Solemn Consecration of a Church

The Priestly Fraternity of Saint Peter

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Chapel of Saints Peter and Paul
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altars. They are carried back triumphantly to the church while the people bear candles and sing hymns and antiphons to their honor. Each reliquary arrives at its altar and is buried in the sepulcher with blessed cement.

The bishop now returns to the interior walls. With the holy chrism, he anoints the walls at each of the twelve candles, meanwhile saying, “May this temple be sanctified and consecrated in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, to the honor of God and to the memory of Saint N.” This anointing with its accompanying prayer constitutes the essence of the consecration of the church. It is, according to Guéranger, a figure of confirmation. The building is now a church properly so called, its complete initiation waits only on the chrismation of the altar and the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

At the altar the bishop again traces the five crosses, this time using holy chrism in place of Gregorian water. These five crosses recall the five wounds of Christ, from which all the fruits of the altar flow. The corners of the altar are also anointed where they meet the mensa. Finally, the bishop lays on the crosses grains of incense and wax, which he enflames as a foreshadowing of the true Sacrifice to come. As they burn, those present sing the *Come, Holy Ghost*. A prayer is sung which concludes the consecration of the altar; it is now sanctified, a symbol of Christ, ready to bear that Sacrifice in which Christ serves at once as priest, altar, and oblation. Altar cloths, candles, and other ornamentation are brought in. What follows is the end towards which all has been ordered: the church has been consecrated in order to consecrate. Taking bread and wine, the bishop pronounces those words which call Our Lord to descend from heaven and pitch His tent once again amongst men. The building has assumed its sacred dignity; it has become a dwelling for the divinity. The work of the consecration is finished.

The solemn consecration of a church is that act by which God descends to accept as His own a dwelling made by human hands. The building takes on a sacred character, forever divorced from common or profane use. It becomes, as the Divine Office describes, a gate of heaven, a house of prayer, founded on solid rock, the court of the Lord, an eternal habitation, a fearful place, an unfathomable mystery. The communion antiphon of the Mass for the Dedication of a Church teaches that prayers are here heard more propitiously: “My house shall be called a house of prayer, saith the Lord: every one that asketh therein receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.” The Pontificale Romanum, the ceremonial for bishops, adds that this will be a place in which the sick and lame will be healed, the infirm restored to strength, lepers cleansed, the blind enlightened, and demons put to flight. The very stones, anointed by chrism, signify the New Jerusalem, the mystical Body of Christ, whose members are joined by the holy bonds of charity.

The Pontificale distinguishes consecrations from blessings. The former are elevated above the latter by greater solemnity, by the use of holy oils, by a more exalted ordinary minister (a bishop rather than a priest), and by the conferral of a higher and permanent state. There are only four consecrations, strictly speaking, of things: besides that of a church are those of a fixed altar, an altar-stone, and a chalice with its paten. All are intimately related to that consecration which is spoken of without qualification, that is, the transubstantiation of the elements of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Our Lord. It might be said, then, that the Church reserves the greatest of her blessings for those things most immediately in contact with the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

The ceremony is certainly one of the most impressive of all the sacred rites of
the Church, spanning two days. According to Dom Guéranger (1805-1875), author of The Liturgical Year, each element of the rite corresponds to a stage of the catechumenate. The building, which is a sign of the elect, is itself symbolically initiated into the Christian mysteries, that it might become a worthy setting for their actual celebration. In this way the consecration of a church manifests humanity’s elevation from nature to grace, of which it will henceforth be an instrument.

Fasting and abstinence are encouraged on the first day both for the community requesting the consecration and for the diocesan bishop who, as the Vicar of Christ, will translate the building from the secular to the sacred. In the evening, the bishop leads his clerics in the recitation of First Vespers for the Dedication of a Church. Afterwards, he prepares relics of the martyrs. A reliquary is fitted for each altar; each reliquary houses the remains of at least two martyrs, three grains of incense, and an attestation of authenticity written on parchment. On the following day each of these reliquaries will be sealed into the mensa (that is, the top surface) of its respective altar. This act goes back to the earliest eras of the Christian age during which Holy Mass was offered on the tombs of martyrs, every year marking the anniversary of their birth into eternal life. Once the relics have been thus prepared, they are borne aloft in solemn procession. All who follow carry lit candles as the relics are led to the altar of an ancillary chapel. There they are placed, and the community keeps vigil in their presence.

On the morrow the church lies bare and empty, a sign of the human race bowed down and made desolate under the weight of original sin. In an older form of the rite, it was now that the twelve wall candles of the church were lit. Like the twelve tribes of Israel, they gave testimony to and hope of a Saviour to come. And He does come. Jesus Christ, in the person of His bishop, arrives at the ancillary chapel to join His faithful in prayer. There he exchanges his choir dress for the episcopal vestments. Having girded himself with prayer and penance, the high priest leads all present in procession to the exterior of the church, which, however, remains stubbornly closed.

At the threshold of the shut doors, the bishop calls upon the help of God. His attendants carry to him salt, which he exorcizes. Next come ashes, which he blesses. These are added to water and finally, to blessed wine. The result is called Gregorian water, prescribed for the consecration of churches nearly fifteen hundred years ago by Pope St. Gregory the Great. With this ancient sacramental the bishop sprinkles the circumference of the building, an asperses of bricks, which Guéranger describes as a siege to recover abandoned souls. Having finished his circuit, he stands once more before the doors and strikes them with his pastoral staff. “Lift up your gates, ye princes!” he cries, “And be ye lifted up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall enter in.” A deacon, alone within the unyielding doors, responds, “Who is this King of Glory?” The bishop answers, “The Lord of hosts, He is the King of Glory! Open!” The doors surrender and open.

He enters and the Litany of the Saints is intoned. At its conclusion the Gregorian water is again presented to him. With it, the bishop proceeds with a baptismal washing of the entire building. He begins with the interior walls, which he showers with the blessed water before returning to the sanctuary. From there he sprinkles the church across nave and transept, forming a massive sign of the cross upon the floor. Finally he advances to the main altar. This he circles, sanctifying it with water from the hyssop branch. On the mensa of the altar he traces by hand the five inlaid crosses.

Meanwhile sacristans scatter two lines of ash or sand upon the floor of the church, which intersect to form a St. Andrew’s cross. The bishop receives his crozier and with it inscribes first the Greek, then the Latin alphabet. The sacred languages—channels of Scriptures, Councils, and Creeds—represent the passing on of Christian doctrine; they meet on the Cross, the central dogma of Christian religion.

The bishop lifts up his voice in the Consecratory Preface and then processes back to the ancillary chapel where the relics await. These leave their place in that chapel in order to welcome and enthrone Our Lord onto their respective