



Pope Francis said Wednesday that having Mass centered around the altar in commemoration of Jesus' sacrifice is meant to remind faithful that the cross is the first Christian altar on which Christ made his own offering.

During the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the Church uses various signs to “continually makes present the sacrifice of the new covenant sealed by Jesus on the cross,” the Pope said Feb. 28, adding that “this was the first Christian altar.”

“When we draw close to the altar during Mass, our memory goes to the altar of the cross where the first sacrifice was made,” he said, and encouraged Catholics to reflect on this when they go to Mass.

Pope Francis spoke to pilgrims attending his general audience, which this week was divided into two areas due to the cold temperatures in Rome – the main group was in the Vatican's Paul VI Hall, while the overflow watched the audience from inside St. Peter's Basilica, instead of the square outside, where chairs are still dusted with white from Monday's rare snowfall.

The Pope focused on the Liturgy of the Eucharist as part of his ongoing catechesis on the Mass, noting how during this part the priest celebrating imitates several gestures that Jesus made during the Last Supper: the presentation of the gifts, the Eucharistic Prayer, the breaking of the bread and Communion.

During the presentation of the gifts, Francis said members of the congregation should bring the bread and wine to the priest, “because they signify the spiritual offering of the Church gathered there for the Eucharist.”

Even if they don't bring their own bread from home as was the custom in the past, “the rite of the presentation of these gifts preserves their spiritual value and meaning.”

In ordination Masses for priests, the bishop gives the new priest the bread and wine, saying “receive the offering of the holy people for the Eucharistic sacrifice,” which is important to remember, Francis said, because in the bread and wine is offered “the commitment of the faithful to make themselves, obedient to the divine word, a sacrifice pleasing to God the omnipotent Father for the good of all his holy Church.”

“Thus, the lives of the faithful, their suffering, their prayer, their work, are united to those of Christ and to his total offering, and in this way they take on a new value.”

While our own offering is small, “Christ needs this little bit – like what happened in the multiplication of the bread – to transform it into the Eucharistic gift which nourishes and unites everyone in his body which is the Church,” he said.

In off-the-cuff remarks, the Pope noted that God asks us for little, “but he gives us a lot. In daily life he asks us for good will, for an open heart, he asks us to want to be better, and in giving himself in the Eucharist, he asks us for these symbolic gifts, which then become his body and blood.”

A concrete image of the prayer and offerings made during Mass is the use of incense, he said, noting that the perfumed smoke is symbolic of these gifts rising to heaven.

“By incensing the offerings, the cross, the altar, the priest and the people, the priest visibly manifests the offertory bond that unites all these realities to the sacrifice of Christ,” he said, and told attendees to remember that “the first altar is the cross, and on the altar we bring the small gifts we have.”

Francis then noted that after placing the bread and wine on the altar, the celebrant asks God to accept the gifts that the Church has offered, which signifies **“the wonderful exchange between our poverty and his wealth.”**

“In the bread and wine we present him with the offering of our lives, so that it is transformed by the Holy Spirit in the sacrifice of Christ and becomes with him one offering pleasing to the Father,” he said.

The gift of self made in the Mass, he said, can help bring light to one's daily activities and relationships, as well as the suffering and joy that might be encountered. This, he said, will help Christians “to build an earthly city in the light of the Gospel.”

Pope Francis closed his audience urging faithful not to forget the altar in Mass always refers to **“the first altar of the cross. And to the altar we bring the little we have in our gifts, the bread and wine, which then becomes the abundance that Jesus gives us.”**