

The Principal Ornament of the Altar

You may have visited chapels and churches in the Roman Rite of the Catholic Church and noticed that there is an altar crucifix (formerly a cross) that has been placed in the centre of the altar. This practice originated with Pope Benedict XVI and continues in papal Masses to this day. It originated in response to concerns emerging from the celebrant facing the people during the Holy Mass and was offered as a compromise in the debates regarding the stance of the priest during the Eucharistic Prayer.

Monsignor Charles Pope, in the 17 January 2023 edition of *Our Sunday Visitor*¹ offers a greater study of the reasons Pope Benedict XVI and the Vatican put into place the practice of placing a crucifix on the altar. Here is an excerpt:

One of the oldest signs consists in turning to the east to pray. The east is a symbol of Christ, the sun of justice. ... The liturgy was not imagined primarily as a dialogue between the priest and the assembly. ... The celebration of the Holy Mass 'toward the people' is a concept that entered [in order to] form part of the Christian mentality only in the modern age, as serious studies demonstrate and Benedict XVI confirmed: 'The idea that the priest and the people in prayer must look at one another reciprocally was born only in the modern age and is completely foreign to ancient Christianity. In fact, the priest and the people do not address their prayer to one another, but together they address it to the one Lord.'"²

Aside from these thoughts and reasons given by Pope Benedict XVI, if we consider the principal ornament of the altar (the crucifix) is placed there to recall to the mind of the celebrant, and the faithful in attendance at Mass, that the Victim offered on the altar is the same as was offered on the Cross. In other words, both the Presider and the faithful can face the crucifix and engage, in a proper way, with the one Sacrifice.

The *General Instructions of the Roman Missal* (270) indicate that "there is to be a cross, clearly visible to the congregation, either on the altar or near it." The revised *General Instruction* (2003) clarifies that the cross in question should have a corpus (representation of Christ's body), meaning that it should be a crucifix rather than a bare cross. It also indicates that the altar crucifix should be placed between the altar candles and that it be large enough to be seen by the faithful and celebrant alike. It is removed when the Blessed Sacrament is exposed but is generally to remain in place on the altar to signify the sacredness of the altar.

Beginning 2 December 2023 at St. Thomas Aquinas, we come into compliance with the *General Instructions* and will have an altar crucifix placed on our main altar for the celebration of the Holy Mass, not only to conform to the *General Instructions*, but to edify our celebration of the Holy Mass.

¹ Our Sunday Visitor: "Why is there a crucifix on the altar?" 17 January 2023. Accessed online at <https://www.oursundayvisitor.com/why-is-there-a-crucifix-on-the-altar/> on 29 October 2023.

² Ibid.