

**B**less this altar built in the house of the Church,  
that it may ever be reserved  
for the sacrifice of Christ,  
and stand for ever as the Lord's table,  
where your people will find nourishment  
and strength.

Make this altar a sign of Christ  
from whose pierced side flowed blood and water,  
which ushered in the sacraments of the Church.

Make it a table of joy,  
where the friends of Christ may hasten  
to cast upon you their burdens and cares  
and take up their journey restored.

Make it a place of communion and peace,  
so that those who share  
the body and blood of your Son  
may be filled with his Spirit  
and grow in your life of love.

Make it a source of unity and friendship,  
where your people may gather as one  
to share your spirit of mutual love.

Make it the centre of our praise and thanksgiving  
until we arrive at the eternal tabernacle,  
where, together with Christ,  
high priest and living altar,  
we will offer you an everlasting sacrifice of praise.

*Prayer of Dedication of an Altar*

# Westminster Altar Servers

A twice yearly publication by the Diocesan Liturgy Commission  
for Altar Servers

## Be friends and apostles of Jesus

*On August 2, 2006, Pope Benedict XVI addressed a European pilgrimage of Altar Servers in Saint Peter's Square.*

When you take part in the Liturgy by carrying out your altar service, you offer a witness to all. Your absorption, the devotion that wells up from your heart and is expressed in gestures, in song, in the responses: if you do it correctly and not absent-mindedly, then in a certain way your witness is one that moves people. The Eucharist is the source and summit of the bond of friendship with Jesus. You are very close to Jesus in the Eucharist, and this is the most important sign of his friendship for each one of us. Do not forget it.

This is why I am asking you not to take this gift for granted so that it does not become a sort of habit, knowing how it works and doing it automatically; rather, discover every day anew that something important happens, that the living God is among us and that you can be close to him and help him so that his mystery is celebrated and reaches people.

If you do not give into habit, if you put your innermost self into carrying out your service, then you will truly be his apostles and bear fruits of goodness and service in every context of your life: in the family, at school, in your free time. Take to one and all that love which you receive in the Liturgy, especially to places where you realize that they lack love, where they do not receive goodness, where they suffer and are lonely. With the power of the Holy Spirit, try to take Jesus to those very people who are outcast, who are not very popular or have problems. With the power of the Holy Spirit, it is precisely there that you must take Jesus.

In this way, the Bread you see broken upon the altar will be shared and multiplied even more, and you, like the Twelve Apostles, will help Jesus distribute it to the people of today in their different walks of life. So it is, dear Altar Servers, that my last words to you are: May you always be friends and apostles of Jesus Christ!

Westminster Altar Servers is a publication of the Diocesan Liturgy Commission. Together with other diocesan liturgy resources it can be downloaded from <http://www.rcdow.org.uk/liturgy>  
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# The Altar at which we serve

One of the requirements of our churches is that they have a fixed altar – something which remains there whether Mass is celebrated or not. It can sometimes seem rather inconvenient, for there are times when we celebrate other forms of liturgy in our churches and when it would be nice to rearrange the furniture! Some limited rearrangement is often possible and helpful, but the altar is not something to be wheeled in and out. It is desirable that it be made of stone, and even if it is made from wood it should be fixed. In its permanence it symbolises Christ our cornerstone (thus the preference for stone). It comes most fully into its own in the celebration of the Mass, but even outside of the Mass it is not obscured or pushed to one side but remains there, a reminder and a presence of the living Christ.

At the beginning of Mass we see that the priest, entering the sanctuary, reverences the altar, bowing and venerating it with a kiss. It would be as true, indeed maybe even more true, to say that these actions are directed towards Christ himself, symbolised in the altar. Offering that kiss to the altar is an intimate and intense moment of prayer. It is normally reserved to the priest, however I heard some while ago that a bishop, at the end of a liturgy where he had dedicated a new altar, invited the whole congregation to come forward to offer it the same reverence. The invitation was well received and the action made a deep impression on many of those present.

If, principally, the altar symbolises Christ, it also symbolises the Church. When a new altar is dedicated it goes through a sort of baptism rite – the ritual makes use of water, oil, light and fire, and sweet smelling substances to make this which was ‘ordinary’ into a new creation, made new in Christ.

If this ‘baptism’ of the altar makes it like us in some way, its meaning for the Church is made all the stronger by the way in which, very commonly, the dedication rite includes the placing of relics of the saints into or under the altar. This tradition dates back to the early centuries when it was common for the altar to be built over the tomb of a martyr saint. Their free offering of their life echoed and found its fulfilment in Christ’s self-offering at Calvary and in the Eucharist. In gathering for worship at this altar/tomb the men and women of the Church

showed that they wished to achieve that same quality of love and witness in their lives too.

Until relatively recently the relics of saints placed in altars have tended to be tiny slivers of bone. And most of the time unless one knew that they were there you wouldn’t know. There was no exterior sign. More recently the Church has encouraged an end to such tokenism, and said that when relics are used they should normally be a fairly sizeable piece of, for example, a bone of a saint. In past the tiny slivers used were often inserted in something about the size of a matchbox, and cemented into the ‘table’ of the altar. That’s not so practical with larger relics, so they are more and more often placed in proper reliquaries below the altar. In consequence we are helped to remain mindful of the ecclesial dimension of our prayer. At the altar the whole Church, living and dead, unites with her Lord, in a single act of worship, offering praise and thanksgiving to the Father.



## Resources for MCs and Servers

The Bishops of England and Wales have recently issued a new guide to the liturgical arrangement of churches. This guide, *Consecrated for Worship* is based on the teaching of the Church in the *Roman Missal* and other such documents, and applies that teaching to the particular circumstances of the Church in England and Wales. It will be a very helpful reference book for MCs and servers.

Last year the Bishops issued *Celebrating the Mass*, a guide to the celebration of Mass. Again this is firmly based on the teaching of the Universal Church, and also includes the application of that teaching to England and Wales. *Celebrating the Mass* is an indispensable resource for MCs, as they seek to ensure that best practice is followed in their parish.

Both of these books are published by the Catholic Truth Society. [<http://www.cts-online.org.uk/> ]

A wide range of resources have been produced by the Liturgy Office of the Bishops’ Conference to assist parishes make good use of *Celebrating the Mass* and *Consecrated for Worship*. Full details of these are available on the Liturgy Office website [<http://liturgyoffice.org.uk/>] from where most of the resources can also be downloaded free of charge.