

CHAPTER TWO

DEDICATION OF A CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

I. NATURE AND DIGNITY OF CHURCHES

1. Through his death and resurrection, Christ became the true and perfect temple¹ of the New Covenant, and gathered together a people to be his own.

This holy people, unified through the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is the Church,² that is, the temple of God built of living stones, where the Father is worshiped in spirit and in truth.³

Rightly, then, from early times the name "church" has also been given to the building in which the Christian community gathers to hear the word of God, to pray together, to celebrate the sacraments, and to participate in the eucharist.

2. Because the church is a visible building, it stands as a special sign of the pilgrim Church on earth and reflects the Church dwelling in heaven.

When a church is erected as a building destined solely and permanently for assembling the people of God and for carrying out sacred functions, it is fitting that it be dedicated to God with a solemn rite, in accordance with the ancient custom of the Church.

3. A church, as its nature requires, should be suitable for sacred celebrations. It should be dignified, evincing a noble beauty, not just costly display, and it should stand as a sign and symbol of heavenly things. The general plan of the sacred building should be such that it reflects in some way the whole assembly. It should allow for the distribution of all in due order and facilitate each one's proper function. Moreover, in what concerns the sanctuary, the altar, the chair, the lectern, and the place for the reservation of the blessed sacrament, the norms of the General Instruction of the *The Roman Missal* are to be followed.⁴

¹ See John 2:21.

² See Saint Cyprian, *The Lord's Prayer*, 23: PL 4, 553; Second Vatican Council, const. on the Church, no. 4: *AAS* 57 (1965) 7.

³ See John 4:23.

⁴ See *The Roman Missal*, General Instruction, nos. 253, 257, 258, 259-267, 271, 272, 276-277. See Roman Ritual, *Holy Communion and Worship of the Eucharist outside Mass*, nos. 6 and 9-11.

Also, those norms must be carefully observed which concern things and places destined for the celebration of other sacraments, especially baptism and penance.⁵

II. TITULAR OF A CHURCH AND THE RELICS OF THE SAINTS TO BE PLACED IN IT

4. When a church is to be dedicated it must have a titular. Churches may have for their titular: the Blessed Trinity, our Lord Jesus Christ invoked according to a mystery of his life or a title already accepted in the sacred liturgy, the Holy Spirit, the Blessed Virgin Mary, likewise invoked according to some appellation already accepted in the sacred liturgy, one of the angels, or, finally, a saint inscribed in the Roman Martyrology or in an Appendix duly approved; but not a blessed, without an indult of the Apostolic See. A church should have one titular only, unless it is a question of saints who are inscribed together in the Calendar.

5. It is fitting that the tradition of the Roman liturgy should be preserved of placing relics of martyrs or other saints beneath the altar.⁶ However, the following should be noted:

a) Relics intended for deposition should be of such a size that they can be recognized as parts of human bodies. Hence excessively small relics of one or more saints must not be deposited.

b) The greatest care must be taken to determine whether relics intended for deposition are authentic. It is better for an altar to be dedicated without relics than to have relics of doubtful credibility placed beneath it.

c) A reliquary must not be placed on the altar or in the table of the altar but beneath the table of the altar, as the design of the altar may allow.

III. CELEBRATION OF THE DEDICATION

Minister of the Rite

6. Since the bishop has been entrusted with the care of the particular Church, it is his responsibility to dedicate to God new churches built in his diocese.

If he cannot himself preside at the rite, he shall entrust this function to another bishop, especially to one who is his associate and assistant in the pastoral care of the community for which the church has been built; or, in altogether special circumstances, to a priest, to whom he shall give a special mandate.

⁵ See Roman Ritual, *Rite of Baptism for Children*, no. 25; *Rite of Penance*, no. 12.

⁶ See *The Roman Missal*, General Instruction, no. 266.

Choice of Day

7. A day should be chosen for the dedication of the new church when as many of the people as possible can participate, especially Sunday. Since the theme of the dedication pervades this rite throughout, the dedication of a new church may not take place on days on which it is totally improper to disregard the mystery then commemorated: the Easter triduum, Christmas, Epiphany, Ascension, Pentecost, Ash Wednesday, the weekdays of Holy Week, and All Souls.

Mass of the Dedication

8. The celebration of the eucharist is inseparably bound up with the rite of the dedication of a church; so when a church is dedicated the liturgical texts of the day are omitted and texts proper to the rite are used for both the liturgy of the word and the liturgy of the eucharist.

9. It is fitting that the bishop should concelebrate the Mass with the priests who take part with him in the rite of dedication and with those who have been given the task of directing the parish or the community for which the church has been built.

Office of the Dedication

10. The day on which a church is dedicated is kept as a solemnity in the church which is dedicated.

The office is that of the dedication of a church. The office begins with Evening Prayer I. When the rite of the depositing of relics takes place, it is highly recommended to keep a vigil at the relics of the martyr or saint which are to be placed under the altar; the best way of doing this is to have the Office of Readings, taken from the Commons or from the appropriate Proper. But to encourage the participation of the people, the vigil, while observing what is normative,⁷ may be suitably adapted.

Parts of the Rite

A. Entrance into the Church

11. The rite of the dedication begins with the entrance into the church; this may take place in three ways; that way is to be used which seems to suit best the circumstances of time and place.

— *The procession* to the church to be dedicated: all assemble in a nearby church or other suitable place, from which the bishop, the ministers, and the congregation proceed to the church to be dedicated, praying and singing.

⁷ See *The Liturgy of the Hours*, General Instruction, nos. 70-73.

— *The solemn entrance*: if the procession cannot take place or seems inopportune, the community gathers at the entrance of the church.

— *The simple entrance*: the congregation assembles in the church itself; the bishop, the concelebrants, and the ministers come out from the sacristy in the usual way.

Two rites are most significant in the entrance into the new church:

a) The handing over of the church: representatives of those who have been involved in the building of the church hand it over to the bishop.

b) The sprinkling of the church: the bishop blesses water and with it sprinkles the people, who are the spiritual temple, then the walls of the church, and finally, the altar.

B. Liturgy of the Word

12. Three readings are used in the liturgy of the word. The texts are chosen from those in *The Lectionary* (nos. 704 and 706) for the rite of the dedication of a church.

In the first reading, even during the Easter Season, the passage of Nehemiah is always read which recounts the assembling of the people of Jerusalem in the presence of Ezra the scribe to hear the proclamation of the law of God (Nehemiah 8:1-4a; 5-6, 8-10).

13. After the readings the bishop gives the homily, in which he explains the biblical readings and the meaning of the dedication of a church.

The profession of faith is said. The general intercessions are omitted since in their place the litany of the saints is sung.

C. Prayer of Dedication and the Anointing of the Church and the Altar

Depositing of the Relics of the Saints

14. After the singing of the litany, if this is to be done, the relics of a martyr are deposited to denote the fact that the sacrifice of the members has its source in the sacrifice of the Head.⁸ When relics of a martyr are not available, relics of another saint may be deposited in the altar.

Prayer of Dedication

15. The celebration of the eucharist is the most important rite, and the only necessary one, for the dedication of a church. Nevertheless, in accordance with the common tradition of the Church, both East and West, a special prayer of dedication is also said. This

⁸ See *The Roman Missal*, Common of Martyrs 8, prayer over the gifts; Saint Ambrose, *Epistula* 22:13: PL 16, 1023: "Let the triumphant victims occupy the place where Christ is victim: he, however, who suffered for all, upon the altar; they, who have been redeemed by his sufferings, beneath the altar"; see Ps. Maximus of Turin, *Sermo* 78: PL 57, 689-690; Book of Revelation 6:9: "I saw underneath the altar the souls of all the people who had been killed on account of the word of God, for witnessing to it."

prayer declares the intention of dedicating the church to the Lord for all times and it asks for his blessing.

Rites of Anointing, Incensation, Covering, and Lighting of the Altar

16. The rites of the anointing, incensation, covering, and lighting of the altar express in visible signs several aspects of that invisible work which the Lord accomplishes through the Church in its celebration of the divine mysteries, especially the eucharist.

a) The anointing of the altar and the walls of the church:

— In virtue of the anointing with chrism the altar becomes a symbol of Christ who, before all others, is and is called "The Anointed One"; for the Father anointed him with the Holy Spirit and constituted him the High Priest who on the altar of his body would offer the sacrifice of his life for the salvation of all;

— The anointing of the church signifies that it is given over entirely and perpetually to Christian worship. Twelve anointings are made in accordance with liturgical tradition, or, where it is more convenient, four, signifying that the church is an image of the holy city of Jerusalem.

b) Incense is burned on the altar to signify that the sacrifice of Christ, which is there perpetuated in mystery, ascends to God as an odor of sweetness, and also as a sign that the prayers of the people rise up pleasing and acceptable, reaching to the throne of God.⁹

The incensation of the nave of the church indicates that the dedication makes it a house of prayer, but the People of God are incensed first, for it is the living temple in which each faithful member is a spiritual altar.¹⁰

c) The covering of the altar indicates that the Christian altar is the altar of the eucharistic sacrifice and the table of the Lord; standing around it priests and people, in one and the same action but with a difference of function, celebrate the memorial of the death and resurrection of Christ and partake in the Lord's Supper. For this reason the altar is prepared as the table of the sacrificial banquet and adorned as for a feast. Thus the decoration of the altar clearly signifies that it is the Lord's table at which all God's people meet with joy to be refreshed with divine food, namely the body and blood of Christ sacrificed.

d) The lighting of the altar, which is followed by the lighting of the church, teaches us that Christ is "a light to enlighten the nations,"¹¹ whose brightness shines out in the Church and through it upon the whole human family.

D. Celebration of the Eucharist

17. When the altar has been prepared, the bishop celebrates the eucharist, which is the principal and the most ancient part of the whole rite.¹² The celebration of the eucharist is

⁹ See Book of Revelation 8:3-4.

¹⁰ See Romans 12:1.

¹¹ Luke 2:32.

¹² See Pope Vigilius, *Epistula ad Profuturum episcopum*, IV: PL 84, 832.

in the closest harmony with the rite of the dedication of a church:

—for when the eucharistic sacrifice is celebrated, the end for which the church was built and the altar erected is attained and manifested by particularly clear signs;

—furthermore, the eucharist, which sanctifies the hearts of those who receive it, in a sense consecrates the altar and the place of celebration, as the ancient Fathers of the Church assert more than once: "This altar is an object of wonder: by nature it is stone, but it is made holy when it receives the body of Christ";¹³

—finally, the bond whereby the dedication of a church is closely linked with the celebration of the eucharist is likewise evident from the fact that the proper preface of the Mass is, as it were, an integral part of the rite of the dedication of a church.

IV. ADAPTATION OF THE RITE

Adaptations within the Competence of the Conferences of Bishops

18. Conferences of bishops can adapt this rite, as they see fit, to the character of each region, but in such a way that nothing detracts from its dignity and solemnity.

However, the following should be observed:

a) the celebration of the Mass with its proper preface and the prayer of dedication must never be omitted;

b) rites which have a special meaning and force from liturgical tradition (see above no. 16) must be retained, unless weighty reasons stand in the way, but the wording may be suitably adapted if necessary.

With regard to adaptations, the competent ecclesiastical authority is to consult the Holy See and with its consent introduce adaptations.¹⁴

Decisions within the Competence of the Ministers

19. It is for the bishop and for those who are in charge of the celebration of the rite:

—to decide the way in which the entrance into the church is to take place (see above, no. 11);

—to determine the way in which the new church is to be handed over to the bishop (see above, no. 11);

—to judge the suitability of depositing relics of the saints. Here it is primarily the spiritual good of the community that must be looked to and what is laid down in no. 5 is to be observed.

It is for the rector of the church to be dedicated, helped by those who assist him in

¹³ Saint John Chrysostom, *Homilia XX in II Cor.*, 3: PG 61, 540.

¹⁴ See Second Vatican Council, const. on the liturgy, no. 40: *AAS* 56 (1964) 111.

the pastoral work, to decide and prepare everything concerning the readings, chants, and other pastoral aids to foster the fruitful participation of the people and to promote a dignified celebration.

V. PASTORAL PREPARATION

20. In order that the people may take part fully in the rite of dedication, the rector of the church to be dedicated and others experienced in the pastoral ministry are to instruct them on the importance and value, spiritual, ecclesial, and missionary, of the celebration.

Accordingly, the people are to be instructed about the various parts of the church and their use, the rite of the dedication, and the chief liturgical symbols employed in it. Thus fully understanding the meaning of the dedication of a church through its rites and prayers, they may take an active, intelligent, and devout part in the sacred action.

VI. REQUISITES FOR THE DEDICATION OF A CHURCH

21. For the celebration of the rite the following should be prepared:

a) In the place where the station is held:

- *The Roman Pontifical*;
- a cross to be carried in the procession;
- if relics of the saints are to be carried in procession, the items indicated in no. 24a.

b) In the sacristy or in the sanctuary or in the nave of the church to be dedicated according as each situation requires:

- *The Roman Missal*;
- *The Lectionary*;
- a vessel of water and a sprinkler;
- vessels of holy chrism;
- towels for wiping the table of the altar;
- if it is to be used, a waxed linen cloth or a waterproof linen cover of the same size as the altar;
- a basin and a jug of water, towels, and all that is needed for washing the bishop's hands and those of the priests after they have anointed the walls of the church;
- a linen gremial;
- a brazier for burning incense or aromatic spices; or grains of incense and small candles to burn on the altar;
- a censer, incense boat, and spoon;
- a chalice, corporal, purificators, and hand towel;
- bread, wine, and water for the celebration of Mass;
- an altar cross, unless there is already a cross in the sanctuary, or the cross which is carried in the entrance procession is placed near the altar;

- a linen cloth and candles;
- flowers, if opportune.

22. It is praiseworthy to keep the ancient custom of placing crosses made of stone, brass, or other suitable material or having the crosses carved on the walls of the church. Thus twelve or four crosses should be provided according to the number of anointings (see above no. 16) and suitably distributed on the walls of the church at a convenient height. A small bracket should be fitted beneath each cross into which is fixed a small candlestick with a candle to be lighted.

23. For the Mass of the dedication the vestments are white or of some festive color. The following should be prepared:

- for the bishop: alb, stole, chasuble, miter, pastoral staff, and pallium, if this is used by the bishop;
- for the concelebrating priests: the vestments for concelebrating Mass;
- for the deacons: albs, stoles, and, if opportune, dalmatics;
- for other ministers: albs or other lawfully approved dress.

24. If relics of the saints are to be placed beneath the altar, the following should be prepared:

a) In the place where the station is held:

— a reliquary containing the relics, placed between flowers and lights. If the simple entrance takes place, the reliquary may be placed in a suitable part of the sanctuary before the rite begins;

— for the deacons who will carry the relics to be deposited: albs, red stoles if the relics are those of a martyr, or white in other cases, and, if available, dalmatics. If the relics are carried by priests, then in place of dalmatics chasubles should be prepared.

Relics may also be carried by other ministers vested in albs or other lawfully approved dress.

b) In the sanctuary:

— a small table on which the reliquary is placed during the first part of the dedication rite.

c) In the sacristy:

— pitch or cement to seal the cover of the aperture. In addition, a stone mason should be at hand to close the aperture containing the relics at the proper time.

25. A record of the dedication of the church is to be made out in duplicate, signed by the bishop, the rector of the church, and representatives of the local community; one copy is to be kept in the diocesan archives, the other in the archives of the church. Where, however, the depositing of relics takes place, a third copy of the record should be made, to be placed in the reliquary, if opportune.

Mention should be made in the record of the day, month, and year of the church's dedication, the name of the bishop who performed the rite, also the title of the church,

and the names of the martyrs or saints, as the case may be, whose relics have been deposited beneath the altar.

Moreover, in a suitable place in the church, an inscription should be placed on which is recorded the day, month, and year when the dedication took place, the title of the church, and the name of the bishop who celebrated the rite.

VII. ANNIVERSARY OF THE DEDICATION

A. Anniversary of the Dedication of the Cathedral Church

26. In order that the importance and dignity of a particular church may stand out with greater clarity, the anniversary of its cathedral church's dedication is to be celebrated, with the rank of a solemnity in the cathedral church itself, with the rank of a feast in the other churches of the diocese, on the day on which the dedication of the church recurs.¹⁵ If this day is always impeded, the celebration is assigned to the next free day.

It is desirable that on the anniversary the bishop should concelebrate the eucharist in the cathedral church with the chapter of canons or senate of priests, and with the participation of as many of the people as possible.

B. Anniversary of the Dedication of a Particular Church

27. The anniversary of a church's dedication is celebrated with the rank of a solemnity.¹⁶

¹⁵ See Roman Calendar, Table of Liturgical Days, I 4b and II 8b.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, I 4b.