

“Equal parts commentary on the rites and ecclesiology, Paul Turner’s latest book, *New Church, New Altar: A Commentary on the Order of Dedication of a Church and an Altar*, is essential reading for anyone building a church. It seamlessly weaves together the various rites, their history and meaning, and the applicable liturgical law to reveal that building a church is never just a construction project: it is also for and about ‘building up spiritually the people of God into a dwelling place for God with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone’ (Eph 2:21). And if you’re not building a church, don’t ignore this gem: use it to guide your community into a mystical reflection on how your church building and the rites that dedicate it reveal what it means to be church—living stones, a spiritual house, a holy priesthood.”

—Bernadette Gasslein, Editor, *Worship*

“Fr. Paul Turner has produced a wonderful commentary including rich historical references for a ritual that few people ever get to experience in person. Vicariously we can experience it through his writing.”

—Michael S. Driscoll, Professor Emeritus of Theology,
University of Notre Dame

New Church, New Altar

*A Commentary on the Order of
Dedication of a Church and an Altar*

Paul Turner



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IN MEMORIAM EPISCOPI SVI
RAYMONDI BOLANDI
QVI OPVS SVVM
TAM PASTORALEM QVAM THEOLOGICVM
ADHORTATVS EST
ATQVE FORMAM ÆDIS
ECCLESIAE SANCTI IOHANNIS FRANCISCI REGIS
PROBATVS EST
HVNC VOLVMEN DEDICAT AVCTOR

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Abbreviations

CB	<i>Ceremonial of Bishops</i>
Durand	<i>Le pontifical romain au Moyen Âge, Tome III, Le pontifical de Guillaume Durand</i>
GIRM	The General Instruction of the Roman Missal
ODCA	<i>Order of Dedication of a Church and an Altar</i>
PR 1595–1596	<i>Pontificale Romanum: Editio princeps</i>
PR 1961	<i>Pontificale Romanum</i>
PRG	<i>Le Pontifical Romano-Germanique du Dixième Siècle</i>

Introduction

“Church,” happily, means both building and people. That one word in English captures the interplay between the physical building and the persons who believe in what it represents.

At certain momentous times, a church dedicates a church. The celebration brings to fruition the hopes, plans, meetings, fundraising, wisdom, excitement, disappointments, and dreams of a community. Parishioners behold a new space where they will gather, a space that affirms their identity and shapes their praise of God.

Central to a new church is a new altar. Its dedication seals the relationship between the building and the worship it houses. Sometimes an older church receives a new altar. Its solemn dedication honors its sacred function.

Canon law declares that a church is a sacred building set apart for divine worship. The faithful have the right to enter it for that purpose.¹ The *Ceremonial of Bishops* notes that the purpose of a church building is to gather the Christian community “to hear the word of God, to pray together, to celebrate the sacraments, and to participate in the eucharist.”²

1. *Code of Canon Law* (Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1983), canon 1214.

2. *Ceremonial of Bishops* (CB) (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1989), p. 864.

Only a bishop can authorize the construction of a Catholic church.³ Only a bishop may dedicate the church or its altar, although he may delegate another bishop or priest to do so.⁴ The dedication should take place as soon as possible because the space is not sacred until this ceremony happens, and until then, Mass is to be celebrated there only in case of necessity.⁵

The day for the dedication must be carefully chosen. The date will become an annual solemnity to be observed on the parish calendar for the entire life of the building. For this reason, the law excludes certain days: Christmas, Epiphany, Ash Wednesday, Holy Week, the Paschal Triduum, Ascension, Pentecost, and All Souls' Day.⁶ However, it therefore permits the dedication liturgy to replace a Sunday in Advent, Lent, Easter, and Ordinary Time. Prudence excludes feasts that the parish may wish to celebrate but which the Mass on the anniversary of dedication would replace; for example, the commemoration of the parish's titular saint or of a day already attracting strong devotion, such as Our Lady of Guadalupe (December 12).

The title bestowed on the church at its dedication is permanent. Only one saint may be given the title, except for saints listed together in the calendar.⁷ This means that if a parish is ever combined with another parish, the original dedicated name of the church cannot change, though the name of the parish community may.

The liturgy for the events is found in the *Order of Dedication of a Church and an Altar*. This ritual has been thoroughly revised since the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), and it successfully incorporates the ecclesiology of the council into

3. Canon 1215 §1.

4. Canon 1207 and CB 867, 923.

5. Canon 1217 §1 and §2, 932 §1; and CB 922.

6. *Order of Dedication of a Church and an Altar* (ODCA) (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2018), II:7.

7. Canon 1218; ODCA II:4; and CB 865.

its ritual acts. Although published independently, this order of service is considered part of a larger work called the Roman Pontifical, the collection of ceremonies over which a bishop presides. The *Order of Confirmation* is another example of a book that actually forms part of the Roman Pontifical, though it is published as an independent ritual.

In 1961, just before the opening of the council, the Vatican had authorized an initial revision of these ceremonies as part of an updated Roman Pontifical, the fruit of the liturgical renewal already underway. While the council was still in session, a new committee met in 1965 to begin revising the Pontifical again, but other projects took priority, such as the liturgical books pertaining to the Mass, as well as orders of service for baptisms and weddings, celebrations important to Catholic families.⁸ Furthermore, because the Order of Dedication had just been modified, work on that project was tabled until yet another new committee shouldered the task in 1970.⁹ After drafting the new format and sending it out to various dioceses for comments, the committee finalized its work within a few years, and the Vatican published its typical edition in Latin in 1977.¹⁰ A provisional English translation appeared in 1978¹¹ and again in 1989.¹² The Vatican published new rules for

8. Jean Evenou, "Le nouveau rituel de la dédicace," *La Maison-Dieu* 134 (1978): 85–105. For this reference, p. 87.

9. Annibale Bugnini names the relator as Pierre Jounel of France and the members as Ignacio Calabuig, OSM, from Spain, Canon André Rose from Belgium, and Domenico Sartore from Italy. *The Reform of the Liturgy 1948–1975*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), pp. 792–97.

10. *Ordo Dedicacionis Ecclesiae et Altaris* (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1977).

11. *Dedication of a Church and an Altar* (Toronto: International Committee on English in the Liturgy, 1978).

12. *Dedication of a Church and an Altar*, Provisional Text, rev. 1989 (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1989).

vernacular translations in 2001, which initiated a revision of all the liturgical books in English. Because the Roman Missal took priority once again, absorbing considerable effort until its publication in 2011, work on the various parts of the pontifical was deferred. The revised *Order of Confirmation*, for example, was not ready until 2016. The revised English translation of *The Order of the Dedication of a Church and an Altar* (ODCA) carries a publication date of 2018.

The International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL) is charged with preparing the translations of the liturgical books from the typical editions in Latin into the vernacular. The commission published a summary and brief commentary on the ODCA in late 1977. It noted several highlights, especially the decision to change the dedication from a ceremony taking place just before the celebration of the first Mass in the building, to a place inside that very Mass:

[T]he ancient centrality of the eucharist in this act of dedication has been restored to its proper place. As the summit towards which the worship of the liturgical assembly tends, the celebration of the eucharist is the most suitable means of dedicating the altar and church where this worship will now take place. . . .

The rite and its introduction also present a compelling and renewed sense of the pre-eminence of the worshipping community as the primary liturgical symbol. The building is significant as the gathering place of the faithful. It is this which makes it a holy place.¹³

The new typical edition provides a liturgy that moved from a focus on the exorcism and blessing of sacred space to the dedication of a church—both the building and the people. Ignazio

13. “Rite for the Dedication of a Church: A Commentary,” *ICEL Newsletter* 4/4 (October–December 1977), pp. 2–3.

Calabuig, OSM, who served on the revision committee, wrote about the task:

The liturgical point of the rite had been smothered by a profusion of signs. Simplification of this sort necessarily entailed the pruning away of parts valid in themselves, but which in their accumulation—like an excess of fine furniture in an overcrowded room—made for a good deal of clutter.¹⁴

Still, many will find the ceremonies quite complex, especially because most people may experience them only once in a lifetime. Furthermore, the ODCA covers more circumstances than the dedication of a new church and altar, which is sufficiently intricate by itself. Consequently, the first task upon picking up the book is to discern which of its rituals apply to the project at hand.

Chapter I contains The Order of Laying a Foundation Stone or the Commencement of Work on the Building of a Church. This pertains to the initial stage of construction of a new church, usually of a parish church. The bishop appropriately presides even for this event, but he may entrust his role to another bishop or a priest (ODCA I:3).

Chapter II presents The Order of the Dedication of a Church. This is the most significant chapter in the book because it concerns both the dedication of the church and its altar, carried out simultaneously in the same liturgy within the celebration of the Eucharist.

Chapter III has The Order of the Dedication of a Church in Which Sacred Celebrations Are Already Regularly Taking Place. This covers a situation that is not recommended but

14. Ignazio M. Calabuig, OSM, *The Dedication of a Church and an Altar: A Theological Commentary* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1980), p. 5.

can happen: The building has been serving as a church long before any bishop has dedicated it. Now, the time has come.

Chapter IV contains The Order of the Dedication of an Altar. This may be used, for example, when an existing church acquires a new altar as part of a renovation, requiring the bishop to dedicate it.

Chapter V is The Order of Blessing a Church. Different from Chapter II, this concerns the blessing of a chapel, oratory, or other building for sacred purposes, together with its altar. It does not include all the complex rituals of the dedication of a parish church, for example.

Chapter VI presents The Order of Blessing an Altar. Different from Chapter IV, this concerns the blessing but not the dedication of an altar. For example, a parish may set up an altar in a room suitable for daily Mass, or a priest on mission may need to bring his own altar. Such a furnishing receives this blessing.

Chapter VII contains The Order of Blessing a Chalice and a Paten. Any priest may conduct this ceremony (ODCA VII:3), but it has a long tradition associated with the Roman Pontifical because it used to require a bishop to anoint the new vessels with chrism. In a nod to the tradition, the revised order of service retains it in the final chapter.

Obviously, not all of these chapters can apply to the construction project of a single given community. Some of them are mutually exclusive. But one or more of these chapters will be needed. As the United States bishops have remarked, “Just as the initiation of a person into the Christian community occurs in stages, so the construction of a church building unfolds over a period of time.”¹⁵ Once the appropriate rituals have been identified, liturgical preparations may begin.

15. *Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship, Guidelines of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 118.

On the anniversary of the dedication of a church, the local parish celebrates the day as a solemnity. The Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours come from the Common of the Dedication of a Church. At Mass, special readings are selected among the many options in the lectionary; the antiphons, presidential prayers, and preface come from the appropriate place in the Missal. The conclusion of this book makes remarks on observing both the anniversary of dedication and the titular saint of the church.

At a dedication, the local priest and those who assist him prepare readings, music, and other aids to foster the participation of the people (ODCA II:19 and CB 872). They are also to instruct the faithful “on the spiritual, ecclesial, and missionary importance and value of the celebration” (ODCA II:20). The same pastoral care fittingly applies to the celebrations presented in the other chapters of the ODCA and to the parish’s annual local solemnities. To that end, a companion booklet accompanies this book, suitable for distribution among the people who will celebrate these events.¹⁶

From breaking ground on the first day of construction to remembering the founders of the parish on its annual anniversary, this book hopes to assist especially those who lead the church at their church.

16. Paul Turner, *Our Church, Our Altar: A People’s Guide to the Dedication of a Church and Its Anniversary* (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021).

The Order of Laying a Foundation Stone or the Commencement of Work on the Building of a Church

After the bishop has approved the construction of a new church and is satisfied that the necessary material and spiritual resources are available, the community gathers to celebrate the ritual described in the first chapter of the ODCA. If the project is of smaller scale—the building of a chapel, for example—or if the community already has been using a building not yet dedicated, the ritual in this chapter is omitted.

The physical work of construction commences with the spiritual work of prayer. The community gathers outdoors, preferably with the bishop who will eventually dedicate the new church. A wooden cross marks the location where the altar will be. The ceremony takes place without Mass, which will not be celebrated here until the bishop returns to dedicate the completed building. Still, this ritual carries a profound meaning: The gathering of the people on location proclaims that “the structure to be built of stones will be a visible sign of the living Church, God’s building” (ODCA I:1).

The ceremony therefore calls to mind 1 Corinthians 3:9, where St. Paul calls his readers God’s building, as well as the

Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, which lists Paul's image among several that apply to a proper understanding of the church (6).

A wooden cross marking the site of the altar has been part of this ritual since the thirteenth century. The Pontifical of William Durandus, a work that the eponymous bishop of Mende wrote for his own usage, became treasured throughout the church and influenced the development of the Roman Pontifical after the Council of Trent. Durandus wrote at the beginning of his description of this same ritual, "At dawn therefore a wooden cross should be set in the place where the altar will be."¹

In 1965, when the Vatican's committee began its soon-to-be-deferred efforts to revise this ritual from the pontifical of 1961, the members still managed to create a vision that endures:

For the Order of Blessing and Laying a Foundation Stone for the Building of a Church.

When the stone has been blessed, and, if it will have seemed desirable, when the document of the blessing of the foundation stone and of the beginning of the church has been read, it should be in complete conformity to the spirit of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, so that something from Sacred Scripture is read, as for example those matters recounted concerning the building of the Temple of Solomon in Deuteronomy (*sic*), or another passage. At the end, though, or while the stone is being laid, some popular song may be sung. When the rite is completely finished, it is ap-

1. *Le pontifical romain au Moyen Âge, Tome III, Le pontifical de Guillaume Durand* (Durand), Studi e Testi 88, ed. Michel Andrieu (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1940), II:I, 2, p. 451. English translations from such works are by the author.

propriate that a hymn or canticle of thanksgiving be sung by all the people.²

This results in an order of blessing in four main parts: The Approach to the Place Where the Church Is to Be Built, The Reading of the Word of God, The Blessing of the Site of the New Church, and The Blessing and Laying of the Foundation Stone. All this ends with The Concluding Rites.

Part One: The Approach to the Place Where the Church Is to Be Built

The ceremony begins either with a procession to the site or a gathering on the site. The First Form calls for the community to gather in another location where the bishop greets them and offers a prayer (ODCA I:10–13). His prayer praises God, “who established Holy Church, built upon the foundation of the Apostles with Christ Jesus himself as chief cornerstone.” The bishop thus directly connects this event to the description of the church in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians 2:20. The prayer concludes with a desire that the people may “come at last to the heavenly city.” Here the bishop alludes to the image of the new Jerusalem in Hebrews 12:22 and Revelation 21:02.

The same prayer also looks back in history to the construction of the temple of Solomon, the greatest and most beloved building project in the Old Testament. The bishop prays that the gathered people may “revere,” “love,” and “follow” God. According to 2 Chronicles 7:14, God expected these same sentiments from those who worshiped in Solomon’s newly built temple, as revealed to the king in a dream. The bishop also

2. Coetus a Studiis XXI de Libris II et III Pontificalis, Schemata n. 67, De Pontificali, 4, March 25, 1965, I:3, p. 2.

prays that the people may “grow into the temple of [God’s] glory,” another allusion to Solomon’s building, which was filled with the glory of the Lord (2 Chr 7:1). The bishop thus places this project within the arc of buildings dedicated to God from the earliest moments of biblical history.

The entire English translation passed through several stages of work with ICEL, beginning in 2009.³ The bishop’s prayer went through a few minor changes; for example, the Latin word for “revere” is *timeat*, which the translators had first rendered as “fear.” Although “fear of the Lord” is a common concept in biblical piety, the word “revere” seemed better to capture its contemporary meaning.

Then the deacon invites all to move to the building site. That procession may include the singing of Psalm 84 with the refrain, “My soul is longing for the courts of the Lord” (ODCA I:14). This psalm had been part of the ceremony in the Roman Pontifical of 1595–1596,⁴ which remained in force until 1961, but the schola sang it, not the people, and not in procession but at the time when the bishop sprinkled the ground and the cross with water he had just blessed. For hundreds of years, this liturgy included no processional music or gathering hymn because the ministers conducted it largely without the presence of the people. Today, the gathered people of God form one of the primary symbols of the rite.

In the Second Form of The Approach to the Place Where the Church Is to Be Built, the people begin the ceremony by

3. The author serves as a facilitator for the commission and shares some of his personal recollections in this book.

4. *Pontificale Romanum: Editio princeps (1595–1596)* (PR 1595–1596), ed. Manlio Sodi, SDB, and Achille Maria Triacca, SDB (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), pp. 290–92. See also the commentary by the papal master of ceremonies Joachim Nabuco, *Pontificalis Romani expositio: Juridico-practica*, Domus II: De Rebus (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1945).

singing a suitable chant. The rubrics suggest a trinitarian text: “May eternal peace from the eternal God be with those gathered here. May abiding peace, the Word of the Father, be peace for the people of God. May the faithful Consoler, bring peace to all nations” (ODCA I:15). Then the bishop greets the people and offers the prayer that precedes the procession in the first option.

An early draft of the English translation for this prayer made the trinitarian structure clearer by adding the words “the Spirit,” followed by a comma, before the words “the faithful Consoler.” However, the word “Consoler,” the sole title in the original Latin, sufficiently conveys the meaning. That explains the wayward comma that remains in the ritual text after the word “Consoler.” The editors overlooked removing it when they eliminated the words “the Spirit” and the correlative comma.

Both forms of this first part contain new material that the postconciliar reform added to the ODCA in order to strengthen the meaning of the rites. The bishop’s prayer concerns the people, not just the building, that they may “grow into the temple” of God’s glory. The ceremony repositions one of the psalms originally sung on pilgrimages to the Jerusalem temple as processional music to the site. The people’s trinitarian acclamation places the work into the hands of God, the bestower of peace. Even the mention of the Consoler in the acclamation reflects the council’s commitment to more frequent mentions of the role of the Holy Spirit in the church’s collection of prayers. Whereas Durandus began the rite with sprinkling holy water to purify the site, the ceremony now begins with a purposeful assembling of the church.

Part Two: The Reading of the Word of God

Catholics expect a Liturgy of the Word at public gatherings for worship, but biblical readings had not been part of this ceremony