

“How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts.”

Ps 83

Each year the anniversary of the dedication of a church is a solemn occasion. We recall the moment when this building was anointed with oil by the bishop, and was consecrated as a holy place, a place set apart for the worship of the living God. The crosses on the walls, just above those candles, mark the spots where the walls of our church were anointed so that the whole building, and not just the sanctuary and the altar, became sanctified. The ceremony, like all of the Church’s rites and ceremonies, is beautiful and rich in its multi-layered symbolism. But the anniversary of such a ceremony is not merely a moment of remembering. As with all of the Church’s feast days, the annual celebration actually draws us more deeply into the mysteries we celebrate.

When a church building is consecrated, several different things happen all at once. First, and most obviously, the building is set apart from other buildings – it is marked as being different from ordinary houses, shops, offices, schools, and so forth – by being anointed with the same holy oil of chrism that is used in Baptisms, Confirmations, and Ordinations. Through the prayers and ceremonies, the church building is distinguished as being sacred, compared to the outside world which is profane. Having been anointed, the church building then becomes the house of God. As such, only sacred events and rites may take place inside, only sacred words may be used inside the church, only sacred music may be heard, only sacred hymns sung, and sacred readings read. Secular music, readings, and ceremonies are kept at bay. All things profane are left at the door.

Once sanctified, the building becomes a fitting place for the worship of the one true God. And this is all that a church may be used for, namely acts of worship. A church is

not for social gatherings, or chit-chat and gossip, or secular exhibitions, performances, or concerts. All such things must take place somewhere other than in God's holy temple.

The nave of the church is where God's people, saints and sinners alike, take their places for the sacred ceremonies which follow. In the nave there is an almost unceasing murmur of prayer. Candles are lit, not just to symbolize the prayers offered by God's holy people: the lighting of a candle, along with the whispered prayer that accompanies that action, is itself an act of veneration of the angels and saints, or is a direct act of worship of God Himself. Stained glass windows allow the light of God's splendour to pour into the Church through the virtues and merits of the saints, whilst pictures and statues bring Our Blessed Lady and the saints down into our presence and, at the same time, draw us up into their company.

The sanctuary, where most of the sacred action of the Church's rites take place and which at the most solemn of the Church's ceremonies is filled with the sweet fragrance of incense which both carries our prayers towards heaven and at the same time pours down God's blessing upon the things of God, the sanctuary is an even more holy space than the nave. Within the bounds of the sanctuary, marked by the altar rails, the priest goes up to the altar of God to offer up the redeeming sacrifice of the Mass whereby we are made present at the Foot of the Cross on Calvary and enter into Christ's work of salvation. During the Mass we do not – as has already been said – we do not merely recall Christ's death on the Cross. Rather, His death is made sacramentally present, and on this very altar – as on the altars of all Catholic churches around the world – the sacrifice which redeems us from sin is accomplished before our very eyes.

Then, most holy and sacred of all, is the tabernacle – the inner sanctum, the Holy of Holies – where dwells the living God in the form of the Blessed Sacrament. We genuflect before His presence; we surround Him with flowers and candles; on the day of the church's

consecration, the whole sanctuary, the whole building, is made a shrine – a dwelling place – of the living God, a shrine where only the best of materials and fabrics are good enough, as was the case in Solomon’s Temple of old.

There is only one thing in life that *truly* matters, and that is getting to heaven. Everything – even morally good things that have been given to us for our benefit – may be fittingly laid to one side unless they are of use to us in getting to heaven. Here, inside a Catholic church, there are only those sacred things that we need to help us arrive before the face of God. Everything else is left outside. Here, we have everything in life that we truly need. How *beautiful* is God’s holy house, His house of prayer. As it says in my favourite psalm, number 83:

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts.

My soul longs, yea, faints for the courts of the Lord.

My heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.

Even the sparrow finds a home, and a swallow a nest for herself,

where she may lay her young, at thy altars,

O Lord of hosts, my King and my God.

Blessed are those who dwell in thy house, ever singing thy praise.