

Next Friday, February 2, the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple, I will preside at the dedication of a new altar in Notre Dame Cathedral Basilica.

We rarely modernize our historic cathedral, but it was time to replace the “temporary” wooden altar. The Archdiocese installed that altar within the liturgical changes following the Second Vatican Council (1962–65).

During the dedication, I will anoint, incense, light, and pray over the new altar. It is a beautiful artistic creation, fashioned by human hands to reflect the inestimable graces that will flow from this place.

Prior to the dramatic dedicatory rites, I will seal the relics of four of Canada’s saints in the altar’s base. The saints come from different states of life to signify that God calls everyone to holiness.

One relic is of Canada’s first bishop—St. François de Laval (1623–1708)—whose diocese was most of North America north of the Spanish colonies. Another is that of St. Kateri Tekakwitha (1656–1680), the first indigenous woman to be canonized. Her presence in the cathedral of our capital expresses our commitment to healing relations with Canada’s Native Peoples.

Two relics are of the first Canadian-born saints. St. Marguerite d’Youville (1701–1771) founded the Grey Sisters of Montreal. Brother André (1845–1937), the miracle-worker of Mount Royal, fostered devotion to St. Joseph and regularly visited Ottawa.

From the earliest days of the Church, the altar has been at the centre of Christian acts of thanksgiving.

Our altar reflects the incomparable beauty of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ, who offered the perfect sacrifice for our salvation on the Altar of the Cross. The altar is made of stone to remind us of Jesus, established by His Heavenly Father as Eternal High Priest.

The altar is immovable, fixed to the floor as a sign of the unending presence of Christ at the centre of His Church until He comes again in glory.

Have you noticed that priests and deacons kiss the altar at the beginning of the Mass as a way of greeting Christ? Later, they greet the same Christ present in the Altar of Sacrifice. He is present also in the words proclaimed from the Book of the Gospels and in the faithful who receive the Kiss of Peace.

The Fathers of the Church taught that in some manner, "The altar is Christ." Saint Irenaeus of Lyons wrote, "Christ is the sacrifice, He is the victim; He is the sacrifice, the priest, and the altar."

The ancient Prayer of Dedication that I will recite recalls Noah's sacrifice after the flood. It renewed God's covenant of love with humans. Similarly, Abraham, our father in faith, was willing to offer his son on Mount Moriah, where Solomon later built his temple. So too did Moses prefigure the Cross when he sprinkled his altar of stone with the blood of the Paschal Lamb.

Each of these altars merely foreshadowed the Paschal Mystery (the death and resurrection of Jesus) that we will celebrate on our altar. As the prayer of consecration reminds us, we will celebrate the sacrifice of Christ and the Divine Banquet will refresh God's holy people. This altar will become, truly, the Lord's Table, a sign for us of Him from whose pierced side flow the Sacraments of the Church for our salvation.

May this altar be for us, I will pray, "a festive table to which the guests of Christ hasten with joy... a place of intimate communion with Him who feeds us with His body and blood that we might be filled with His Spirit to grow in love."