

Good Shepherd Catholic Community Proposal to Relocate the Tabernacle

As Roman Catholics, we believe that Christ's Real Presence in the Eucharist continues after the celebration of the Mass. For this reason, the Eucharist is reserved in a tabernacle with a candle that is always burning to signify the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. In the early Church the Eucharist was reserved to bring Communion to the sick, a practice that the Church still holds as important today (*Built of Living Stones*, no. 74). Gradually, the tabernacle took on significance as a place for the faithful to go to pray and visit with Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament.

Repeating Canon 938 §2 of the Code of Canon Law, the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM), states that the tabernacle should be in a part of the church that is "truly noble, prominent, conspicuous, worthily decorated, and suitable for prayer" (314). The document provides two options for fulfilling this requirement:

315. ...it is preferable that the tabernacle be located, according to the judgment of the Diocesan Bishop:
- a) either in the sanctuary, apart from the altar of celebration, in an appropriate form and place, not excluding its being positioned on an old altar no longer used for celebration (cf. no. 303);
 - b) or even in some chapel suitable for the private adoration and prayer of the faithful and organically connected to the church and readily noticeable by the Christian faithful.

In either case, it is necessary to take into account the architecture of the church in question, and it is ultimately the bishop's decision to determine where the tabernacle should be placed (314).

In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, in 2007 Pope-Emeritus Benedict XVI adds the following:

The correct positioning of the tabernacle contributes to the recognition of Christ's real presence in the Blessed Sacrament. Therefore, the place where the eucharistic species are reserved, marked by a sanctuary lamp, should be readily visible to everyone entering the church (no. 69).

After Vatican II a number of church documents have allowed for the location of the tabernacle to be in a separate chapel that is suitable for private prayer and devotion (see for example: *Eucharistiae Sacramentum*, no. 9). The majority of these documents point out that a separate chapel dedicated to the Blessed Sacrament is most appropriate in large churches, basilicas, and cathedrals where numerous funerals and weddings are celebrated, or where numerous pilgrims visit. The placement of the Blessed Sacrament in a separate chapel in these churches allows for a place conducive to prayer while the building itself may have visitors present or walking around on tours looking at the historic architecture and the artistic treasures of the church. This is one of the reasons that the major basilicas in Rome typically have large side chapels reserved for the Blessed Sacrament – as is the case at St. Peter's Basilica, St. Mary Major, and others.

Some liturgists make the case that a separate chapel for the Blessed Sacrament is proper in all churches. Among other reasons, they point out that a chapel set aside for private prayer and devotion is a good thing and should not be lightly dismissed. They also assert that a separate chapel promotes devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. Some argue that a tabernacle in the sanctuary can be a distraction during the celebration of the Eucharist and, therefore, it makes sense to separate the area of celebration from the area of reservation.

Responding to these views, a noted liturgical expert, Bishop Peter J. Elliott, states the following about the insistence that the only proper place for the Blessed Sacrament is in a separate chapel:

This extremism has done great harm, as can be inferred from the lingering complaint that “Now our church seems empty.” Deeper harm is evident in the observable fact that, no longer required to genuflect, most people do not bother even to bow to the altar. A generation has emerged in some places with no awareness of the eucharistic presence of Christ in the tabernacle, hence of a lessened awareness of the altar and the sacred space of liturgy. This is a problem particularly for people who come to church only for the Sunday liturgy, and more so in terms of the faith and complete catechesis of our children (Elliott, 2005, p. 325).

At Good Shepherd, the tabernacle is not in the sanctuary and is not prominent and readily visible to those who enter the Church. Also, given its current position, Eucharistic Ministers are required to transport a large ciborium containing the Blessed Sacrament from the chapel to the main altar for every daily and Sunday Mass celebrated in the church. Once brought to the altar or credence table the consecrated hosts need to be distributed to smaller ciboria. At the end of the distribution of Communion the contents of the smaller ciboria are emptied into the large ciborium and moved back to the chapel by a Eucharistic Minister. In my opinion, this constant movement of the Blessed Sacrament across the church is not reverent and is unbecoming of the dignity of the Eucharist. I respectfully disagree with those who observe that the carrying of the Eucharist across the church is no different than the action of the Eucharistic Ministers who carry the smaller ciboria to distribute communion to the faithful. Carrying the Eucharist back and forth across the church is an action that is required due to the distance of the chapel from the altar. This can be eliminated or drastically lessened by the presence of the tabernacle closer to the altar.

For these reasons I suggest that the tabernacle be moved and placed near the altar in the sanctuary. In this way, the tabernacle would be “truly noble, prominent, conspicuous, worthily decorated, suitable for prayer” and “noticeable by the Christian faithful” and would, hopefully, foster the recognition of Christ’s true presence in the Eucharist.

Let me close this brief discussion about the placement of the tabernacle in the sanctuary of church with this passage from Bishop Elliott:

To avoid the arid effects of liturgical rationalism and to promote prayer and reverence, let the Eucharist be restored to the truly prominent position in every church. Where this has happened, the response of the faithful has been a resurgence of devotion to our Eucharistic Lord. Through our incarnational, human way of affirming priorities through sign and symbols, let Jesus be seen to be who he is – the center of our faith and love, the “summit and source” of the life of the Church (Elliott, 2005, p. 331).

As I mentioned during the parish townhall meeting, two proposals have been discussed regarding the placement of the tabernacle in the sanctuary. One (plan A) situates the tabernacle immediately behind the altar and under the crucifix. This placement would require a major reconstruction on and around the ramp in the rear of the sanctuary and, perhaps, the raising of the crucifix to allow for sufficient space for the tabernacle. The design also requires the purchase of a new tabernacle that would contribute to the artistic design of the reconstruction. The other proposal (plan B) would move the tabernacle that is currently in use in the Eucharistic Chapel and place it in the sanctuary to the left of the altar and immediately adjacent to the walkway that leads to the ambo.

I have discussed both of these proposals with the parish staff and with the architect who designed the church, Jim Bransford. I think that Jim's observation about the two plans sums up the consensus of our discussion. According to him, plan A (with the tabernacle under the crucifix) does not fit well with the design of the church and would distract from the setting and beauty of the crucifix. Plan B (with the tabernacle in the sanctuary to the left of the altar) is a much better fit with the design of the church. In addition, this plan ensures that the tabernacle would be placed in a location that is "noble, prominent, and conspicuous" as the documents of the church call for. The plan situates the tabernacle in the center of attention as one enters the church through the main doors in the narthex. It also allows for the use of the current tabernacle and does not require the purchase of a new one.

As for the use of the current Eucharistic Chapel – with the help of the Knights of Columbus and the Catholic Respect Life ministry, I have arranged for the purchase of an exact reproduction of the Tilma of Our Lady of Guadalupe from the sanctuary in Mexico City. The reproduction is certified both by the Rector of the Sanctuary and the Archbishop of Mexico City. The plan is that the Tilma would be placed in the chapel and dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe – the patroness of pregnant women and the unborn. It will be a Marian chapel dedicated to prayers for pro-life issues – including prayers for those lost to abortion and to the families who have lost children as a result of miscarriages, still births, or other tragedies.

I would appreciate it if you would keep this project in your prayers. God bless!

Fr. Mike, TOR
Pastor