



The Domestic Church

Create a Family Prayer Space

The Family Altar

by Catherine Fournier

Lent has always been a time of increased reflection and prayer, a time for making new habits of prayer that will carry on into Ordinary Time. A family altar, or prayer table as some call it, helps not only to maintain a family habit of prayer, but serves as a physical reminder that our home is a place of worship.

This is the whole idea of the domestic church, that we worship with our family life, in our homes, as a family. A family altar is the expression of that worship call.

It need not be anything elaborate, fancy or expensive. If the home is full of small inquisitive children with busy fingers, it need not even be an table style altar. For many years, our prayer 'table' was the top shelf of a bookcase. What is essential is an easily visible spot when the family gathers for prayers. A small table in a corner (where the TV used to sit?), a space on top of a bookcase, or a mantle piece will all work well.

The family altar should include a few items to show that it is a special place.

A cloth covering, either embroidered or in the liturgical colour of the season gives the family altar a certain formality.

A crucifix and small statues of favorite saints, along with votive lights or candlesticks can then be arranged on the altar. During the Advent season, the Jesse tree and the Advent wreath can be kept on the altar too.

A Bible is an important addition, books of prayers or meditations could also be kept at the family altar.

Icons or pictures can be placed in stands or hung on the wall behind the family altar. Like the crucifix and statues, icons and pictures give focus to our meditations and devotions. Iconography is also instructive - the images always contain symbols that indicated some part of the Gospel story, or the life of the saint.

Creating and maintaining a family altar is a simple activity, but one that will make a difference to your family's prayer life and to the atmosphere of the home.