

The Mass (Part II)

by Fr. Tim Church

THE FURNISHINGS OF THE CHURCH, continued

Continuing with the furnishings of the church, it might be helpful to say a little more about the **tabernacle**. The Blessed Sacrament is reserved in the church or a special chapel; this is accomplished with the use of a secure repository called a tabernacle. The name (Latin: “tent”) is reminiscent of the Old Testament moveable “dwelling” that was used to house the ark of the covenant. This was a sign of God’s unique presence among his people. In the Old Testament, it is evident by the terrifying signs of the pillar of fire and the cloud over the tent. In the New Testament God’s presence is known to us in the Incarnation, the coming of God as a man:

“And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14)

Jesus promises to remain with us, and it is in his Body and Blood of the Eucharist that we are assured that his promise is true. The current norms of the Catholic Church make it clear that the tabernacle should be visible to the faithful, either in the main church, or in a chapel. We have had the good fortune to design our new church so that the one tabernacle is seen in both. Curiously, there are no specific requirements for the appearance of the tabernacle, only that it be secure and dignified. Some interesting designs have appeared throughout history, including doves and bee hives!

Now, all that being the case, what is our response to the presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament? Once again, the liturgical norms are helpful. A candle or oil lamp burns near the tabernacle to indicate the Blessed Sacrament is reserved. As we enter the church, before we move to our seat, we genuflect by touching our right knee to the floor. This is an act of fealty or obedience. It is an acknowledgment that Jesus is our Lord. Unless we are serving in the sanctuary as altar server, etc., anytime we cross in front of the tabernacle it is proper that we genuflect. This is one of the wonderful physical gestures of the Catholic Church. As is the case with all physical gestures, it helps us to form in our consciousness a sense of honor and respect for Jesus’ presence in the church. The sweetness and gentleness of our devotion is nowhere better seen.

Practical furnishings are given honor in the Catholic Church to establish a sense of respect in our daily use of the things of our worship of God. The **ambo** which is used as a place for the book of scripture readings is given dignity in the sanctuary. While the ambo is similar in appearance to a protestant pulpit, and is sometimes used as the place for the homily, its first and most important purpose is to give honor to the book of readings. I believe it helps greatly if the book can be seen at all times, laying open on the top of the ambo. We are reminded of the clear guidance that we are given by the sacred Word of God.

The **presider’s chair** is also given a place of honor in the sanctuary. The priest or bishop represent Christ to the community in their role at the Mass. The chair is usually on an elevated platform (although it is not to appear like a throne). The presider is present as a servant, but one of the ways that he accomplishes

this is by facilitating the dignity of the parish community. He provides oversight to insure the order and integrity of the gathered community. He shepherds the people of God, according to the Lord's call to him.

To be continued...