

The Dedication of Holy Cross Church

The dedication of a new church is a joyful event in the life of any parish. The rite of dedication is richly filled with symbolism. This is the first in a series of articles which explain the rite and some of the symbols we will be using.

Why dedicate a church?

When a church is erected as a building destined solely and permanently for assembling the people of God and for carrying out sacred functions, it is fitting that it be dedicated to God with a solemn rite, in accordance with the ancient custom of the Church.

I thought the church was the People of God?

Through his death and resurrection, Christ became the true and perfect temple of the New Covenant and gathered together a people to be his own. This holy people is the Church, the temple of God built of living stones.

From early times “church” has also been the name given to the building in which the Christian community gathers to hear the word of God, to pray together, to receive the sacraments, and to celebrate the Eucharist.

What dedicates a church?

It is the diocesan bishop’s responsibility to dedicate new churches in his diocese. Every church must have a titular, e.g. a canonized saint, Blessed Trinity, Our Lord Jesus Christ according to a mystery invoked in his life or a title in the Sacred Liturgy, the Holy Spirit, the Blessed Virgin Mary or one of the angels.

The celebration of the Eucharist with its special prayers and readings and hymns most fittingly dedicates a church along with other unique parts of the Rite of dedication

- Blessing and sprinkling of water

- Prayer of dedication

- Anointing of the altar and walls of the church

- Incensation of the altar and church

- Lighting the altar and church

What are the parts of the Rite of Dedication?

Entrance into the Church

The people gather outside the church for a more solemn entry, or if circumstances dictate, they may gather in the church and the liturgical ministers will process into the church.

Representatives of those who have been involved in the building of the church hand it over to the bishop, the Shepherd of the Diocese of Trenton.

The people, the walls of the church and the altar are sprinkled with water blessed by the bishop. The water is a sign of our repentance, a reminder of our baptism and a symbol of the cleansing of the church walls and the altar.

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Liturgy of the Word

The texts for the mass have a special meaning for the occasion and are specifically chosen from the Rite for dedication of a church. The first reading is always the passage from Nehemiah that tells the people of God gathered to hear the proclamation of the Law of God.

After the readings, the bishop gives a homily in which he explains the readings and the meaning of a dedication of a church. The profession of faith always follow and the Universal prayer (intercessions) are omitted since the Litany of the Saints is sung in their place.

Prayer of Dedication

The prayer of dedication is a sign of the intention to dedicate the church to the Lord for all times and a petition for his blessing.

Rites of Anointing, Incensing, Covering and Lighting the Altar

The anointing of the altar with sacred chrism makes the altar a symbol of Christ, “the Anointed One.” The anointings of the walls of the church signify that it is given over entirely and perpetually to Christian worship. There will be four anointings, symbolizing universality and that the church is a sign of the heavenly city of Jerusalem.

Incense

The sacred use of incense denotes that Christ’s sacrifice on the altar and our prayers rise up to heaven with an odor of sweetness. Next, the people are incensed as the living temple in which each of us is a spiritual altar, and finally the church is incensed as a house of prayer.

Covering and Lighting of the Altar

The altar is adorned with coverings for a sacred feast, the Eucharistic sacrifice. The lighting of the altar is followed by lighting of the church reminding us that Christ is the Light of the World, shining through the Church and the whole human family.

Celebration of the Eucharist

The essential part of the entire rite, the reason for which the Church was built and the altar erected.

What are the candles on the walls of the church for?

The candles on the wall of the church are a reminder of the church’s dedication and anointing. They are located at the places of anointing, are lit at the dedication and on the anniversary of the dedication each year.

Whose relics does Holy Cross have and where did they come from?

Sadly, we do not know whose relics are contained in the altar stones which Holy Cross has used for decades, as neither the parish nor diocesan records identify the saints. Nevertheless, we have taken the relics from each of the altar stones we have used in altars at Holy Cross over the years and will encase them under the altar in a reliquary on the day of the dedication.