

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN FAITH

No. 9

RESERVATION OF THE BLESSED SACRAMENT

(With thanks to Fr. Stan Swift for permission to quote)



**THEREFORE WE, BEFORE HIM BENDING,
THIS GREAT SACRAMENT REVERÉ;
TYPES AND SHADOWS HAVE THEIR ENDING,
FOR THE NEWER RITE IS HERE;
FAITH, OUR OUTWARD SENSE BEFRIENDING,
MAKES THE INWARD VISION CLEAR.**

RESERVATION OF THE BLESSED SACRAMENT

The Mass is, of course, the principle act of worship of the Church. By following Jesus' command to "*do this in memory of me*" and by the invocation of the Holy Spirit, a new creation comes into being. Christ in the fullness of his humanity and divinity, his Body and Blood, is present under the forms of bread and wine and, in receiving him, we are made one with him in that new creation.

It has been the practise of the Church from the earliest times to reserve the Blessed Sacrament. Justin Martyr (c.155AD) writes of it being taken "to those who were absent" thus uniting them with the worshipping community – the Body of Christ. Reservation was normal throughout the centuries in the Catholic Church. However, with the Reformation, the practise was abandoned together with any widespread understanding of the centrality of the Mass. With the Oxford Movement (c.1830 onwards) and the rediscovery of the Catholic Tradition of our Church, the need to reserve the Sacrament gradually became understood and the practise widespread both in our churches and cathedrals. It is normally kept in a Tabernacle on the altar (as in S. Andrew's), in an Aumbry in the wall or in a hanging Pyx above an altar. A white light normally indicates the presence of Christ and it is usual to genuflect (go down on one knee) when passing before the reserved Sacrament as a sign of respect.

When I was a child I remember seeing Roman Catholics on the bus, or walking down the street, make the sign of the cross as they passed the door of their church. A simple yet profound mark of respect acknowledging the sacramental presence of Jesus. It is a devotion that is made more explicit when one prays before the Blessed Sacrament. Many find benefit from this and the Rite of Benediction is an extension of this practise. Prayer is offered to Jesus present in the Host (the Blessed Sacrament) and sheltered in a monstrance, hymns are sung and devotion offered and he blesses us as the monstrance is raised above the congregation in the sign of the cross. At other times the Host is placed in the monstrance on the altar for an extended period of prayer and devotion. This is called *Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament*. Sometimes the priest will take the Sacrament from the tabernacle during mass if insufficient wafers have been consecrated.

From the 16th century, Protestants objected to the separation of Eucharistic devotion from reception of the Sacrament at Mass, largely because of a fear of superstition or idolatry. This is no longer a real issue and there is much spiritual benefit to be gained from placing ourselves lovingly in the Real Presence of Christ, as well as the practical need to reserve the sacred Host for those who are unable to attend Mass through sickness.