

Prayer in the Presence of the Blessed Sacrament: A History Lesson, Part 2 of 4

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After Jesus and the early church established the Eucharist, many people wished to participate yet were not able to be present for this special gathering of the church each week, each Sunday. Justin Martyr, around 150AD, wrote that the Eucharist was taken to the sick or to those unable to worship with the community. Around 215AD Hippolytus and Cyprian, who died in 258AD, mention that people were reserving the Eucharist in their homes. These are the first elements of a long history of reserving, praying and making the Eucharist present to people who recognized the presence of Christ in the sacred bread.

While the early church would gather on the Lord's Day to celebrate Eucharist, the other days of the week the people would gather to pray. The "Didache," a document from around 80 AD, mentions that people would be asked to pray The Lord's Prayer and other prayers three times a day. In asking three times a day for "our daily bread," the Christian community identified the importance of sharing the bread of life and being nourished by the Lord. The "church of the home," the Sunday gatherings in each other's homes to worship the Lord, would be sustained by sharing the bread during the week, reserved in kitchen cupboards to remember the Lord's Supper.

The importance of reserving the Blessed Sacrament traces its origins to the early house churches and eventually to the parish church when Christianity became a legalized, accepted religion in 313 by Constantine. The widespread practice of having a special area in a church with the reserved sacrament developed when churches were built to look like tabernacles, designed with the focus on the tabernacle or reservation of the Blessed Sacrament in mind. It naturally occurred with people wishing to extend the fruits or prayers of the Eucharist/Mass and continue their personal prayer. People who were able to stay or who would come back later wished to extend or visit the presence of God in the form of the eucharistic bread.

During the Middle Ages, when practices developed whereby people did not feel worthy to receive Holy Communion, the community would gather in the presence of the Lord, reserved in the tabernacle. This important prayer style, in the presence of our Lord, served to fulfill a need by which participation in Mass became secondary. The Eucharist became less an action—something to do and participate in—and more something to adore. Since people were worshiping in a language foreign to them and only the learned in Latin would participate, the theology and practice of receiving Holy Communion became separate from the Mass. People began to participate or receive Communion only by seeing the host.

Monstrances and *lunas* displaying the Blessed Sacrament also developed in the Middle Ages. (The roots of these words come from Latin terms that mean "show.") Eventually, especially through forty hours devotions, liturgical rituals developed around having the Blessed Sacrament exposed in a monstrance. Several historians believe that the practice of forty hours developed in the early part of the sixteenth century at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Milan, Italy. The forty hours were meant to commemorate the hours in which Christ's body lay in the tomb between his death and resurrection. Pope Clement VIII formally decreed this devotion in 1592 for the churches

of Rome. Pope Clement XI, in 1705, and Clement XII, in 1731, gave special instructions for all the churches of the world to participate in this practice. Special preaching accompanied the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament and because the preaching was in the native language of the people, the faithful felt more connected to these services and found the blessing, or benediction, at the end of the service very meaningful. A priest would bless the people with the Blessed Sacrament in the monstrance, and several miracles and important affinities developed giving rise to the importance of this ritual, usually done on a Sunday afternoon.

People were encouraged to visit a church and pray in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament in a tabernacle as a worthy way of staying connected in prayer to our Lord. Mini pilgrimages, visiting multiple churches in a city on the same day, became a practice and devotion that was rewarded by indulgences. Such a noble cause at the time allowed people to feel connected and blessed.

The worship of the Holy Eucharist outside Mass was reaffirmed after the Second Vatican Council (1963–1965) in a special instruction from the Holy See. The annual solemn exposition, especially on the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ, was affirmed. The directives for worship of the Blessed Sacrament were published in 1973 in *Roman Ritual: Holy Communion and Worship of the Eucharist*. Each conference of bishops was directed to develop liturgical rituals in harmony with liturgical principles from the eucharistic theology reaffirmed at Vatican II. These theologies were from the 2000 years of history and practice of the Eucharist. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy developed approved rituals around prayer before the Blessed Sacrament in its *Order for the Solemn Exposition of the Holy Eucharist (OSE)* in 1993.

OSE reaffirmed that solemn exposition of the Blessed Sacrament offers the opportunity for people to deepen their prayer reflection on the Eucharist. A faithful Christian life and our vocation as disciples of the Lord call us to be people of prayer. Prayer before the Blessed Sacrament has always been an opportunity for people to be in a spiritual communion with Christ and in communion with one another and the saints in heaven and on earth. When we pray with Christ present in the sacrament, we remember the sacrifice of the Mass and our spiritual communion. It leads us into a deeper reflection of the paschal mystery and leads us to respond gratefully to share our body, our presence of Christ within us, to build up the reign of God. As Mass renews our covenant and union with Christ, our prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament strengthens our resolve to share this heavenly food in multiple ways, doing good works to serve God and one another.

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