

Making an Altar for the Home

With most of us in the United States (and world-wide) staying safe by staying at home, we are now worshipping virtually with our faith communities via Zoom, Facebook, YouTube, church websites and other platforms. While meeting in this way has proved wonderful for staying connected with the practice of coming together for Sunday services, weekday prayers such as Compline or Morning Prayer, not being in our sanctuaries together has been hard.

We have experienced that the Church is not a building but a community gathered in prayer. We've also realized that our homes can also be places of prayer. So as we near the end of our Lenten journey and prepare for Holy Week, perhaps it's time to create a prayer space at home that is available anytime of day or night to anyone in your household. In the midst of the chaos of homeschooling and worries of this world right now, working together as a household to build a home altar or sacred space may be an excellent way to create order and peace.

It is quite simple and can be done with what you already have at home most likely. Find a surface in a low traffic area such as a window sill, small table, portable tray table, or book shelf. I find it helpful to have it in a quiet area (usually this is on a shelf above my desk so it is always in sight) where there is little "action." On the back of this page is a list of items you may use.

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Things to gather:

✘ **Cloth:**

A placemat, tablecloth, or any piece of fabric. Try to match the color of the church season if possible. So now it is a dark purple for Lent. I've used one of the scarves that my granddaughter likes to pretend with when she comes to visit. With Holy Week I will find something red—probably the red scarf!

✘ **Candle:**

real or battery operated (which might be good if you have small children) to remind us that Jesus is the Light of the World. For me it also symbolizes the presence of the Holy Spirit and helps me quiet my mind and center my thoughts.

✘ **Cross:**

Any shape, type, or media cross will do. I'm fortunate in that I have a number of crosses in my home that I could use. The one pictured is one given to me in my childhood. If you don't have a cross, you could always make one out of paper, two sticks tied together with twine, even popsicle sticks. It could be a crucifix (with Jesus on it) or plain (which I tend to prefer because I like to focus on resurrection—the empty cross).

✘ **Icon:**

A holy image of a saint or biblical figure. Not everyone will want (or have) an icon, and that's okay. I discovered the beauty of icons one summer when I visited the Smithsonian Folklife Festival on the National Mall in Washington, DC when Greece was a featured country. It was wonderful to watch some iconographers painting with gold leaf. It didn't hurt that I was also taking a course on Church History and we had just studied the sixth century of Christianity. The icon pictured on my altar is called "Jesus of the People" by Janet Mackenzie, which won the 2000 National Catholic Reporter's competition for a new image of Jesus by judge, Sister Wendy Beckett of PBS fame.

✘ **Object from nature:**

A stone, flower, shell, acorn, etc. This reminds us of God's creation that surrounds us always. I have a hazelnut, also a connection to St. Julian of Norwich.

✘ **Flowers:**

Most of our churches have flowers on or near their altar—again, a reminder of God's creation and abundance. During Lent and Holy Week I don't have flowers—but watch out for Easter!

✘ **Prayers:**

I like to have a *Bible* and *Book of Common Prayer* nearby as I usually read a lesson appointed from the day or read the Daily Office. But sometimes a little card with a prayer on it is nice too. Near my desk I have a bulletin board where I keep lots of clippings and postcards of prayers that I have collected throughout the years that have meaning to me. Perhaps there is a prayer that you like especially; write it on paper or an index card.

✘ **Other objects**

Things that have meaning to you: You'll see a gold cloth heart. This was given to my mother by a quilting friend and she gave it to me on my birthday as she was beginning to slip away from Alzheimer's. You also see a set of children's prayer beads that I made at Kanuga's Christian Formation conference one year. I also added a little mirror—for fun—to remind me that I am God's beloved.

✘ **Bowl with paper and pen.**

I don't have this, but I know some people do. They might write names of people or thanksgivings on a slip of paper and put it in the bowl as part of their prayer practice. They can serve as reminders and become a household "collection of prayers."