

# This House of Prayer

1st in a series of 5

July 30, 2006

*Our Cathedral is a tangible invitation to prayer and reflection. During the coming weeks, we will visit different holy places in the Cathedral, and explore how they call us to prayer. This week, we hear the Gospel of the multiplication of the loaves, a sign of the Eucharist, and we pause before the altar.*

I will come to the altar of God,  
the God of my joy. (Psalm 43)

## WHAT IS AN ALTAR?

In the Old Testament, an altar was a dedicated place, where sacrifices were offered to God. For Christians, the altar is still the place of sacrifice, but it has another dimension as well. The altar is also the table for a marvelous banquet, at which Christ—who long ago fed the five thousand on a grassy hillside—continues to gather his people around him, and to feed them with his own substance, his very body and blood.

The altar is the pre-eminent symbol of Christ in a church building. In fact, it is sometimes said that “the altar is Christ.” Shortly following the Second Vatican Council, this instruction was given to those responsible for the building and arranging of churches: “the way the church is arranged greatly contributes to a worthy celebration and to the active participation of the people.... Above all, the main altar should be so placed and constructed that it is always seen to be the sign of Christ himself, the place at which the saving mysteries are carried out, and the center of the assembly, to which the greatest reverence is due” (*Eucharisticum Mysterium*, 1967). At St. James Cathedral, the centrally placed altar is without question the focus of attention and the center of worship. The altar challenges us, and calls to us to place Christ at the center of our lives.

## THE CATHEDRAL'S ALTAR

The Cathedral's altar is the work of many hands. The altar itself was created by Harold Vogel, incorporating marble panels representing wheat and grapes by four different artists. The two panels on the west side are from the Cathedral's original high altar, and are the work of an unknown Italian artist. Those on the south side are by Northwest sculptor Mary Jo Anderson of Oregon; those on the east are by New York artist Randall Rosenthal (who also created the Cathedral's ambo), and those on the north are by Alaskan Inuit sculptor Larry Ahvakana. Each artist brought a fresh, individual interpretation to the traditional emblems of wheat and grapes. The panels they created are unique and varied: a wonderful emblem for the diversity of the people who gather around this altar day after day to celebrate the Eucharist!



Under the Cathedral's altar are relics of the saints, including St. Frances Xavier Cabrini. The relics are an important reminder that when we celebrate the Eucharist, we are not alone: rather, we pray in company with the “cloud of witnesses” who have gone before us in faith.

The oculus Dei (“eye of God”), with its inscription from Christ's Last Supper words in Luke's Gospel—“I am in your midst as one who serves”—gently reminds us that just as we find Christ truly present in the sacrament of his body and blood, we will find him also in our service of those in need.

## FOR REFLECTION

“What is God's altar if not the souls of those who lead good lives? Rightly, then, the heart of the just is said to be the altar of God.” --St. Gregory the Great

“Christians who give themselves to prayer, offer petitions to God, and present sacrifices of supplication, are the living stones out of which the Lord Jesus builds the Church's altar.” --*Rite of Dedication of an Altar*

## PRAYER

Lord, you willed that all things be drawn to your Son, mounted on the altar of the Cross.

May this altar be the table of our unity,  
a banquet of plenty, and a source of the Spirit,  
in whom we grow daily as your faithful people.

--*Rite of Dedication of an Altar*

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**A YEAR OF PRAYER and RENEWAL**