

### PART III

#### Veneration of the Altar & the Sign of the Cross

##### Veneration of the Altar:

In ancient times, kissing temples or images of the gods was customary to show reverence. By the 4<sup>th</sup> century, when Christianity became an open & legitimate faith practice, Christians appropriated this sign of honor since the altar is considered the “*table of God*” or the “*the table of the Lord.*” The altar, in fact, is a symbol of Christ, the cornerstone and spiritual rock of the Church. With the growth of the cult of the martyrs/saints in early Christianity, relics were placed beneath the altar - to further amplify the sanctity of this table. As Christ’s life was offered for our salvation, the martyrs/saints’ sacrifice for the sake of their faith is deemed as “*imitatio Christi,*” a supreme “*imitation of Christ.*” Beneath our altar here at St. Joseph’s is a relic of St. Aloysius Gonzaga, a Jesuit priest and namesake of Gonzaga University in Spokane, WA. The altar is venerated with a kiss at the beginning and at the end of the Mass. When incense is used during mass, the altar is further venerated with it.

##### Reflection:

According to the liturgical book called *Dedication of a Church and an Altar*, “*Christians who give themselves to prayer, who offer petitions to God and present sacrifices of supplication, are the living stones from which the Lord Jesus builds the Church’s altar.*” The veneration of the altar at the beginning of the Mass is an act of greeting which recalls that our “*common table*” is holy and sacred to the “*common act of thanksgiving*” by the assembled “*people of common faith.*” From this altar table, therefore, everybody is nourished with the Body & Blood of Jesus Christ. When the priest venerates it, he does so in the name of the faithful gathered to worship God.

##### Sign of the Cross:

Signing with the cross, especially before the celebration of any of the 7 sacraments, gain popularity among Christians as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. The crucifix has an ignominious history of being a symbol of “*capital punishment*” in ancient Rome. This is the paradox of this ubiquitous symbol of Christianity: a notorious symbol of death became a symbol of everlasting life for us. The gesture of signing with the cross also articulates one of the fundamental aspects of our Christian faith, i.e. our belief in the Holy Trinity: “*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, & of the Holy Spirit.*” This Christian dogma is one of the more profound conundrums of our faith. We are after all a monotheistic faith, believing in only one God. So how do we explain one God in three Persons? Quite simple, really. Our God is a God of family. There’s the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit - perceived as a mother figure - who binds both of them. Since we all live in the context of a family, this understanding of a God-in-family is something we can intellectually and spiritually grasp.

Reflection: One of our identifying features as Catholics is the sign of the cross. It is a traditional form of “*self-blessing*” with very strong baptismal overtones: Christ’s victory over death on the cross is also extended to us through baptism. By faithfully carrying our own crosses, and joining it with Christ’s own cross, we are on our path to salvation which Christ has won for us. Salvation, however, is not automatic. Endowed with God’s gift of freedom, we go through life making free choices and hopefully doing God’s will in the process. We are accountable for our choices.