

“Once again, Fr. Turner gives the church another valuable resource that each parish and its leadership team must have in preparing for the rituals around the dedication of a church and altar. Fr. Turner masterfully weaves a summary of the biblical texts, the liturgy, and reflection questions to assist the parish team’s planning and guide our understanding of ‘church.’ Even if we are not planning a dedication or rededication, we are called to take time to remember the symbols of our church buildings and altars. We are the church, and these theological reflections guide us to be the ‘solid rock’ upon which the foundation of future generations have their faith inspired.”

—Reverend John Thomas Lane, SSS, Saint Paschal Baylon
Roman Catholic Church, Highland Heights, Ohio;
Liturgical Consultant, Congregation of
the Blessed Sacrament

“This book is a great example of liturgical catechesis. It can be used in a variety of pastoral settings. It is a must-read for parishes not only engaged in a process of building a worship space but also renovating or simply refreshing a space. Rev. Paul Turner puts forward a mystagogical structure highlighting the scriptural foundation of the rites, the liturgical actions, and reflective questions. These characteristics of faith formation deepen full, conscious active participation not only in the rites but is attentive to the movements of the heart.”

—Sister Sandra DeMasi, SSJ, Director of Liturgy, St. Rose of
Lima Parish, New Jersey

Our Church, Our Altar

*A People's Guide to the Dedication of
a Church and Its Anniversary*

Paul Turner



LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

Cover design by Monica Bokinskie. Photograph courtesy of Dreamstime.

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Turner, Paul, author.

Title: Our church, our altar : a people's guide to the dedication of a church and its anniversary / Paul Turner.

Description: Collegeville, Minnesota : Liturgical Press, [2021] | Summary: "A guide for preparing the parish community to celebrate the dedication of a new church and altar and other related rituals. Includes spiritual reflections for group or individual meditation based on the biblical passages upon which the rituals rely"— Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021016775 (print) | LCCN 2021016776 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814666616 (paperback) | ISBN 9780814666623 (epub) | ISBN 9780814666623 (mobi) | ISBN 9780814666623 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Church dedication—Liturgy. | Altars. | Catholic Church. Dedication of a church and an altar. | Catholic Church—Liturgy.

Classification: LCC BX2302 .T87 2021 (print) | LCC BX2302 (ebook) | DDC 265/.9—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021016775>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021016776>

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Introduction

We may encounter God anywhere, but we set aside special places and objects for prayer. These gain importance through their repeated, communal use from one generation to the next. They are holy not just because one person says so, but because a community of people shares the experience from age to age.

Some places become holy because of unplanned events that happened there: the sudden revelation of natural beauty, falling in love with another person, or an unexpected death. These places shimmer with divine presence because they became sacred almost of their own accord.

Other places are constructed for the purposes of prayer. A new church, for example, requires land, building, and objects that will become places of encounter with God. For these to shimmer with divine presence, deliberate actions make them sacred. In the Catholic tradition, a bishop approves construction based on the needs of the local congregation, and he presides over the ceremonies that dedicate the new sacred space.

The Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments approves ceremonies that pertain to dedication, gathering them into a single liturgical book called *The Order of the Dedication of a Church and an Altar*. Most parishes do not own a copy because it is used rarely. Most people have never seen it because it pertains primarily to the ministry of a bishop. And yet, when a bishop dedicates a new

church, this book reminds him to assemble the people. Their pastor is to prepare them for this day.

This book will help you reflect on your church and altar, especially if they are brand new. Nonetheless, if your church was built some time ago, you may still benefit from praying about the ceremonies of its founding. Each year your parish celebrates the anniversary of its dedication. This book will help you celebrate that day as well.

The Vatican's ritual book is divided into seven chapters that cover a variety of circumstances. No one parish celebrates all seven rituals, but it occasionally needs the book for the few chapters that apply to its circumstances.

If your parish is constructing an entirely new building, then the bishop will preside over Chapters I and II: The Order of Laying a Foundation Stone or the Commencement of Work on the Building of a Church and The Order of the Dedication of a Church. That second chapter includes the dedication of the new church's new altar.

If your parish has been celebrating Mass in a building that the bishop has not yet dedicated, then he eventually comes to preside over Chapter III: The Order of the Dedication of a Church in Which Sacred Celebrations Are Already Regularly Taking Place.

If your parish is keeping its dedicated building, but replacing its altar with a new one, then the bishop uses Chapter IV: The Order of the Dedication of an Altar.

Sometimes the building set aside for worship is not a parish church but a chapel or oratory used for more restricted purposes. In that case, the bishop will preside over Chapter V: The Order of Blessing a Church. He does not "dedicate" such a church; he "blesses" it in a less solemn ceremony.

Similarly, if such a chapel or oratory receives a new altar, the bishop will bless it, not dedicate it, with the ceremonies in Chapter VI: The Order of Blessing an Altar.

Finally, if new vessels are to be set aside for the celebration of Mass, the bishop or any priest uses Chapter VII: The Order of Blessing a Chalice and a Paten.

These seven chapters appear in a book that traditionally forms part of the Roman Pontifical, the collection of ceremonies over which a bishop presides. Nonetheless, a bishop may delegate a priest to preside for them. Indeed, for a priest to dedicate a new church or a new altar, he needs a special mandate from the bishop. A priest needs no special permission, however, to bless the vessels for Mass.

Each parish celebrates the anniversary of its dedication as a solemnity each year. (References to this Mass appear in this book as “Chapter VIII.”) The date calls for a special celebration of the Mass with readings and prayers. If the anniversary falls on a Sunday in Ordinary Time, it actually replaces the usual Sunday Mass.

All of these rituals derive their inspiration from multiple passages in the Bible. Some of these passages have influenced more than one of these events. Consequently, this *People’s Guide* is designed to help you pray over the pertinent biblical texts. No matter which ceremonies your community will experience or has experienced in the past, these reflections will help you pray about the sacredness of the place where you worship and the principal objects in use.

Below you will find an outline of the seven ceremonies in the *Order of the Dedication*, as well as information on the anniversary celebration. Whether you are preparing for the event or reflecting on it afterward, this section will explain it. Each section lists the biblical citations that have inspired the ceremony.

The rest of this book lists those citations in biblical order, so that you may choose those that pertain to the ceremony of interest. Reading the verses from a Bible and the reflections from this book will deepen your encounter with God in the

building and objects that your bishop has set aside for liturgical prayer. May you come to treasure more deeply your place as a living stone in the church.

THE CEREMONIES



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

Just before the construction on a new church begins, the parish community gathers with the bishop for prayer. This ceremony will reach its ultimate conclusion in Chapter II, the dedication of the new church with its altar. This liturgy takes place apart from Mass, largely because the church for Mass does not yet exist.

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

The ceremony begins either at a distance from the building site or directly on it. If a former church or some other large room accessible to the parish stands nearby, the people may gather there first. From there, they process with the bishop to the building site. If no such place is convenient, the people gather on location where the construction is about to begin.

A wooden cross marks the place where the altar will stand, continuing a custom that has been part of this ceremony at least since the thirteenth century. The altar will be the central

place where the community celebrates the sacrament of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

First Form: The Procession

Gathered in a suitable place and anticipating a procession, the people welcome the bishop, who greets them, explains the ceremony, invites their participation, and recites an opening prayer.

The bishop then invites all to process to the building site. All may sing an antiphon and psalm, such as “My soul is longing for the courts of the Lord” with Psalm 84.

Second Form: The Station at the Place Where the New Church Is to Be Built

If a procession seems inopportune, all gather at the building site with an acclamation such as this one, which invokes the three Persons of the Holy Trinity: “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.”

As in the First Form, the bishop greets the people, explains the ceremony, invites their participation, and recites the opening prayer.

Part Two: The Reading of the Word of God

One or more readings from the Bible foster the formation of the people. This ceremony takes place outdoors, so depending on factors such as the agreeableness of the weather and of the seating, the number and length of the readings may be adjusted.

The bishop preaches a homily to explain the readings and the meaning of the rite: “Christ is the cornerstone of the Church, and the structure that is going to be built by the living Church of the faithful will be at once the house of God and the house of the People of God.”

After the homily, someone may read a document about the building, signed by the bishop and by representatives of the builders and of the church. This document may then be sealed into the foundation.

Part Three: The Blessing of the Site of the New Church

For the heart of the ceremony, the bishop offers a prayer of blessing over the site. He sprinkles it with blessed water, perhaps walking around the foundations. All may sing an antiphon, such as “All your walls will be of precious stones and the towers of Jerusalem built with gems,” together with verses such as ones from Psalm 48.

Part Four: The Blessing and Laying of the Foundation Stone

Not every new building comes with a foundation stone, but if this one does, the bishop blesses it. He may sprinkle the stone with blessed water. He may incense it.

As a stonemason prepares to fix the slab in place, the bishop declares the meaning of the rite and prays that Christ the cornerstone may be invoked and praised in the building to be raised upon this rock.

While the stone is set in place, all may sing an antiphon, such as “The house of the Lord is founded firmly, on solid rock.”

The Concluding Rites

The bishop introduces the universal prayer, and another minister leads the petitions. All may respond with words such as “Bless and preserve your Church, O Lord.”

The bishop invites all to join in the Lord’s Prayer, and then he alone offers a concluding prayer. He blesses the people in the usual way, and a deacon dismisses them.

The words and actions of this ceremony rely on several biblical passages. It will help you to learn which of the readings are used. You may prepare for or reflect upon this complete order of service through the meditations on the following numbers of this book:

Biblical passage	Ceremony	Reflection number
1 Corinthians 3:9c	Introduction	92
2 Chronicles 7:1, 14	Prayer	10
Ephesians 2:19-22	Prayer	100
Hebrews 12:22	Prayer	108
Revelation 21:2	Prayer	117
Psalms 84:3, 4, 6, 8, 10, 11 and 13	Procession	30
1 Kings 5:16-32 (2-18)	Reading	6
Acts 4:8-12	Reading	87
1 Corinthians 10:1-6	Reading	94
2 Chronicles 7:16a	Reading	10
Psalms 24:1-2, 3-4ab, 5-6	Reading	19
Psalms 42-43	Reading	23
Psalms 87:1-3, 4-5, 6-7	Reading	31
Ezekiel 37:27	Reading	55
Psalms 100:2, 3, 5	Reading	34
1 Corinthians 3:11	Reading	92
Psalms 118:1-2, 16ab-17, 22-23	Reading	37

Biblical passage	Ceremony	Reflection number
Isaiah 28:16-17	Reading	47
Matthew 7:21-29	Reading	64
Matthew 16:13-18	Reading	65
Mark 12:1-12	Reading	70
Luke 6:46-49	Reading	73
Psalms 48:2-4, 9-11, 13-15	The Blessing of the Site	26
Isaiah 54:12	The Blessing of the Site	48
Daniel 2:45	The Blessing and Laying of the Foundation Stone	58
Matthew 7:24	The Blessing and Laying of the Foundation Stone	64
James 2:1	The Blessing and Laying of the Foundation Stone	110
Revelation 1:6	The Blessing and Laying of the Foundation Stone	112
Revelation 22:13	The Blessing and Laying of the Foundation Stone	120
2 Chronicles 7:1	Concluding Rites	10
Ezekiel 43:1-2, 4-7a	Concluding Rites	56
Daniel 2:45	Concluding Rites	58
Matthew 7:24	Concluding Rites	64
Ephesians 2:19-22	Concluding Rites	100
1 Peter 2:4-5	Concluding Rites	111