

Westminster Cathedral – Key Stage 4

Features of a church



Context

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1. The Altar





The Altar

The altar is ideally made from a single piece of stone, and is sited in the sanctuary, the focal point of the church. As the faithful gather at Mass to renew the sacrifice of Jesus at his Crucifixion, the priest consecrates bread and wine on the altar to become Christ's body and blood, so that the faithful may receive Him in Holy Communion.



Altar Meaning

The altar represents Jesus himself and Catholics therefore bow to it as they enter or leave the church. When Christ's Body and Blood are present on or near the altar, Catholics genuflect (kneel on one knee) to acknowledge His presence.

Since Jesus gives Himself as food to nourish his followers, Christians of the Eastern Churches speak of the altar as the 'Holy Table'.



Westminster Altar

The altar stone in the Cathedral is a single block of Cornish granite, weighing 12 tons and measuring 12 feet by 4 feet. In it are set the relics of saints. This recalls the fact that the earliest stone altars were erected over the tombs of martyrs.

Above it there is a baldacchino: a canopy, made of marble and supported by eight marble columns from Verona, in Italy. This forms a protection for the altar as well as drawing the eye to the altar as the focus of worship (the word comes from the Arabic, meaning tent, which in turn has associations with the tent which covered the Ark of the Covenant as described in the Old Testament.)

2. The Tabernacle



A Tabernacle

The tabernacle is a secured container that holds the consecrated Body of Christ - 'the Blessed Sacrament' - outside the time of Mass, so that He is continually present in the Church. From the tabernacle Holy Communion can then be taken to those who are sick.

Acknowledging Christ's Real Presence here, Catholics genuflect when approaching the tabernacle and often spend time in prayer before the Sacrament. A sanctuary lamp - red or white - will be lit to mark the Lord's Presence in the tabernacle.



Westminster Tabernacle

The tabernacle in Westminster Cathedral is located in the Blessed Sacrament Chapel. Above it, wings outstretched, is a pelican, a symbol of sacrifice. It is said that the pelican will peck at its own breast to draw blood, if it cannot otherwise feed its young. There is a second bronze pelican above the gates of the screen leading into the chapel.

Inside the tabernacle curtains hang behind its doors from a number of gold wedding rings, each inscribed with the name of the donor. They were offered to the Cathedral in the wills of several women for this specific purpose.

3. Paschal Candle





Paschal Candle

This is a special candle that burns at principal liturgies during the Easter season. 'Pasch' refers to the Passover in Hebrew and it was at the Passover meal that Jesus celebrated his 'Last Supper' with his disciples before his Passion and Crucifixion. The Candle is lit at the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday night from a new fire and then processed into the church. Illuminating the darkened building, the Candle symbolises Jesus' Easter triumph over sin and death by his Resurrection.

The Paschal Candle is also lit at all major Masses until Pentecost. It is then used throughout the year at baptisms and funerals as a sign of the promise of new and eternal life.



Paschal Candle Symbols

On the Candle are different symbols:

- The cross represents Christ's self-sacrifice, showing God's love for humanity.
- 'Alpha' and 'Omega' are the first and last letters in the Greek alphabet, proclaiming Jesus Christ as the beginning and end of all things.
- The number of the current year is marked on each Candle. It asserts that all times and all ages belong to the Lord.



Westminster Paschal Candle

The Paschal Candle is kept in the Baptistry after Pentecost. Aside from the usual symbols, the Cathedral's Candles continue the tradition of being painted all over with Paschal scenes.

4. The Ambo





The Ambo

The Ambo is a lectern situated on the sanctuary. In the celebration of Mass it is used for proclamation of the biblical readings. These are contained in volumes called the Lectionary, used by readers, or the Book of the Gospels, used by a deacon or priest. During the 'Liturgy of the Word' at Mass, the faithful are spiritually nourished by the word of God.



Westminster Ambo

A second Ambo on the opposite side of the sanctuary is provided for a Cantor to lead the singing of the people.

The Cathedral also has a pulpit from which the priest or bishop presiding would deliver his homily, or sermon. Before the days of microphones it was necessary, especially in a large building like Westminster Cathedral, for the priest's voice to carry so that everyone in the congregation could hear him. For this reason, the pulpit, which was enlarged more than once, was built at a level above the congregation and had a sounding board above to help direct the speaker's voice.

Until the 1960s, it was used more regularly but nowadays is reserved for the more solemn liturgies and special occasions.

5. The Font



The Font

Fonts are shaped to form a bowl that can be filled with water for the celebration of Baptism. Fonts were traditionally positioned by the door of the church, to symbolise people's entry into the Christian life. Baptism is the first Sacrament that a person receives, and is the way in which they become a Christian.

After Christ's Resurrection, He instructed his disciples to baptise those who would come to faith: 'Go, make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. Catholics believe that baptism brings forgiveness of sin, adoption as God's children and the promise of eternal life.



Westminster Font

The font is found in the Baptistry, close to the main doors of the Cathedral. It is a large octagonal font, made of marble with a wooden lid. It was constructed in Rome in 1901/2 and brought to the Cathedral.

Gates from the Baptistry lead to the first Chapel, of St Gregory and St Augustine, who were together responsible for the evangelisation of England. Cardinal Herbert Vaughan, the Cathedral's founder, wanted the Chapels to reflect a Christian's journey through life, so the waters of Baptism lead you into a life with Christ. On the mosaic decoration of the arch linking the baptistry and the chapel, the four rivers of Paradise stress the link between baptism and conversion.

6. The Confessional



The Confessional

This is a small room set aside for the Sacrament of Reconciliation in which Catholics confess their sins and receive God's forgiveness through the person of the priest who offers them absolution. A grille separates the penitent (the person confessing) and the priest, so that confession can be anonymous. The penitent is given a 'penance', normally a short act of devotion as a token of sorrow for the sins committed and of desire to renew their journey of faith. They are then absolved by the priest, who, through the power of God, forgives their sins. Once they have received absolution, their relationship with God is restored and they are reconciled to Him and to the community of the Church.



Westminster Confessional

There are a number of confessionals in Westminister Cathedral.

Made of Austrian oak, several are located in the south aisle, but are seldom used, as the principal confessionals, with adjacent seating for those preparing to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation, are located towards the rear of the Lady Chapel.

7. Sarcophagus



Sarcophagus

A sarcophagus is a stone or marble coffin or tomb placed above ground that, for Christians, will normally bear sculpture or inscriptions depicting Christ and scenes from the Bible. Sarcophagi were expensive and, as a result, they were reserved for wealthy families and people of importance.





Westminster Cathedral Sarcophagus

There are eleven people interred in Westminster Cathedral. All the Cardinals, except Cardinal Bourne; Bishop Richard Challoner and a former Russian Ambassador, Count Alexander Benckendorff.

Cardinals Wiseman, Manning, Godfrey and Griffin are buried in the Crypt, as is the Russian Count. The other Cardinals and Bishop Challoner are buried in the main body of the Cathedral.

You may notice a red hat, properly called a galero, suspended above the tombs of most of the Cardinals. It is left there till it disintegrates as a symbol of how all earthly glory passes. Cardinals today do not wear or even have a galero. However, to maintain the custom, Cardinal Hume's niece made a galero for him, which can be seen hanging in the Chapel of St Gregory and St Augustine where he is buried.



St. John's Tomb

There are also the relics of St John Southworth, who ministered to the people of the Westminster area in the 1600s, especially during Plague times. He was hanged, drawn and quartered at Tyburn for being a Catholic priest in the times of persecution. After his death in 1654, his body was bought by the Spanish ambassador and buried secretly in France. Details were lost until his coffin was discovered in 1927 and returned to England in 1930. St John Southworth now lies in the Chapel of St George and the English Martyrs.

8. Statues





Statues

Statues are very commonly found in Catholic churches. A primary focus will be a statue of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. If the church is dedicated in honour of a particular saint, then it will normally contain a statue of that saint. Catholics use statues to focus their prayers, with the saints acting for them as exemplars of Christian life and as intercessors on their behalf.



Our Lady of Westminster

As already stated, statues are not a usual feature of Byzantine style. However, there are a few in the Cathedral.

The carved Nottingham alabaster statue of Mary with the Child Jesus, from around 1450, was purchased by the Cathedral in the 1950s. It is venerated as Our Lady of Westminster, recalling the medieval shrine to Our Lady which was in Westminster Abbey.

There is a statue of St Anthony of Padua, carved from a tree trunk, just by the main entrance doors and nearby, a small statue of St Christopher given to the Cathedral by the writer Hilaire Belloc as an offering for the protection of his son and the troops crossing the Channel in World War I.

In the Baptistry there is a large statue of St. John the Baptist, made of Cornish tin. It is a copy of the work of Bertal Thorvaldsen, a Danish sculptor.



Our Lady of Walsingham

The Norfolk village of Walsingham is the home of England's National Marian Shrine, and a copy of the image of Our Lady venerated there can be found in the Chapel of St George and the English Martyrs. This statue was originally blessed by Cardinal Griffin shortly after World War II, but has been recently refurbished and placed on a plinth, specially designed by Tomasz Zdziebkowski.

There is a bronze statue of St Peter which is situated near the main doors. You might notice that the toes of his right foot are much shinier than the rest of the bronze. This is because people like to touch the toes of his right foot as they pray. It is a copy of the celebrated statue in St Peter's Basilica in Rome.

Bronze reliefs - raised depictions made of the same material as their background - of St Vincent de Paul, St Benedict of Nursia and St Thérèse of Lisieux are to be found on the walls at the entrance to the Lady Chapel.

Tasks

1. Explain two ways in which the altar helps Believers to worship. Refer to scripture or Another source of Christian belief and Teaching in your answer.

2. Which one of the following always appears on the paschal candle?

- A - alpha and omega,
- B - a bible saying,
- C - a picture of Jesus,
- D - the fish symbol

3. Give two other symbols or symbolic meanings of the paschal candle.

4. 'Having statues in churches is against the Ten commandments.' Discuss this statement Showing that you have considered more than one point of view. (You must refer to religion and belief in your answer).

5. In cathedral hall (or your classroom) reflect on what you have seen and learnt. 'People come from all over the diocese to receive the sacrament of reconciliation.' why do you think people do this?

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