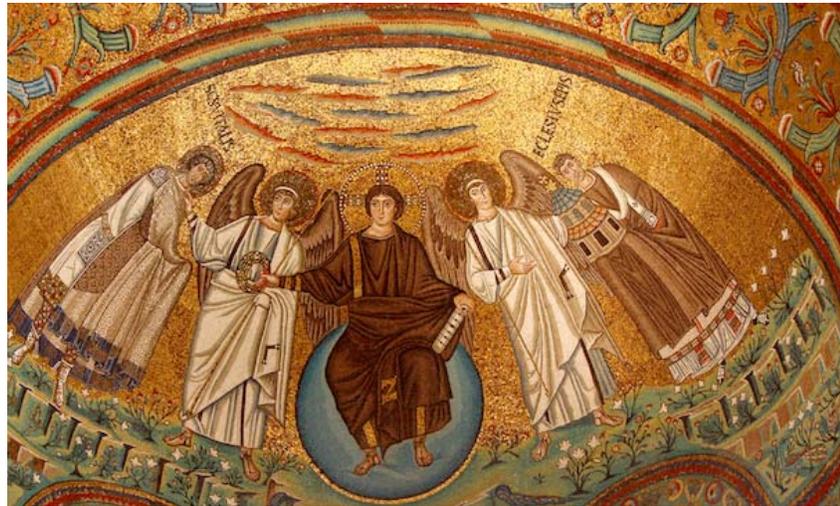


# The Parish as a Sacred Place

By Greg Witherow

Our Catholic parishes are not secular structures, common, ordinary meeting houses where the faithful worship. Instead they are **unlike any other structure on earth** whether it be a school, hospital or even other houses of worship. They are a sacred place, set apart for prayer, meditation and the liturgy of the Mass. Catholics are instinctively drawn to pray in a church during their hour of need. Sometimes even non-Catholics sense a difference<sup>1</sup>. What follows is an explanation of how Mother Church provides “holy ground” for her people, to step out of this world and enter into the sacred.

By canon law a new parish is blessed by the bishop. In many cases this happened years ago. Holy Trinity was blessed by bishop Loverde using specific rites and given a sacred name per Canon Law (1217) stating a parish is named (never changed) for the Trinity, angel or saint. There cannot be a “Gainesville Catholic Church”.



The altar has a special place of honor in the parish. It too is blessed according to the appropriate rites (Canon Law 1237.1) and it contains relics of the saints (Canon Law 1237.2). This images the altar in heaven where John writes in Revelation seeing, “under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God and the testimony which they had”. Recently in the Arlington diocese, St. Veronica parish’s altar was dedicated as related in the Arlington Catholic Herald newspaper.

“Holy water was sprinkled on the altar and the congregation. Relics of Sts. Peter Chanel, Felix, Elizabeth Ann Seton and Pius X were sealed within the altar. Bishop Burbidge then poured chrism on the altar to anoint it. Incense was burned on the altar as a symbol of prayers rising to heaven. Finally, the altar was adorned with lit candles.”<sup>2</sup>

Finally each parish has a tabernacle containing the consecrated hosts. Our faith tells us such hosts are the body, blood, soul and divinity of Christ. It is the “power plant” of each parish, connecting heaven and earth. Statues and stain glass with saints remind us the “cloud of witnesses” surround us.

Before entering, pause and think. Recall, the profane lies behind, the sacred lies before. Saints and angels hover, watching, praying. Christ is physically present “in the room”. Really. Not pretend. It is like nowhere else. Entering is to find the ladder<sup>3</sup> where heaven and earth meet. We bask in His glory.

<sup>1</sup> Holy Trinity hosts “Bethlehem Walk” during advent, depicting life in Bethlehem on the first Christmas. The first scene brought the tour into the darkened, candlelit sanctuary where the tabernacle is present, behind the altar. The actors later relayed the affect this had on visitors. Gasps were often heard when they entered. One child asked, “is this heaven?” That’s the only room that got that reaction, on both nights. Yes there was beauty in the sanctuary, but even more and unknown to the visitors, Christ was physically in the room. They were in a sacred place.

<sup>2</sup> <http://bit.ly/2AHWWLv>. Accessed January 15, 2018

<sup>3</sup> Jacob’s ladder is a picture of Christ (Genesis 28:12) connecting heaven and earth. Christ makes this point to Nathanael in John 1:51