

Environment for Catholic Worship

Part 5

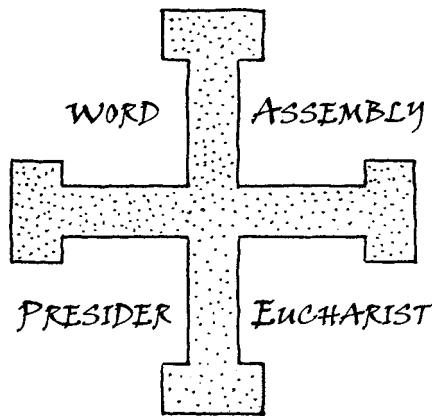
Reservation of the Eucharist

For the last 30 years, Catholics have grown accustomed to hearing much more of the Word of God proclaimed than they had for centuries. Until the reforms of the recent past, Roman Catholic liturgy had focused on the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, while Protestant liturgies placed more emphasis on the Word of God and its interpretation. The most obvious architectural symbol of the contrast between these two poles was the central and unmistakable presence of a tabernacle in most Roman Catholic worship spaces. For many, its very

presence within the sanctuary was a statement of the particular and defining belief of the Catholic Church.

The Second Vatican Council emphasized the belief of the Church that Christ is present in a number of ways when we gather for worship. While the central teaching of the presence of Christ in the Eucharistic species remains unchanged, we are also taught to recognize Christ in the proclamation of the Word, in the person of the presiding priest, and, in the very assembly of believers.

Another recovery that has enriched our liturgical life is the understanding of the Eucharist as an act. The word Eucharist comes from the Greek, meaning “a giving thanks.” It is in the very act of taking, blessing, breaking and sharing that is the heart of Jesus’ command to “Do this in memory of me.” This fuller understanding of the liturgy urges us to unite ourselves with the Christ in a perfect offering to God. The restoration of more frequent reception of communion that has occurred in the last century is yet another return to a much earlier tradition, when all who were present would partake of the meal.



6th century paten with a depiction of Christ sharing the Eucharist with the apostles, Riha, Syria

History of Eucharistic Reservation In the early church, when believers were unable to join their brothers and sisters in the Eucharist because of sickness, a portion of eucharistic bread was taken from the celebration to their homes so they could be united with the community in their thanksgiving. It gradually became the custom to store a small amount of the remaining Eucharist for those expected to die. This became known as *viaticum*—food for their journey. The place where the Eucharist was stored gradually gained in prominence from simple cupboards in rooms outside the main worship space to more prominent, even elaborate tabernacles. By the 17th century the tabernacle was commonly found on the central altar. The exceptions were found in cathedrals and basilicas, where tabernacles have often been placed on side altars or in separate chapels.

In recent years, in order to emphasize the importance of the action of the whole assembly gathered around the

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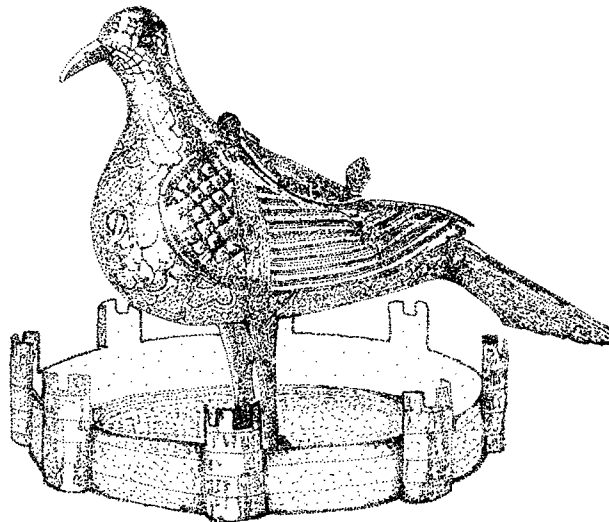
The reservation of the Eucharist was originally intended for the communion of the sick, for those unable to attend the Sunday celebration, and as *Viaticum* for the dying. (CIC) As the appreciation of Christ's presence in the eucharistic species became more developed, Christians desired through prayer to show reverence for Christ's continuing presence in their midst. [70]

The *Code of Canon Law* directs that the Eucharist be reserved in a part of the church that is "distinguished, conspicuous, beautifully decorated, and suitable for prayer." It directs that regularly there be "only one tabernacle" in the church. It should be worthy of the Blessed Sacrament—beautifully designed and in harmony with the overall decor of the rest of the church. To provide for the security of the Blessed Sacrament the tabernacle should be "solid," "immovable," "opaque," and "locked." The tabernacle may be situated on a fixed pillar or stand, or it may be attached to or embedded in one of the walls. A special oil lamp or a lamp with a wax candle burns continuously near the tabernacle as an indication of Christ's presence. [72]

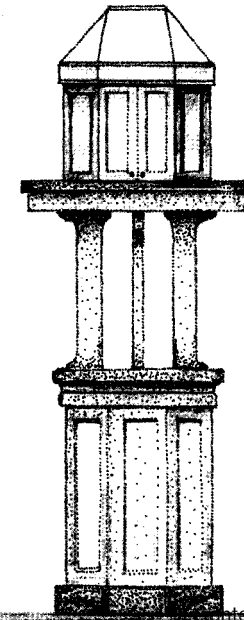
There are a number of possible spaces suitable for

altar and the presiding priest, the tabernacle has been removed from the altar table. The discipline of the Church requires that the tabernacle be truly prominent in our worship spaces, but never in such a way that it obscures the focus of the principal activity of the celebration of the Eucharist. In some churches, it is located in a separate chapel designed for prayer, meditation and adoration. It may also be set in the main worship space but at some distance or separation from the altar.

Today the reservation of the Eucharist in the tabernacle still serves the needs of the ministry to the sick and dying and other situations when Communion is given outside Mass. It is also the place for the adoration of Christ in the reserved Eucharistic bread. It is not to be seen as a storage of consecrated hosts for future Masses, except in the case of unexpected numbers of communicants.



13th century French pyx in the form of a dove, gilded copper with enamel. The reserved Eucharist was placed in these often suspended vessels.



Contemporary tower for the reservation of the Eucharist

eucharistic reservation. The revised General Instruction of the Roman Missal states that it is more appropriate that the tabernacle in which the "Blessed Sacrament is reserved not be on the altar on which Mass is celebrated." The bishop is to determine where the tabernacle will be placed and to give further direction. The bishop may decide that the tabernacle be placed in the sanctuary apart from the altar of celebration or in a separate chapel suitable for adoration and for the private prayer of the faithful. In making his determination, the bishop will consider the importance of the assembly's ability to focus on the eucharistic action, the piety of the people, and the custom of the area. The location also should allow for easy access by people in wheelchairs and by those who have other disabilities. [74]

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