

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2006

Fellow Eucharistic Ministers

Happy New Year!

Yep, it is our New Year already - according to the church calendar. And soon the rest of the world will be celebrating as well. May this coming year find you safe, healthy and secure in your faith.

This past year has been very full - with every emotion. We have loved and lost. We have also been blessed with many new faces in our ministry. (If you need/want a new roster, let me know and I will see they are available or emailed to you.)

I have been asked to and am including a reprint of an article about Eucharist and the tabernacle so I will keep this short enough to thank all of you once again - I feel so blessed to simply know all of you. Being able to serve you is just a bonus.

A few business items:

- We are beginning to organize ourselves a bit more - we need a few more of you volunteer to be on call for funerals and weddings so we can share that list with our bereavement ministry and with our wedding coordinators. We have begun a "train the trainer" group so there are a few teams who can train at any time. So far, this group consists of myself, Liz Norene, Bob Steighner, Lena Kho and Stephanie Smith. A few others have offered and will be transitioned in. We still need someone to back me up with scheduling. I have had one volunteer for this and need to follow through but it helps to have a few understand how things are done.
- You will notice we have new vessels. We purchased the pewter for a few reasons. Among them, the crystal ones were being broken, and the metal ones have a lower center of gravity and should be easier to manage. Please do not fill the chalices so full. Instead, fill them less than 3/4 and go back and get a refill from the flagon which is left on the corporal.
- A reminder on how to clean up a spill. (There are stains on our new carpet - especially on the side by the tabernacle. It has been suggested this may be from spilled Precious Blood.) If there is a spill, try not to get flustered. Leave your station and get an extra purificator to blot up what you can. Then, if it is not too bad, cover the area and continue to serve. Immediately after mass, go back to the sacristy and get enough water to dissolve the "substance" of the wine that we talk about in the training materials. Continue to blot as you would your own carpets at home. If the area remains wet, you should mark the spot and/or ensure the EMs for the next mass know about it so they can avoid that area until it dries. You could also notify the office so our custodians know about it.
- Co-captains, please do not begin to clean up until after the mass is finished, that means waiting until the priest is out the door - since we are all singing in full conscious and active participation until then.
- Read the article included. We have been running out of Precious Blood at some masses and we have had as much as a full pewter ciborium of hosts at others. It is important not to run out of Precious Blood just as we want to ensure we have the right amount of hosts for each mass. We will soon be implementing the instructions NOT to go over to the tabernacle for a mass.
- I'd also like to remind you again, that we want you to sit with your families. Then proceed up to the altar during the kiss of peace. One person, typically a co-captain, does need to remain closer to the altar since we are currently acting as sacristans as well - responding to the need of the presiders. And, whoever places the corporal on the altar is generally situated close to it. That does not preclude your coming up from any seating to do it.

Anything else you have on YOUR minds that we all need to be aware of? Or that you think I need to take care of and haven't? Let me know.

Yours in Eucharist,

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Not Where, But Why

On the relationship of Eucharist and tabernacle by Thomas Slon
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In the task of designing church interiors, one of the most neuralgic issues is the placement of the tabernacle. Behind the altar? To the side of the altar? In a separate chapel? In recent years, the visual prominence of the tabernacle, not the centrality of the altar, seems to have become for some the litmus test for Catholic liturgical orthodoxy. Members of parish church design committees sometimes suggest that the tabernacle makes the church Catholic; not, apparently, the Catholics assembled there nor the Catholic liturgy celebrated there. In this view the degree to which one reverences the tabernacle is the degree to which one believes in the real presence of Christ, which in turn constitutes the degree to which one is Catholic.

The history of the tabernacle is well documented, from its complete absence in the Roman basilicas of late antiquity; through its appearance in the early Middle Ages as a small receptacle, a pyx, kept in the sacristy; to its full-blown manifestation during the Counter-Reformation, at which time the tabernacle became a feature of the architecture, if not the focus of it. Equally well documented is the history of devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, which can be traced back to the first century but flourished in an especially vigorous way during the Middle Ages. As the liturgy became more and more the exclusive domain of the clergy such devotions became the laity's access to the sacrament.

While varied devotions throughout the centuries, the overarching principle behind the reservation of the sacrament remained the same. The sacrament is reserved so that those too ill to attend the Eucharist may receive Communion, and for Communion services. And because it has been reserved, our faith in the presence of Christ at the Eucharist and our faith that the consecrated bread is indeed the body of Christ motivate prayer and devotion.

As a priest whose work takes me to various parishes, and as an architect who has worked with committees designing and renovation churches, it seems to me that before considering where the tabernacle would be located, one must ask how the tabernacle is to be used. This order of questions may come from the architect's quest for form following function: the function determines the form. But what is at stake in the way the tabernacle is used is the integrity of the Eucharist as both meal and sacrifice. A directive in the church's authoritative *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, pertinent but seldom adverted to in this debate, states, "It is most desirable that the faithful, just as the priest himself is bound to do, receive the Lord's body from hosts consecrated at the same Mass so that even by means of the signs Communion will stand out more clearly as a participation in the sacrifice actually being celebrated" (No. 85).

The clear implication here is that it is most desirable that the faithful at the Eucharist should not receive Communion from the tabernacle. This is to preserve the triple action central to the Eucharist, that of blessing, breaking and sharing bread (and similarly, blessing, pouring, and drinking wine) in the name of the Lord. It is the triple action performed in its entirety that sacramentalizes the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, whose body was offered, broken and given for the sake of the world. It is this triple action taken as a whole that is the object of Jesus' command, "Do this in memory of me." And it is this triple action that gives the simple meal its sacrificial meaning.

To exemplify this, we do well to look to the Easter Triduum, the liturgical climax of the church year. During these three days from Holy Thursday evening, with its high point in the Easter Vigil, the church celebrates the whole of the paschal mystery in an intense and protracted way. The liturgical instructions for these days contain certain notes concerning the tabernacle. According to these instructions, at the beginning of the Holy Thursday evening liturgy; at which we commemorate the institution of the Eucharist, the tabernacle is to be empty. The Blessed Sacrament is not to be reserved at this time. Thus anyone who receives Communion at that liturgy does so from the altar. After the liturgy, that is, after the Communion of the people, the sacrament is to be reserved.

As a church we have made much of this reservation, with processions, decorated altar and time for prayer before the exposed sacrament. But the primary reason for this reservation is to provide for the Communion service that concludes the Good Friday liturgy, because on Good Friday the Eucharist is not celebrated. Presumably what has been reserved on Thursday is consumed on Friday, and thus the liturgy on Saturday begins, like Thursday's, with an empty tabernacle. Those who receive Communion at that Easter Vigil liturgy, including and most especially the newly baptized, do so from the altar. The tabernacle is still empty.

With regard to the use of the tabernacle, the Triduum presents an ideal recognized more in the breach than in the observance. To bless and break the bread that is on the altar, and then to share bread taken from the tabernacle undermines the eucharistic action of blessing, breaking and sharing. As the guidelines governing the activities of extraordinary ministers of the sacrament become more stringent, so that only the clergy may go to the tabernacle, the priest leaving the altar for the tabernacle at communion time to bring the sacrament to the altar makes the disintegration of the triple action all the more obvious.

This is not to deny that what comes from the tabernacle is the body of Christ. On the contrary. But for this very reason, using pre-consecrated hosts at the Eucharist makes the object and purpose of the Mass the reception of Communion, and not the fullness of the eucharistic action. Retrieving consecrated hosts from the tabernacle for use during the Eucharist in effect reduces the eucharistic liturgy to a Communion service, a rite made possible by a well-stocked tabernacle and a deacon or a layperson commissioned to lead such a service. But we have been charged in memory of the Lord not merely to receive his body in Communion, but to perform the Eucharist, which is the sacrament of the entire paschal mystery, the living, dying and rising to new life, sacramentalized in the blessing, breaking/pouring and sharing. Receiving Communion is only a part of that sacramental activity.

As more and more parishes face the prospect of priestless Sundays, the distinction between the Eucharist and the Communion service is likely to blur. Not so much where the tabernacle is located, but how it is used at the Eucharist will contribute to this one way or the other. Improper use of the tabernacle risks making the Eucharist seem like a Communion service, only longer, run by the priest with the extra prayer, and the actual Communion service, in the priest's absence, preferable to the faithful. Why celebrate Eucharist when you can receive Communion at a Communion service? While we worry ourselves about proper reverence for the Blessed Sacrament and belief in the real presence of Christ, what may in fact be waning is the proper reverence for the Eucharist as sacrament of the paschal mystery and belief in the source and summit of the life of the church. This hinges largely, not on where the tabernacle is located, but on how the tabernacle is used during the eucharistic celebration.