

**Altar Guild Association of the Diocese of Ft. Worth
St. John's Anglican Church
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Thank you for the honor and privilege of speaking to you again at this important gathering of your Altar Guilds in the Diocese of Ft. Worth. I remember with great fondness the last time I spoke to you a few years ago.

Your work of service is so very important in the life of the church. We clergy depend heavily on you. I always advise new rectors and especially young priests to listen to their Altar Guild. I'm told of a story many years ago that took place at Camp Crucis. It was late in July. It had been one of those hot Texas summers with a string of 100 degree plus days. It was hot, very hot even in the early morning. But the priest doing the daily mass at the beginning of the campers' day decided he would offer the Eucharists at the outdoor chapel that week. A couple of ladies from one of the Altar Guilds in the diocese were helping him out. They reminded him that the indoor, air-conditioned chapel was a moment when the kids got a break from the heat. They suggested that he might want to reconsider. It was their subtle way of saying they think it was a very good idea especially that week when it had been so hot. The priest quipped, "Jesus didn't have air-conditioning on the cross." Being dutiful Altar Guild ladies, they didn't say anything. They obeyed Father and prepared to set up at the outdoor chapel.

The kids did not yet know there was going to be a change. They were in the chapel. Father went in to announce that they were going to go over to the outdoor chapel for the mass. When he informed the campers they would have mass outdoors, one of the kids piped up, "But Father it's so hot outside." To which the priest responded the same way he had to the Altar Guild ladies, "There was no air-conditioning for Jesus on the

cross.” One of the young lads at the back blurted out, “Yeah, but Father, Jesus died.”

I’m sure Father learned that day what all of us in the clergy have come to realize. We need to pay attention to our Altar Guild. In fact, a good priest learns how to read his Altar Guild Director. They serve in a very important role. Over the years, I have found in my study of Scripture and the ancient church the deep Biblical background for this essential role in the Lord’s Church. It’s the profound iconic role of the Mother of Jesus for all of the Mary’s in the Bible. And she and they form the Biblical foundation for what I believe was the first Altar Guild at the Empty Tomb and all Altar Guilds to follow.

The last time I spoke to you I I taught on how those Marys at the Empty Tomb were effectively the first Altar Guild. They came to the Empty Tomb to embalm the holy cloths and Body of Jesus. In a similar way, though not with the substances of embalming, the Altar Guild prepares the altar, paraments and hangings or clothing on and around the altar in the chancel area, and most important the holy vessels and their coverings that convey the Body and Blood of Christ. Today I’d like to focus on Mary. Our Lady served Jesus certainly in ways that cannot be repeated. She was blessed of all women, the Mother of God, the Theotokos. But after our Lord was born her service to Him provides a model for other women not coincidentally also named Mary gathered at the Empty Tomb. In this sense, Mary is the model of the model. Therefore, the title of my talk this morning is, “Mary the Tabernacle of God: Lessons from Her Iconic Role for the Work of an Altar Guild.”

The early church fathers had many biblical theological designations for Mary. One in particular was the “Tabernacle of God.” Mary carried the Son of God in her womb in a similar way to which the Tabernacle in the Old Testament housed the presence of God. The Person of the

Pre-incarnate Christ was present with Israel by the power of the Holy Spirit through the Shekinah Glory illuminating from and over the Tabernacle. The Shekinah Glory was the fire God in and extending above the ancient Tabernacle in the wilderness. And based on what happened earlier with Moses on Mt. Horeb in the desert at the burning bush, that fiery presence of God indicates that the Pre-incarnate Christ was in the bush.

You may know that one of the ancient icons of the church portrays Christ in the burning bush. There is good reason. God identified Himself as “I Am” to Moses. Christ is recorded by St. John in his Gospel as saying seven times that He is the “I Am.” The Second Person of the Godhead was therefore the “I Am” speaking to Moses in the fiery presence of the Holy Spirit through the burning bush. This phenomenon is replicated in the Tabernacle with the Shekinah Glory of the Holy Spirit and the presence of the Pre-incarnate Christ. The same appears with the Holy Spirit impregnating the Virgin Mary to give her the child who was the incarnate Second Person of the Blessed Trinity in flesh and blood. Hence Mary’s role of carrying and more specifically the way she tended to the Body of Jesus along with the other Mary’s at the empty tomb. She/they provide the model for what the Altar Guild does. They take care of the Holy Things that convey the Body and Blood of Christ to His People. Permit me to summarize before I apply this important service of Mary and the other Mary’s to the Altar Guild.

First, woman is given a powerful ontological role to be what Mary became as the New Eve in the New Testament. We read in early Genesis the essential difference between male and female. The female as the bearer of children would shed her blood in the giving of life. The male by God taking a rib from his side to make woman shed blood by *giving up* a part of his anatomy to issue life. Both acts are sacrificial, but different.

The male is the one who actually makes a sacrifice through the piercing of his own body or the slaying of an animal for sacrifice. He gives life by sacrificially taking or giving up life. He does not carry the sacrifice in his body. He is the priest and offeror of sacrifice as in the case when God called Abraham to offer his son Isaac. The sacrifices of the Old Testament are therefore male animals offered by male priests. And when God wants to atone for the sins of world, He becomes a male in the Person of Jesus Christ to give Himself as our once for all sacrifice. In the Incarnation, God operates consistently with the ontological role given to the male.

The female carries a life different from hers and gives of herself to bring about life. She carries the child. Mother's do sacrifice their lives for their children, but the woman in the garden is created to be the seed bearer who will redeem the world. After the fall, God says to the serpent, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring, he shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel" (Genesis 3:15). This verse is called the protoevangelium, the first giving of the Gospel in the Bible. Though spoken to the serpent, it also speaks of the role of woman. Eve would be the seed bearer of a man to come in history who would crush the head of the serpent. This event literally took place when Christ was hung on a cross stuck in a hill outside of Jerusalem called "The place of the skull." Mary, as the Mother of God, carried Jesus Christ in her womb. She fulfilled the role of woman from the very beginning as the seed bearer. She shed her blood to give life. But she was neither the sacrifice nor the offeror of the Sacrifice. Jesus Christ is both priest and victim, as one hymn says. Therefore, in these God given ontological roles of male and female, we can see how Mary fulfills the role of woman in the garden by being a carrier or tabernacle for the Son of God.

Second, the Tabernacle God instructed Moses on Mt. Sinai to build as a place of worship in the desert follows the iconic pattern of the female

role in Genesis 1 and 2. The Hebrew word for “side” constructed of a board on the outer walls of the Tabernacle is the same word for the “rib” of Adam from which woman was made (cf. Exodus 26:20 & Genesis 2:22). The Tabernacle was a living body of the presence of God. The word for the actual boards on the Tabernacle is masculine. It is a Living Incarnate kind of Body housing the Shekinah Glory of the Holy Spirit. The early church fathers saw in this powerful imagery of “side” or “rib” to the “boards” a parallel with Mary.

In a similar way the rib was taken from the side of man to make woman, so a woman would be like one of the boards taken from the side of the Tabernacle to carry the presence of God. Mary became a new kind of temporary Tabernacle. The Holy Spirit as the Shekinah Glory even came to impregnate her with the Son of God. She was a new Tabernacle housing the Living God. She was Theotokos. Yet, the play on Tabernacle extends further as we read of St. John’s interpretation. He says in the first chapter of his Gospel, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” The word “dwelt” in the Greek is literally tabernacle. Precisely translated, the verse says, “The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us.” Mary became like a board or rib taken from the side of the Tabernacle to become the new body Tabernacle carrying the Son of God. Yet, she birthed the Son of God to be the flesh and blood Tabernacle fulfilling everything, every board and piece of furniture in the Old Testament Tabernacle. Like Rebekah who birthed Jacob to be named Israel symbolized by the Tabernacle a Living Body in the Wilderness, Mary did the same. It is a powerful interplay of imagery between Mary’s body as a temporary Tabernacle like Rebekah was for the Messianic seed of Jacob/Israel, and the Body of Christ as the ultimate Tabernacle. Based on it, we can perhaps better understand why the incredible biblical insights of the early church fathers who referred to Mary as the Tabernacle of God. For nine months she carried Jesus in her womb. She was blessed of all women. She was the Tabernacle of God who birthed the true Tabernacle. In her service to

God, she fulfilled the iconic role of woman in the garden as the Seed Bearer who became Jesus Christ.

Third, when we come to Mary in the New Testament, we find that Mary's role progresses from functioning as the Tabernacle of God to carrying for and tending to the Person of the Tabernacle. St. John speaks of the Incarnation when he says, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt [literally in the Greek "tabernacled" among us" (John 1:14). The verse continues, "And we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." The "glory" of God is the Holy Spirit. Like the fiery burning bush and the Shekinah Glory in the Tabernacle, the Son of God is accompanied by the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit impregnated Mary. He comes onto Christ in the form of a dove at His Baptism. But once Jesus is born, she is no longer the Tabernacle. Jesus is the one tabernacling outside her womb. Her role becomes that of carrying for, tending to and serving the Body of Christ. Yet, she does this within the role God has given for the woman. She is not the sacrifice nor the one who offers the sacrifice. Jesus says to His mother at the Wedding in Cana, "Woman," a title reaching back to the designation of the first female, "My hour has not yet come." Apparently, what she was compelling Christ to do approached the time of His sacrificial death. She understood what her Son was saying. She then takes on a service role of telling those around, "Do what He says." Christ is the sacrifice and the offeror of the sacrifice. He fulfills the role of the male from the beginning, yet He is the one only Man who is sinless fully God and fully Human as a male. Only He is the New Adam both priest and victim giving up His life through she shedding of blood to be our sacrifice.

Yet, Mary's new role becomes a model for all women as we read the New Testament. Another Mary named Mary Magdalene anoints Jesus in preparation for His burial. At the Empty Tomb there are many Mary's. How can we miss the association with the Blessed Mother of God with

all of these other Mary's. They are an extension of her role. They intended to embalm the Body of Jesus clothed with garments. All of these "Marys" were giving their lives in service of the Body and wrappings of Jesus. They were doing what Mary had become once Jesus left her womb.

Fourth, since Jesus tabernacled in His Incarnation, He raised up a new tabernacle to carry Him to the world, the Church. As someone has defined the Church, "She is the Living Body of Jesus Christ." We meet this Holy Mystery when Christ meets a persecutor of the early Christians named Saul on a road to Damascus. Christ says to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4). Notice that Christ did not say, "Why are you persecuting my Church?" Somehow the Church and the Body of Christ are mystically one. The Church is the living extension of the Incarnation. Like Mary She carries the Body of Christ into the world. But there is a Holy distinction between the Church and Christ. The Church is not sinless. The resurrected ascended Second Person of the Godhead is seated at the right hand of God the Father. He is also really and bodily present speaking to Saul. The relationship between the Person of Christ and the Body of Christ as the Church is sacramental. St. Paul explains when he writes to the Corinthians, "The cup of blessing that we bless is it not participation in the Blood of Christ? And the bread that we break is it not participation in the Body of Christ?" (1 Corinthians 10:16). But then the apostle adds speaking of the Church, "Because there is one bread, we, who are many, are one body for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Corinthians 10:17). Do you see the mystical interplay? The Church carries the Body of Christ, but She is not the sacrifice in the full propitiatory sense as Jesus. He is the sacrifice who comes to us in the Eucharistic sacrifice. Notice the sacrificial language in St. Paul's words regarding the Eucharist. He speaks of the cup as the "Blood of Christ." In this mystical interplay of the Body of Christ, we see the distinct roles of male and female implied that I've been developing. The feminine role of the Body of Christ is to

carry Him. As for the Eucharistic Body and Blood of Christ, only the male in the New Testament is to offer Him consistent with a priest's role throughout the Bible. He consecrates Bread and Wine to be the once for all sacrifice of the Body and Blood of Jesus following the example of Jesus at the Last Supper. He does not make a new sacrifice for that is impossible to repeat a once for all event such as the Cross. Rather, he offers the sacrifice who shed His life by giving up His Body and Blood for the sins of the world. As for the Church, She brings the gift of her life to facilitate the offering of Christ in the Eucharist. Yet, she neither makes the sacrifice nor offers it. She gives in ways that it might be offered by the priests of God. This brings me finally to your role on an Altar Guild.

Fifth, an Altar Guild in a very real sense is what the whole Church should be and do. To start, your work is to be all about Jesus in serving Him by giving of yourselves, your souls and bodies, for worship of God to spread His Kingdom. For the particular service on an Altar Guild, this work involves tending to all that is required for priests and other servants at the altar who offer up Christ in the Eucharistic Sacrifice. You do all of the detailed work to adorn the chancel and altar with clothing and prepare the holy vessels that will convey the Body and Blood of Christ. In doing this sacred work, you fulfill the role of woman from the beginning of the world. You live into what Mary and the other holy Mary's did at the Empty Tomb. You are for us models of what the Church should be and do. You tend to the Tabernacles and vessels of Him who continues to tabernacle among us in the Blessed Sacrament.

For example, altar guilds care for and adorn the chancel and altar following the pattern of the Tabernacle of the Old Testament. The Tabernacle had three zones called near, nearer, and nearest. The near area was the Court of the Gentiles where congregants could gather to make their offering. The next nearer section was called the Holies. It was the space where the priests could go to wash and offer up incense. The nearest area was called the Holy of Holies where Shekinah Glory

came to the ark of the covenant. There the blood of the sacrifice was sprinkled. Importantly, the Upper Room where Christ communed and met His disciples before and after the resurrection followed this tabernacle pattern. The architecture of ancient churches therefore duplicated it. There are three zones of near, nearer, and nearest in these churches forming a pattern for all churches through the ages. It's the same here at St. John's. The nave of the church is the Court where the congregation sits, stands, and kneels. The chancel is the holy's space. And the altar is the sanctuary analogous to the Holy of Holies.

The Altar Guild, in a Marion fashion, helps to set up the church as the Tabernacle of God where He comes to meet His people. The holy ladies place clothes called hangings on the pulpit, lectern, and altar. These colored fabrics adorn the chancel. They are like the curtains of the inside walls of the Tabernacle. These curtains were the clothing on the side boards likened the body of the Tabernacle. The paraments in a church are similar to the Tabernacle drapery. They all point to Jesus Christ. The colors tell us what season of the Church year orienting to the events of Jesus's Incarnation and the Church as the Body of Christ (Pentecost or Trinity). There are often Christological symbols Christ, the Blessed Trinity, and the Holy Spirit on the hangings. But cloths are garments of the chancel.

The clothing imagery also takes us to the Empty Tomb. It too became a Tabernacle. We're told in the Gospels that two angels appeared by the sarcophagus wrappings that had clothed the Body of Christ. In the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle we're also told in Scripture that Cherubim and Seraphim, Holy Angels, were at each end of the ark of the covenant extending their wings over the altar to form a glorious canopy. And like the ladies at the Empty Tomb, the altar guild comes to prepare the clothing of the area where the Body of Christ visits the sanctuary of the altar. Only altar guild ladies do not come to embalm.

Altar Guilds also set up the altar for Christ to be really present in the Blessed Sacrament. Remember, when Christ died, we're told in the Gospels that the great curtain between the Holies and the Holy of Holies was torn in half. Altar Guild ladies may go into the Holy of Holies to the altar to prepare for the work of the priest. Only priests may offer and re-present the once for all sacrifice of Christ. Holy ladies may set up the altar to do this holy work. We are grateful!

What the holy ladies of an Altar Guild set up also replicates the Tabernacle. They place a fair linen over the altar. They put on this fair linen a cloth called a corporal. The word means "body." On the corporal they put the sacred vessels: paten/ciborium and a chalice. They cover these vessels with a stiffened piece of cloth sometimes called a mortar board. Its technical name is a pall, analogous to what is placed over a casket. Over the pall on the altar is placed a veil and a burse. Not only is the Tabernacle being replicated but the Empty Tomb Again. Like the grave clothes without the Body of Christ, these are adorning coverings declare Empty Tomb. Christ is not there yet. He is risen. And when He comes, He'll not be covered by a pall. The priest in the liturgy removes these garments. When he consecrates the bread and the wine, they mystically become the Body and Blood of the Living, of the Resurrected Christ declaring to us, "He's alive, risen, and here at the entry to the Empty Tomb. The Empty Tomb and the Resurrected Christ are declared empty at every Eucharist. He is really present on the altar and to the people for them to commune with Him. He is "given, taken, and eaten," that for Him "to be in us and we in Him."

Therefore, the ladies of an Altar Guild do Marion work. You are all part of preparing a Tabernacle in the Holies, and Holy of Holies like an Empty Tomb. As the Mary's of old come to tend the Empty Tomb to prepare it for Christ to appear outside on the altar and at the communion rail. Your service is not to embalm, for Christ is risen. It is a holy work that you ladies go about. And in what you do, you reach back

into the purpose for which God created woman. May you now in some way have a greater appreciation not only of Mary as the Tabernacle of God and what she did, but what you do following her model. For, you have joined the company of the blessed Mary's. God bless you in your holy work. Amen.