

Why Does There Seem to Be Such an Emphasis on the Ambo and the Chair? Why Can't the Priest Just Remain at the Altar Throughout a Mass?

One aspect of our liturgical tradition that is sometimes overlooked is an appreciation of *place* during liturgical rites. For example, the ritual books specifically call for certain actions to be done *at the doors* of the church during the rites of baptism, marriage, and burial, but often such actions are done *within* the church building, sometimes even in the sanctuary, and, as a result, the symbolism of “crossing the threshold” or “entering the church” is lost.

The Roman Missal revised after the Second Vatican Council re-established an ancient tradition in Christian worship, namely, a reverence for, and appropriate use of, “place” during the Mass. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) directs that different parts of the Mass should be associated with different places in a church. The Missal now prescribes that all the scripture readings should be done from one place, the location officially called the “ambo” (often called the “lectern” or “pulpit”), that the priest should be at the altar only when the eucharistic elements are there from the preparation of the gifts through the distribution of communion, and that the “presidential chair” should be used by the priest for the introductory and concluding rites and also during the liturgy of the word. On certain days (e.g., the Easter Vigil or Palm Sunday), the Missal also prescribes that the beginning of the Mass take place outside the church building and, after a special blessing, all enter the church in a formal procession.

Although the Mass is a single act of worship, it consists of two major parts, the liturgy of the word and the liturgy of the eucharist and it is appropriate that these two sections of the

Mass be associated with two different areas within the church building, namely, the “ambo” and the “altar,” from ancient times referred to as “the table of God’s word” and “the table of Christ’s body” (GIRM 28). It is also appropriate to highlight the role of the presiding priest as the one who leads the community in prayer, representing Christ himself (GIRM 30), and this is done in a visual way by the use of the presidential chair, a symbol of leadership in the community.



The current Missal is careful to foster a proper appreciation of *location* during Mass. It directs that only the proclamation of the word of God should take place at the ambo and that even the commentator should not use it (GIRM 309, 105b). It directs that the altar, a symbol of Christ, should not have anything on it other than what is absolutely necessary, namely, the Book of the Gospels during the liturgy of the word and the bread and wine (and the required altar linens and the Missal) during the liturgy of the eucharist (GIRM 298, 306) and that the priest should not be at the altar except during the liturgy of the

eucharist. Flowers should not be on the altar (GIRM 305) and candles and the cross are more appropriately placed near the altar rather than upon it (GIRM 307, 308; *Built of Living Stones*, 91—92).

The presidential chair is normally used by the priest when he does not need to be at the ambo or altar. Thus, he should use it during the Introductory and the Concluding Rites. During the liturgy of the word, the priest remains at the chair while the readers and deacon (or concelebrant) proclaim the readings and gospel. He may preach the homily at the chair and it is there that he also should lead the profession of faith and the general intercessions.

Using different places for different purposes is common in human society. In our homes, we use a living room in different ways than we use the dining room. So it is in a church. Although in most churches, the ambo, altar, and chair are in close proximity to one another in what is called the “sanctuary,” nevertheless, each place has a special role associated with it during liturgical services and the integrity of the liturgical action is actually compromised when the distinction of place is not respected. Yet it is also very appropriate that, through their design and even through the materials from which they are made, the altar, ambo, and chair are seen as related to one act of worship (*Built of Living Stones*, n. 55).

In some churches, the tabernacle and baptismal font are also located near the altar and ambo. Since they are not normally used during Mass, ideally, they would be located away from the sanctuary in their own separate, but prominent, areas. Similarly, secondary altars should not be in the main sanctuary, but in self-contained chapels somewhat removed from the central area of worship.

In our contemporary society, we are acculturated to attending performances in which the action takes place in a single location, whether a screen (for a movie) or a stage (for a play or symphony or speech). But the Mass is not a “performance” by the priest and a few special assistants and the sanctuary is not a “stage.” During the Mass, the real “action” takes place in the hearts and minds of all those who have assembled. The different locations from which the ministers of worship (reader, deacon, priest) exercise their ministry are places toward which the gathered assembly can focus their attention during the different moments of the liturgy, and are related to the different modes of Christ’s presence at Mass. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of Vatican II reminds us that Christ is present at liturgical celebrations in four ways: in the baptized gathered together in prayer, in the person of the priest who presides, in the word proclaimed, and in a special way in the Eucharistic species (n. 7, also GIRM 27). These four manners of Christ’s presence are reflected in a church architecturally by the place for the assembly, the chair of the priest, the ambo for God’s word, and the altar for the eucharistic sacrifice. Each of these locations reminds us of the different, yet complementary ways that Christ is present to us. As we grow more sensitive to the various ways that Christ is present at worship by reverencing and properly using the altar, ambo, and chair, we may also become more sensitive to experiencing Christ’s presence in other places in our world and at other times of our lives as well.

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