 Reading time: 12 min.

(continuation from previous article)

Appendix

I. Ancient custom of consecrating churches

Once a church has been built, it is not possible to sing the divine offices, celebrate the holy sacrifice and other ecclesiastical functions in it unless it is first blessed or consecrated. The bishop, with a multiplicity of signs of the cross and the sprinkling of holy water, intends to purge and sanctify the place through exorcisms against evil spirits. This blessing can be performed by the bishop or a simple priest, but with different rites. Where the anointing of the sacred chrism and holy oils is involved, the blessing is the responsibility of the bishop, and it is called solemn, royal and consecutive because it is the completion of all the others, and even more so because blessed and consecrated things cannot be converted into profane use; hence it is strictly called consecration. If then in such ceremonies only certain prayers are performed with similar rites and ceremonies, the function can be performed by a priest, and it is called a blessing.

The blessing can be performed by any priest, with the permission of the Ordinary, but the consecration belongs to the Pope, and to the bishop alone. The rite of consecrating churches is very ancient and filled with serious mysteries, and Christ as a child sanctified its observance while his cave and crib were changed into a church in the offering made by the Magi. The cave therefore became a church, and the crib an altar. St Cyril tells us that the upper room where they received the Holy Spirit was consecrated by the apostles into a church, a hall that also represented the universal Church. Indeed, according to Nicephorus Calistus, hist. lib. 2, ch. 33, such was the apostles' solicitude that in every place where they preached the gospel they consecrated some church or oratory. The Pontiff St Clement I, Pope in the year 93, successor no less than disciple of St Peter, among his other orders decreed that all places of prayer should be consecrated to God. Certainly in St Paul's time the churches were consecrated, as some of the scholars say, writing to the Corinthians in c. III, *aut Ecclesiam Dei contemnitis?* St. Urban I, elected in the year 226, consecrated the house of St. Cecilia into a church, as Burius *in vita eius* wrote. St. Marcellus I, Pope in the year 304, consecrated the church of St. Lucina, as Pope St. Damasus relates. It is also true that the solemnity with which

the consecration is performed today, increased in time, after Constantine, in restoring peace to the Church, built sumptuous basilicas. Even the temples of the Gentiles, formerly the habitation of false gods and nest of lies, were converted into churches with the approval of the pious emperor, and were consecrated with the sanctity of the venerable relics of the martyrs. Thereupon, according to the prescriptions of his predecessors, Pope St Silvester I established the solemn rite which was expanded and confirmed by other popes, especially by St Felix III. St Innocent I established that churches should not be consecrated more than once. The Pontiff St. John I on his way to Constantinople to deal with the Arian question consecrated the churches of the heretics as Catholic churches, as we read in Bernini[i].

II. Explanation of the main ceremonies used in the consecration of churches.

It would take too long to describe the mystical explanations that the holy Fathers and Doctors give of the rites and ceremonies of church consecration. Cecconi speaks of them in chapters X and XI, and Father Galluzzi in chapter IV, from which we can summarise the following.

The holy Doctors therefore did not hesitate to assert that the consecration of the church is one of the greatest of ecclesiastical sacred functions, as can be deduced from the sermons of the holy Fathers, and from the liturgical treatises of the most famous authors, demonstrating the excellence and nobility that encompasses such a beautiful function, all directed towards making the house of God respected and venerated. The vigils, fasts and prayers are preached in order to prepare for exorcisms against the devil. The relics represent our saints. And so that we always have them in mind and in our hearts, they are placed in a receptacle with three grains of incense. The steps by which the bishop ascends to the anointing of the twelve crosses reminds us that our final and primary goal is Paradise. The sins of the cross and candles signify the twelve Apostles, the twelve Patriarchs, and the twelve Prophets who are the guide and pillars of the Church.

Furthermore, the consecration involves the anointing of the twelve crosses in as many places distributed on the walls, and the church and its walls are said to be consecrated, as St. Augustine notes, lib. Augustine, lib. 4, *Contra Crescent.* The church is closed to represent the heavenly Sion, where one does not enter unless purged of all imperfection, and the help of the saints and the light of the Holy Spirit is invoked with various prayers. The bishop goes around the church three times, in

unity with the clergy, alluding to the turns that the priests made with the ark around the walls of Jericho, not so that the walls of the church might fall, but so that the pride of the devil and his power might be destroyed through the invocation of God, and the repetition of the sacred prayers which are far more effective than the trumpets of the ancient priests or Levites. The three blows that the bishop gives with the tip of his crozier at the threshold on the door show us the power of the Redeemer over his Church, as well as the priestly dignity that the bishop exercises. The Greek and Latin alphabet depicts the ancient union of the two peoples produced by the cross of the Redeemer; and the writing that the bishop does with the tip of the crosier signifies the apostolic doctrine and ministry. The form then of this writing signifies the cross, which must be the ordinary and principal object of all learning of faithful Christians. It signifies also the belief and faith of Christ passed from the Jews to the Gentiles, and transmitted to us from them. All blessings are filled with grave significance, as are all things that are employed in this august service. The sacred anointing with which the altar and the walls of the church are imbued signifies the grace of the Holy Spirit, which cannot enrich the mystical temple of our soul unless it is first cleansed of its stains. The service ends with the blessing in the style of the holy Church, which always begins its actions with the blessing of God and ends them with it, because everything begins with God and ends in God. It is accomplished through the sacrifice not only to fulfil the pontifical decree of St Hyginus, but because there is no consecration accomplished where the victim is not also entirely consumed in the Mass.

From the grandeur of the sacred rite, from the eloquence of its mystical signification, we can easily see how much importance the holy Church our mother attaches to it, and therefore how much importance we must attach to it. But what must increase our veneration for the house of the Lord is to see how much this rite is founded on and informed by the true spirit of the Lord revealed in the Old Testament. The spirit that guides the Church today to surround the churches of Catholic worship with such veneration is the same spirit that inspired Jacob to sanctify with oil the place where he had the vision of the ladder; it is the same spirit that inspired Moses and David, Solomon and Judas Maccabaeus to honour with special rites the places destined for the divine mysteries. Oh how much this union of spirit of one and the other Testament, of one and the other Church teaches us and comforts us! It shows us how much God likes to be worshipped and invoked in his churches, so how willingly he answers the prayers we address to him in them. How much respect for a place, the profanation of which armed the hand of God with a scourge and changed him from a meek lamb into a severe punisher!

Let us therefore come to the holy church but frequently, for the need we

have of God is a daily one. Let us go there, but with confidence and with religious fear. With confidence since we find there a Father ready to hear us, to multiply the bread of his graces to us as on the mountain, to embrace us like the prodigal son, to console us like the Canaanite woman, in temporal needs as at the wedding in Cana, in spiritual needs as on Calvary; with fear, for the Father does not cease to be our judge, and if he has ears to hear our prayers, he also has eyes to see our offences, and if he is silent now as a patient lamb in his tabernacle, he will speak with a terrible voice on the great day of judgement. If we offend him outside the church, we shall still have the church to escape to for forgiveness; but if we offend him within the church, where shall we go to be forgiven?

In the church divine justice is appeased, divine mercy is received, *suscepimus divinam misericordiam tuam in medio templi tui.* In the church Mary and Joseph found Jesus when they had lost him, in the church we shall find him if we seek him with that spirit of holy trust and holy fear with which Mary and Joseph sought him.

Copy of the inscription sealed in the corner stone of the church dedicated to Mary Help of Christians in Valdocco.

D. O. M.

UT VOLUNTATIS ET PIETATIS NOSTRAE
SOLEMNE TESTIMONIUM POSTERIS EXTARET
IN MARIAM AGUSTAM GENITRICEM
CHRISTIANI NOMINIS POTENTEM
TEMPLUM HOC AB INCHOATO EXTRUERE
DIVINA PROVIDENTIA UNICE FRETIS
IN ANIMO FUIT
QUINTA TANDEM CAL. MAI. AN. MDCCCLXV
DUM NOMEN CHRISTIANUM REGERET
SAPIENTIA AC FORTITUDINE
PIUS PAPA IX PONTIFEX MAXIMUS
ANGULAREM AEDIS LAPIDEM
IOAN. ANT. ODO EPISCOPUS SEGUSINORUM
DEUM PRECATUS AQUA LUSTRALI
RITE EXPIAVIT
ET AMADEUS ALLOBROGICUS V. EMM. II FILIUS
EAM PRIMUM IN LOCO SUO CONDIDIT

MAGNO APPARATU AC FREQUENTI CIVIUM CONCURSU
HELLO O VIRGO PARENS
VOLENS PROPITIA TUOS CLIENTES
MAIESTATI TUAE DEVOTOS
E SUPERIS PRAESENTI SOSPITES AUXILIO.

I. B. Francesia scripsit.

Translation.

As a solemn testimony for posterity of our benevolence and religion regarding the august Mother of God, Mary Help of Christians, we resolved to build this church from its foundations on 27April of the year MDCCCLXV, when the Catholic Church was governed with wisdom and fortitude by the Supreme Pontiff Pius IX . The cornerstone of the church was blessed according to the religious rites by Giovanni Antonio Odone bishop of Susa, and Amedeo of Savoy son of Vittorio E. II put it in place for the first time amidst great pomp and large crowds of people. Hail, O Virgin Mother, graciously succour those devoted to your majesty and defend them from heaven with efficacious help.

Hymn read during the solemn blessing of the cornerstone.

When the worshipper of idols
Moved to wage war on Jesus,
Oh how many fearless thousands
Stained the earth with blood!
From fierce battles unscathed,
the Church of God came out
spreading still its life,
from one sea to the other.

And it boasts its own martyrs
in this humble valley,
Ottavio died here,
and Solutor fell.
Beautiful immortal victory!

Rises on the bloody ground
Of the Martyrs
perhaps the divine altar.

And here the afflicted youth
opens his sighs,
Finding solace for his soul
in his martyrs;
Here the scorned widow
with a devout and holy heart
Places her humble tears
in the bosom of the King of Kings,

And to you who often conquer
More than a thousand swords,
To You who boast glories
In all lands,
To You powerful and humble
OF whom Your name speaks,
MARY HELP OF CHRISTIANS,
we build a church to You.

So, O merciful Virgin,
So great to your devotees,
Above them in abundance
Ah! pour out your favours.
Already with tender pupil
Keep the youth in mind,
Who aspires to your laurels,
Oh Mother of the Redeemer!

He, of mind and nature,
of noble feeling,
gives himself to You, O Virgin,
in flourishing of his youth;
he, with constant devotion
hears sacred songs to You,
and now desires the

usual sound of arms.

The glory of Amedeo,
The great virtues of Umberto
Nourish in the heart, and remember
Their heavenly garland;
And from the white clouds,
From the heavenly hosts
Of the blessed Mother
He listens to the pious speech.

Dear and beloved Prince,
A host of holy heroes,
What beneficent thought
Brings you here among us?
Use to the aurate royalty,
Of the world’s lofty splendour
Of miserable squalor
Did you deign to visit?

Beautiful hope to the people,
In whose midst thou comest,
May your days live
Calm, sweet and serene:
Never on thy young head
On thy secure soul
Let not misfortune shriek,
Let no bitter day dawn.

Wise and zealous prelate,
And noble lords,
How much does the Eternal One like
Your holy ardours?
Blessed life and placid
He lives who for the decorum
Of the Temple his treasure
Or the work he lavished.

O sweet and pious spectacle!
O memorable day!
Most beautiful and noble day!
What was ever seen and when?
Well you speak to my soul:
Of this even more beautiful
The day will surely be
That the Temple opens to heaven.

In the difficult work
Gilded benefits,
And soon come to an end,
With joy in God you rest;
And then melting fervently
On my zither a song:
Praise we will say to the Holy One
To the Fortress of Israel.

(continued)

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[i] Compendium of Heresies p. 170. On temples of Gentiles converted into churches, see Butler Lives, November, p. 10.