

Altar Cards

How they “altered” our History

by Chloe Nehme



TABERNACLE
St. Mary of the Hills Church
BHSM Collection

One of the significant places in every town is its parish church. Indeed, the Church has always been the place for people to get together, pray, and relish in the community of their hometown. Boylston has two longstanding parish churches; the First Congregational Church of Boylston and Saint Mary of The Hills Roman Catholic Church. The latter is where we will discover today’s fascinating find; three altar cards which were used during Tridentine Mass services conducted by Roman Catholic Churches.

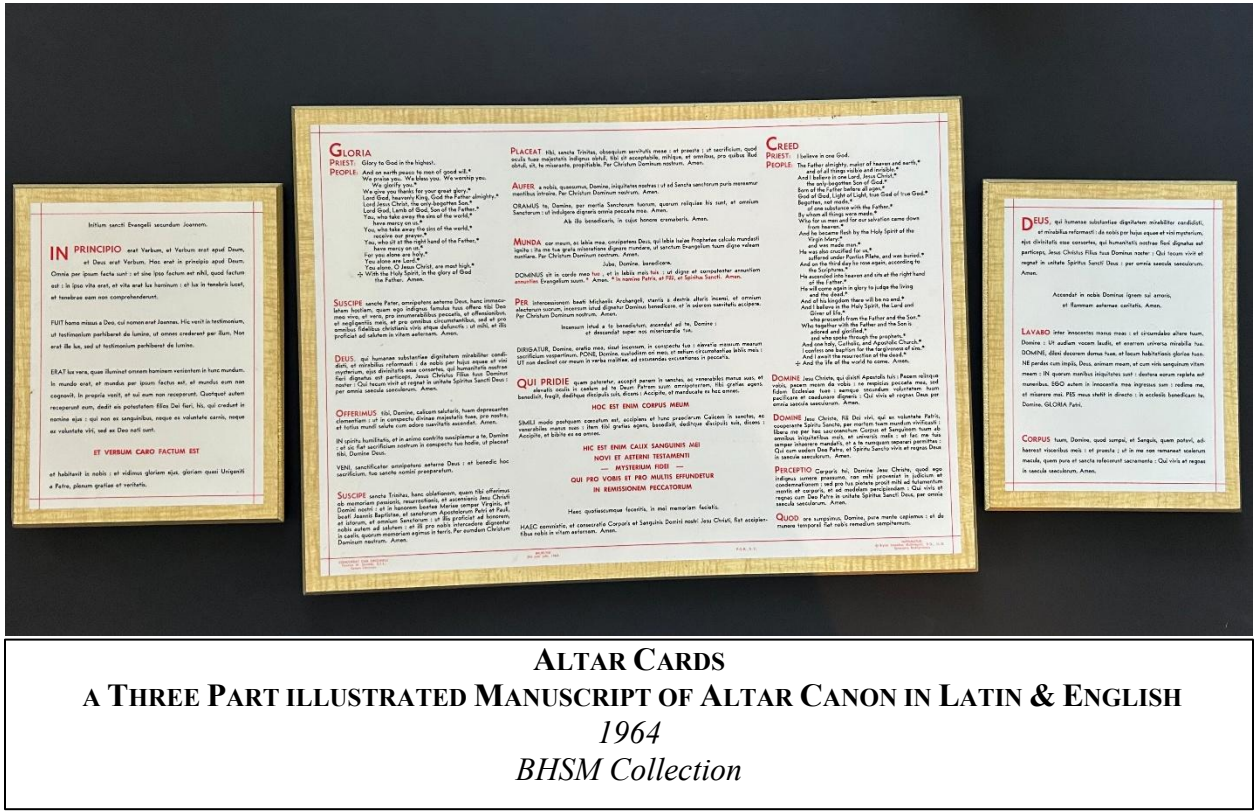
Saint Mary of the Hills Roman Catholic Church as we know it today was officially formed on September 3rd, 1952. However Catholic worship has taken place in Boylston at least since the early 1800s, “In the earliest days, Catholics of Boylston had no formal edifice for the celebration of Holy Sacrifice of the Mass or to receive the Blessed Sacraments but being devout in their faith sought to continue their religious practices and traditions.” Initially they worshipped in their homes, then a dedicated space would be made available for shared faiths in the Sawyer’s Mills School. Eventually a mission chapel, the Sacred Heart Chapel was built, however it would only serve the community for 10 short years as the construction of the Wachusett Reservoir took over lands in the Sawyers Mills area of Boylston. Once again Boylston Catholics had no formal place to worship. Eventually in September 1926 a second mission chapel, Our Lady of the Assumption. would be formed and finally a formal parish would be established.¹

In 1952 from the Our Lady of the Assumption chapel, Bishop John J. Wright created the St. Mary of the Hills Roman Catholic Church. John Joseph Wright (1909-1979) was born in Dorchester and was ordained as a Roman Catholic priest on December 8th, 1935.² In 1947, he was ordained as Auxiliary Bishop of Boston and in 1950, Bishop of Worcester. One of his acts as a Bishop was to rename the Boylston Church. On April 28th, 1969, he was given the distinction of being named Cardinal John Joseph Wright.

St. Mary of the Hills Church’s first pastor was Reverend Harold Griffin³. Reverend Griffin served for two years and was succeeded by Reverend Michael Shea. By 1982, the church was relocated due to becoming too small for its community which now had 1500 members. The church is now located on Cross Street, while the original location is today the site of Calliope Theatre.⁴

Tridentine Mass

Altar cards were used by a priest during the Tridentine Mass, initially a form of Mass authorized for use after the Council of Trent as a response to the European Reformation in the 1500s. During a Tridentine Mass, the services are conducted in Ecclesiastical Latin and the priests face east. Tridentine Mass is conducted using a strict set of instructions codified by the Council of Trent. Over the course of the 20th century, the usage of Tridentine Mass lessened as new liturgy practices were established. Amendments to the Tridentine Mass continued until 1962.⁵ The Second Vatican Council which took place in Rome from 1962 to 1965 revised the Liturgy to allow more participation by the congregation. Over the next few years, the changes were implemented. “It was on November 29, 1964, a year after the Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy was enacted- the” New Mass”, as it was then called, was introduced into the U.S. parishes.”⁶



The altar cards were placed on the altar during Tridentine Mass, beginning to be used after its codification during the Council of Trent, and to serve as a visual aid for the leading priest. There are three cards placed on the altar, each with prayers to be spoken. The one in the middle, known as the ‘Tabella Secretarum’ contains the Gloria prayer, the Nicene Creed, and Mass Canon. It has the Gloria prayer on the left side of the card and the Nicene Creed on the right side, both in English, accompanied with various Latin prayers.

¹ Celebrating our Parish, 70 Years of Our Catholic Community, Saint Mary of the Hills, Boylston Massachusetts, N.Filgate, P.Bartram, V.Triolo, J.Haynes, Boylston Historical Society, 7 Central Street, Boylston, Massachusetts

² <https://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/bishop/bwright.html>

³ St. Mary of the Hills Church website, <https://saintmaryofthehills.com/about-us>

⁴ Then and Now-Our Lady of the Assumption Chapel, by Nancy Filgate, Boylston Historical Society & Museum Inc. www.boylstonhistory.org

⁵ https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/tridentinemass/tridentinemass_1.shtml

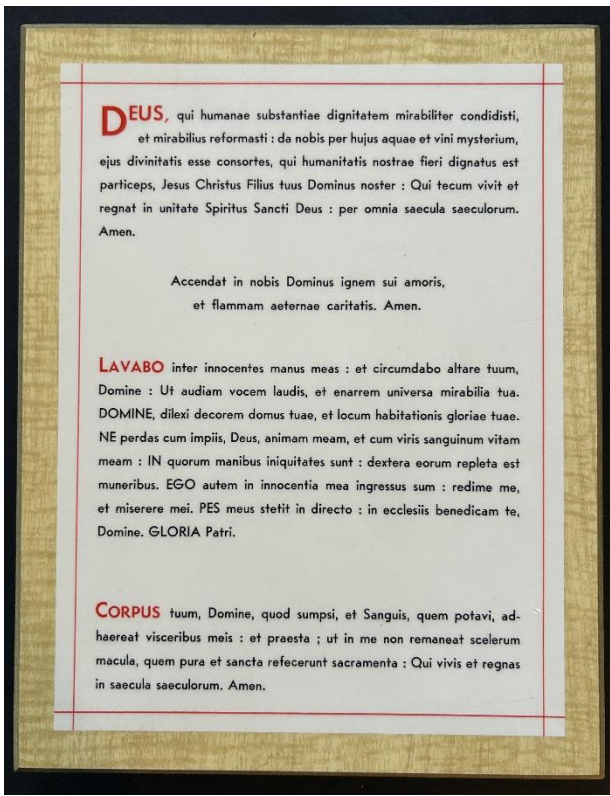
⁶ Benofy, Susan, The Day the Mass Changed, How it Happened and Why--, Adoremus Publisher, February 2010



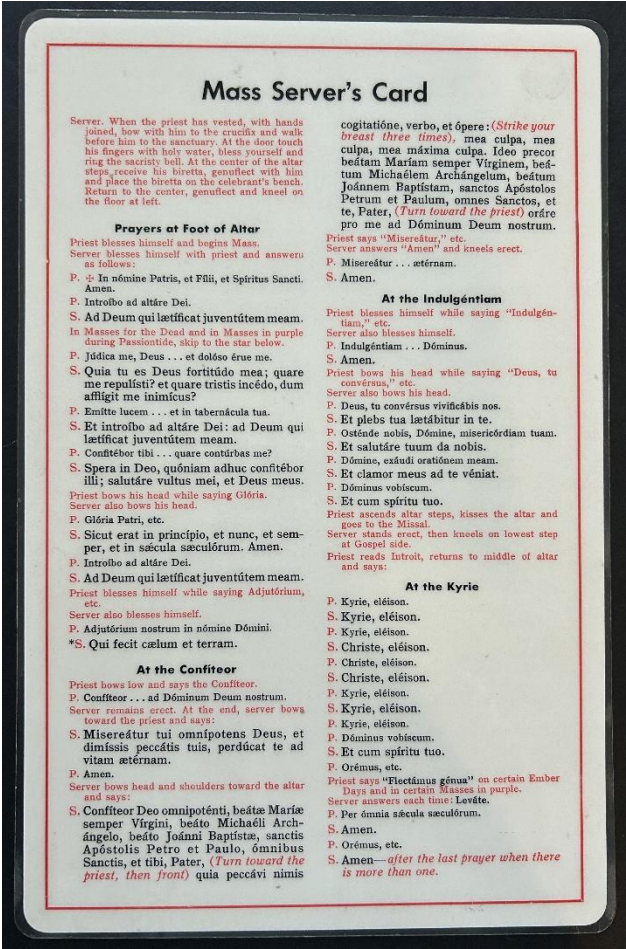
ALTAR CARD - LEFT SIDE
1964
BHSM Collection

The altar card on the right contains the Offertory prayers “*Deus, qui humanae substantiae...*” and the prayers of the Eucharistic declaration of the *Corpus prayer* which signifies bread and wine’s Holy Consecration.⁷ The largest card would be placed in front of the Tabernacle and the Gospel to its left and the prayers to its right.

The card on the left, begins with the phrase “Initium Sancti Evangelii secundum Joannem” which translates to “*The beginning of the Holy Gospel according to St. John.*” Then it continues in Latin (as transcribed in English): *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...*”



ALTAR CARD - RIGHT SIDE
1964
BHSM Collection



MASS SERVER’S CARD
1964
BHSM Collection

While the Tridentine Mass has not been commonly practiced since the 1960s following the second Vatican Council, the altar cards hark us back to a time when it Tridentine Mass was the most used liturgy in Roman Catholic Churches. A time which was formed in response to the Reformation, as new codified and developed way to worship. Thank you to Saint Mary of the Hills for sharing with us part of history!

If you wish for more information regarding the history of Catholicism in Boylston or Saint Mary of the Hills Church, please refer to the Boylston Historical Society’s publication entitled “*Celebrating our Parish; 70 Years of our Catholic Community, Saint Mary of the Hills.*” Copies are available for reading and/or purchase at the Boylston Historical Society and Museum.

⁷ https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Page%3ACatholic_Encyclopedia%2C_volume_1.djvu/393
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