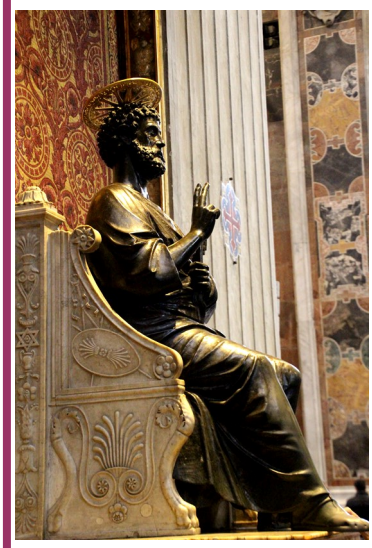
The Presider's Chair



St. **Peter's Chair**
— St. Peter's Basilica, Rome

Every church has a presider's chair — the celebrant's chair — the priest's chair. The symbolism of the priest's chair is derived from the bishop's chair found in every cathedral. In fact, the word "cathedral" comes from a word that means "chair." The bishop's chair is a liturgical symbol of his teaching office and his pastoral leadership, as well as a sign of the unity of believers in the faith that the bishop proclaims as chief shepherd.

By extension, every priest celebrant's chair in a parish church signifies the priest's headship during the sacred liturgy and his mission to sanctify and govern those in his care. Said another way, a priest who presides at liturgy in a parish does so as an extension of the bishop's own priestly ministry, and so the chair assumes a symbolism analogous to that of the bishop's cathedra.

As such, it is more than an everyday chair. It is a symbol of the invisible spiritual reality of the Father's love so aptly described by Dom Lambert Beauduin: "Christ has transmitted all His power of teaching and of spiritual government to His visible hierarchy… [and] through it he realizes the sanctification of the new humanity." The chair is a preeminent architectural sign not simply of authority, but of the spiritual power and responsibility given to the successors of the apostles to bring about Christ's new humanity divinized with the very life of God.



As a priest presiding at a cathedral would not use the bishop's chair, but would use some other special chair, so in a parish liturgy a lay presider would use a chair other than the priest's. If this distinction was not made, then the ancient symbolism of the chair would unravel. This is true when any special objects in the liturgy — altar, ambo, etc. — are used for purposes for which they were not intended.



The priest's chair is located so that the priest can be seen by all in the assembly. Further, it is not supposed to look like a throne, or be remote or grandiose, although the appearance of the chair "reflects the dignity of the one who leads the community in the person of Christ." Accordingly the priest celebrant's chair is distinguished from the seating for other ministers by its design and placement.

What about an empty chair? An empty cathedra at a cathedral liturgy is a powerful symbolic statement that the chief shepherd is not present with the assembly. The empty priest's chair at a Sunday celebration in the absence of a priest is a loud cry that something is wrong.

Sources: adoremus.org / Dr. Denis McNamara; liturgy. Blogs.com / 2/18/10