

Tridentine Community News

March 10, 2013 – Fourth Sunday of Lent

The Position and Furnishings of the High Altar

On February 10 and 17, this column discussed the resurging interest in celebrating Holy Mass facing Liturgical East in the Ordinary Form, just as is the norm in the Extraordinary Form, even on the part of the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship. It is therefore appropriate to consider the various architectural arrangements which make *ad orientem* worship possible.

In metropolitan Detroit and Windsor, our typical experience of High Altars and Side Altars for the Extraordinary Form sees them mounted against a *reredos*, a decorative wall. In California, a *reredos* is often called a *retablo*; in New Mexico the locals call it an *altar screen*, though that term is more appropriately used to describe a decorative cloth mounted above an altar.

Some churches, particularly some in this region built in the 1940s and 50s, employ a *tester*, a sort of roof over the altar table that can project from the wall at the top of the *reredos* [as at St. Suzanne, Detroit], or independently hang from the ceiling [as at the National Shrine of the Little Flower, Royal Oak].



Another tradition of the High Altar is one that is freestanding, but surmounted by a canopy-like *baldacchino*, also known as a *baldachin* or *ciborium* (not to be confused with the ciborium altar vessel that holds the Sacred Hosts for

Communion). The baldacchino at Washington, DC's National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception is pictured. Some altars have a sort of half-ciborium or open dome over them, as at Detroit's Holy Redeemer Church. Both testers and baldacchinos are meant to shroud the sacred, to cover the altar where the most holy action of Consecration takes place, in much the same way that altars of old were shrouded by curtains.

Baldacchinos have been employed in certain newly-constructed churches, such as the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in La Crosse, Wisconsin and the Chapel at Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity Chapel at St. Thomas Aquinas College in Santa Paula, California. These churches are intentionally designed for the celebration of both the Extraordinary and Ordinary Forms. The baldacchino is seen as a viable compromise which veils the sacred in a traditional manner and allows celebration of the Mass both facing in the same direction as the people for the Tridentine Mass, and facing the people for the Ordinary Form.

An increasing number of sanctuaries designed after Vatican II are now being called upon to support the Tridentine Mass. A variety of solutions may be required to adapt those sacred spaces for the traditional usage. At Windsor's St. Theresa Church, for example, our own Barry Rafferty constructed a platform that was placed in front of the altar to allow the priest to celebrate Mass facing East.

In the Tridentine Mass, the open space in front of the High Altar serves a number of liturgical purposes. At Windsor's Assumption Church, choir stalls line the sides of the sanctuary, originally installed so that the Basilian priests who lived at the parish could pray the Divine Office as a community. At St. Albertus Church, the vast open sanctuary provided room for the grand ceremonies of the numerous solemn occasion Masses that were held there when the Polish Seminary (now at Orchard Lake) and Felician Sisters' Motherhouse (now in Livonia) were located across the street. Deacons and Subdeacons in a Solemn High Mass, and Bishops and their assisting clergy and servers in Pontifical Masses, have specific functions to perform in the space in front of the altar. Contrary to urban legend, it's not there to push the "action" at the altar further away from the congregation.

It is the opinion of this writer that the best arrangement for a church in which the Extraordinary and Ordinary Forms of Holy Mass coexist is for there to be a High Altar against a *reredos*, along with a portable freestanding altar. The *reredos* altar arrangement provides for maximal free space in front of the altar that is rarely available in churches employing baldacchinos. Furthermore, culturally, in our age, the *reredos* altar inspires a special sentiment among Catholics, a feeling that the church is intentionally outfitted for traditional liturgy. Conversely, a church with a concealed or removed High Altar feels liturgically disoriented.

One occasionally hears the argument that a church should only have one altar. Such arguments tend to be made by academics who don't have to face the weekly – or daily – challenges of setting up a church for the Tridentine Mass. A few experiences in the trenches of actually rearranging a church, and seeing what sort of space requirements the Extraordinary Form demands, quickly demonstrates the advantage of the portable freestanding altar.

We have heard of one interesting configuration: Holy Rosary Church in Indianapolis has only one altar, but it's on tracks. It slides against the *reredos* for the Tridentine Mass, then slides out to allow for Mass facing the people. It's an arrangement with its own drawbacks – the *predella*, or top altar platform, has to be larger than usual to accommodate this sort of design, but one must give them points for ingenuity.

One thing is clear: In this era when the Extraordinary Form is being offered in an increasing number of churches, it would be short-sighted and certainly not pastoral to build churches where the altar is pushed up towards the congregation. Yet should such a building be put forth as a possible site for the Tridentine Mass, let us always remember that a church serves the Liturgy, not the other way around. It's only a building; it can be adapted...and improved.

Tridentine Masses This Coming Week

Mon. 03/11 7:00 PM: Low Mass at *St. Josaphat* (Feria of Lent)

Tue. 03/12 7:00 PM: Low Mass at *Assumption-Windsor* (Feria of Lent)

Sun. 03/17 Noon: High Mass at *St. Albertus* (Passion Sunday)