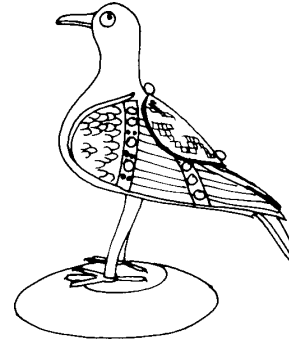


The Blessed Sacrament

Past and current practice



Hanging Pyx
12th Century

Part I

Church buildings today differ in many respects from those of, for example, the 1950s. The altar for Mass has been removed from against the back wall; side altars have disappeared; the number of statues and images has been reduced; communion rails have for the most part disappeared; confessionals are being replaced by reconciliation chapels; the imposing pulpit has become a more simple lectern or ambo. The purpose of these and other modifications is to help us to worship better as a community, and as such they have been positively accepted—when properly explained—by the vast majority of Catholics.

There is one change, however, which has raised many questions, namely, the location of the tabernacle. Formerly this was most often placed upon the high altar. In fact, the tabernacle containing the Blessed Sacrament was often seen as the focal point in the building. It was the laudable custom for people to visit the church during the day to pray in the presence of the Eucharistic Lord. Today the tabernacle is placed in its own area, often quite removed from the altar and the space used for the celebration of Mass. In light of our long tradition of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, people often ask whether this practice is now discouraged or whether the tabernacle is no longer considered important.

To help answer these questions we will, in this series, consider: 1) the reasons for the present location of the tabernacle; 2) the tradition of reserving the Eucharist after Mass and of praying before the Blessed Sacrament; 3) the meaning of the reserved Eucharist for our lives as a community and individuals.

The Space for Celebration

A consideration of the primary purpose of a church building is the starting point for our discussion of the placement of the tabernacle.

The word “church” comes from the Greek *ecclesia* meaning assembly or gathering. The primary use of the

worship space is the gathering of the faithful for the Sunday Eucharist, so the primary reference for designing liturgical space should be the Sunday assembly. The design of the church should also take into account the other liturgical actions to be celebrated there.

Certain demands are put on that space and on its configuration of places for the faithful. We need to stand for prayer and sit for readings; we are often called upon to move about in processions; we need to see, to hear, etc. All this should exist in a climate of friendship and hospitality. This means that we know or can be introduced to one another; that we can easily move about within the building; that we can be seated together in view of one another and of the focal points of the rite. The space should help us become participants, not spectators.

The major worship areas should be designed for such large celebrations as that of the Sunday Eucharist, baptism, funerals, weddings, etc. Depending on the number of participants, the major gathering space for the assembly would also be used for such celebration as the liturgy of the hours, communal celebrations of the rite of penance, benediction, novenas, etc.

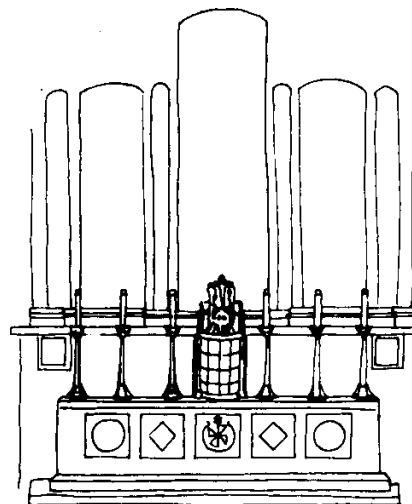
In summary, a church building, especially its main area, is designed for the gathering and liturgical prayer of a people. The primary purpose of the structure is to support our prayer in common, to allow us to celebrate the liturgy in a more beneficial manner. Its design should help us accomplish what we are about when we gather there.

Why We Reserve the Eucharist

The Roman Ritual answers succinctly “the primary and original reason for reservation of the Eucharist outside Mass is the administration of viaticum,” i.e. communion to the dying. There are two secondary reasons: “the giving of communion and the adoration of our Lord Jesus Christ present in the sacrament”

(Roman Ritual: Holy Communion and the Worship of the Eucharist Outside Mass, no. 5).

As history attests, the Church began to reserve the Eucharist in order to bring this spiritual food to those at the point of death. This practice led to the custom of giving communion to those unable to be present for Mass, especially the sick. Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, a practice which only gradually became established in the Church, was a natural expression of the Church's deep and abiding belief that the Lord is indeed present in the Eucharist. It is noteworthy that the Vatican document quoted above says nothing about reserving the Eucharist for later distribution during Mass—a very recent custom but one which, as we shall see, runs counter to the integrity of the eucharistic celebration.



Gothic Revival
20th Century

The Space for Reserving the Blessed Sacrament

The choice of a location for the tabernacle in a church building is an important one. It must respect our love for the Lord present in the Blessed Sacrament. It must also respect different aspects of our life as a Church. For example, the large worship area of a church building is designed for a large number of people who gather there to celebrate the liturgy. The demands of such occasions are different from those occasions when, in silence and warm intimacy, we open our hearts in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. Furthermore, there is a distinction of purpose and meaning between when we gather to celebrate the Eucharist as commanded by Jesus at the Last Supper and when we pray with devotion in the presence of the eucharistic Lord, a presence that is one of the fruits of our eucharistic action.

Our reverence and love for the Blessed Sacrament is to be shown by the manner in which we design and decorate a space for the tabernacle. One possibility is to have a special Blessed Sacrament chapel “suitable for private adoration and prayer by the faithful, which should be structurally connected with the church and visible to the faithful” (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 3rd ed., no. 315b). This need not depend on expensive materials, but on the

- quality of the lighting;
- style and placement of the tabernacle;
- location of chairs and kneelers;
- creation of an inviting atmosphere that leads us to prayer.

Creativity and attention to detail are very important. There should be a dignity, a reserve, a nobility, and a freedom from distraction—all of which will draw us to the Blessed Sacrament and support us as we pray. This space should offer us easy access from both the main worship area as well as from the entrance areas of the building. This does not mean there need be two doors. It simply means that we should easily be able to locate

and visit the reserved Eucharist. The size of the space is not the primary factor; location and quality are.

A special location, devoted only to the reservation of the Eucharist, is preferable in churches that have weddings and their rehearsals, funerals, and other activities and occasional rites that may distract persons who wish to pray privately before the Blessed Sacrament. (See *Roman Ritual: Holy Communion and Worship of the Eucharist Outside Mass*, no. 9). Consequently, in designing a new church or renovating an existing one, it is necessary to ask how this church can best invite and encourage the faithful to make private visits to the Blessed Sacrament and give them a beautiful and inspiring place for quiet prayer before the eucharistic Lord.



You are invited to continue this exploration in two stages. Next time we will take a voyage back in time as we trace the historical development of eucharistic reservation. Afterwards, we will explore some of the dimensions of the reserved Eucharist in our lives today. As Catholics we want to be faithful to our tradition. We also want to explore the richness of that tradition so that we can deepen our faith in the Eucharist and better appreciate the various dimensions of the gift given us by Christ.