

Archbishop Smith: Cross and Altar

This weekend I had the wonderful blessing of visiting St. Agnes and Our Lady of Perpetual Help parishes. On Saturday, at the newly and beautifully renovated church of St. Agnes in Edmonton, I dedicated its new altar. Then on Sunday, while visiting the parish of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Sherwood Park, I blessed a stunning new crucifix, recently installed in the church's sanctuary. These events, although distinct, nevertheless were inwardly united because of the inseparable and mysterious bond that exists between the Cross and the altar.

What I'm getting at here is the teaching of the Church that what happened on Calvary is rendered present at mass. On the Cross, Jesus gave himself for the salvation of the world. His death on the Cross and resurrection from the dead happened once and for all. We are given a share in this victory by participation in the sacraments, in which Jesus, in the power of his paschal mystery (death and resurrection) is present. The supreme instance of this is the Eucharist, in which the very same self-sacrifice of Christ on the Cross of Calvary is rendered present on the altar of the mass. When we receive from that altar Holy Communion, we are drawn by Jesus into his very act of offering himself to the Father. This is so that we, too, – through, with and in him – might make of our lives a complete offering to God.



Newly renovated and reopened St. Agnes Church in Edmonton.

When we understand the unity of Cross and altar, we can appreciate the teaching of the Lord we heard in the Gospel passage for the first Sunday of Advent (Luke 21: 25-28, 34-36). There, Jesus is looking ahead to his promised return at the end of time. He prophesies that his Second Coming will be signalled by events that will leave many people terrified. Many, but not all. To those who are his followers he says: "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." (21:28) That is to say, don't be afraid. Since, as Christians, we live from the unity of Cross and altar, we know that his final return is not something to meet with terror but to welcome with joy. Neither do we fear the unsettling events that beset us even now in our daily living.

When Jesus offered himself on the Cross, he was subsequently raised from the dead by his heavenly Father. In other words, the resurrection was the response of the Father to the self-gift of his Son. On the altar, what is rendered present is the self-same sacrifice of Jesus, who now reigns in heaven as Risen Lord. This means that, on the altar, what is truly present is not only the self-offering of Christ but also the response of the Father! Therefore, when we, by receiving Holy Communion, offer our lives through Christ to the Father, we share also in the Father's response, His answer of life and hope. Living thus from the unity of Cross and altar, we are enabled to "stand up and raise our heads" no matter what befalls us. Our redemption is always near at hand. Let us welcome it with hope and joy.

Blessed Advent!