



A LITURGICAL ACT: PRAYER IN THE PRESENCE OF THE BLESSED SACRAMENT

When we gather for Eucharist or Mass, we do this as the body of Christ. We are called to be members of Christ's body from our baptism and vocation. Our faith in God inspires us to be who we are: members of Christ's body. The word "liturgy" comes from two Greek words that mean "public works." When we gather to pray in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, especially when it is exposed in a monstrance, we engage in a liturgical rite. We may feel that we are by ourselves: "This is my time with the Lord." However, the very act of Communion, from which the host comes so we may pray before our Lord, reminds us that our prayer is always in solidarity with the church—the people of God and the communion of saints.

The liturgical document that guides our prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, *Holy Communion and Worship of the Eucharist Outside of Mass (HCWEOM)* (1973) states that there must always be at least two people praying in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament when it is exposed. This is partially because of sacred Scripture in which Jesus said, "where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I" (Matthew 18:20). Additionally, Jesus always sent his disciples out to mission in pairs. Part of our mission is to be people of prayer. Mindful of this, the church also asks that, during this prayer time, we remember the celebration of the Mass, meditate on God's Word, especially those passages from sacred Scripture that speak of the eucharistic mysteries, and pray with the eucharistic prayers from the Mass. There is a special connection: it is from the Eucharist (Mass) that we are able to reserve the Blessed Sacrament for viaticum, or those who will bring Holy Communion to those unable to worship with the community. The second reason for reserving hosts is for prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament and continuing the reflection of the Mass or Eucharist.

The eucharistic prayers of the Mass, or prayers of thanksgiving, are rich in theology, mystery, reverence, devotion, blessedness and gratefulness. Because they are so filled with meaning, our time before the Lord engages us in an act of worship of

our God "in Spirit and truth." *HCWEOM* recommends that those who pray before the Blessed Sacrament have the texts of the Mass and sacred Scripture available for meditation and reflection so they can unfold the mysteries of the Eucharist. Also, there is to be music that reflects the eucharistic mysteries. Any liturgical worship aid, missal or hymnal will contain appropriate eucharistic songs.

Part of our reflection and prayer with the Blessed Sacrament engages us to leave our churches and chapels and go and serve the Lord and one another. Christ gave of himself, of his life, for others. While praying, we think of those acts of service, justice and peace that will help us be faithful to the body of Christ and build up God's reign in the world. Our prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament leads us to go boldly to be God's presence in a world in need of further nourishment from God's love. How can we, who have prayed with the "presence of God's gift of self," as Saint Peter Julian Eymard (1811–1868) said, not go forward from our prayer to share the gift of ourselves? As many theologians have said, we go from the liturgy of the church to the liturgy of the world. When we do this, we are being faithful to our baptism, which made us disciples of the Lord, and honoring the pledge we made when we received Holy Communion, to be the Lord's presence in the world. Sacraments are public actions that draw us together as a church and allow us to renew ourselves and our pledge to God. Go forward, then, to be that sign and instrument, that sacrament, in the world!

Though not required by *HCWEOM*, it is helpful to pray together or sing a song of praise, adoration and thanksgiving at the shift change when one group is taking over the prayer time from another. Reciting the Lord's Prayer or the Glory to the Father is also a simple, but profound way, of remembering that, from the Mass and during this prayer time, we are in liturgy and doing public service for the Lord.

HCWEOM asked Catholic bishops' conferences to develop holy hours and rituals for prayer before the Blessed Sacrament in more formal settings. In

the United States, the US Catholic Conference of Bishops (USCCB) and its Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy (BCL) issued *Order for the Solemn Exposition of the Holy Eucharist (OSEHE)* in 1993. It is published exclusively by Liturgical Press in Collegeville, Minnesota. This ritual, or order, briefly explains the history and theology of prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament and demonstrates the many ways a congregation (small or large) may worship the Blessed Sacrament when it is exposed in a monstrance.

The Liturgy of the Hours, the prayer of the church, may be done during prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. Included during Morning or Evening Prayer are a hymn, psalms and canticle, reading, responsory, canticle of Zachary or Mary, intercessions, the Lord's Prayer and benediction. If the prayer continues throughout the day, the benediction is done just before the Blessed Sacrament is reposed and the host is placed into a tabernacle. Benediction is blessing people with the host in a monstrance and is done by an ordained deacon or priest. When a layperson leads this prayer, a benediction is not done. Other holy hours stressed in the Order have sacred Scripture focusing on the Eucharist, eucharistic hymns, silence and, perhaps, a homily (if a deacon or priest is present) or a reflection (if only a lay leader of prayer is present).

It is important to make the connection between the Eucharist/Mass and prayer before the Blessed Sacrament by consecrating a host at Mass to be used during prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. Prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament is a fruit of the celebration of the Eucharist/Mass. Furthermore, when prayer is over and the host is placed back into the tabernacle, it is broken and available for distribution or Communion of the sick. What has been worshiped and adored continues to feed someone who is in need of God's nourishment through Holy Communion. This continues a cycle of prayer, reflection, distribution and recognition that Jesus feeds us and we give service to the Lord for blessing us with the gift of the Eucharist.

Many are interested in prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. It has had a renewed interest in our church and has been promoted by many, from Pope John Paul II to other theologians and liturgists around the world.

It is important to note that the church regulates prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. These regulations assist the reverence of the sacrament and ensure the connection of the Eucharist and the Mass or prayer before the Blessed Sacrament.

Let us look at some of the terms used and examine their meanings.

First, one may pray in a chapel or a church that has a tabernacle. All churches or chapels that have Mass at least once a month may reserve the Blessed Sacrament in a tabernacle. When the host has been reserved in the tabernacle, a church or chapel may be open regularly for prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. Prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament is a fruit or extension of the Eucharist (Mass).

"Exposition" is a technical term used to describe the Blessed Sacrament in the form of a host and put into a luna or monstrance. The host for the luna or monstrance is consecrated at the Mass of the day and then placed in the luna or monstrance for exposition. At the end of the exposition, the host is retrieved, broken and placed in a ciborium, a vessel used for hosts that will be consumed during the ritual of Communion of the Sick. It is helpful to remember that hosts consecrated during the Mass are expected to be consumed at that Mass (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal [GIRM] 85*).

The term "monstrance" comes from a Latin term that means "to show." We are showing the Blessed Sacrament to remind us of the great mystery of the Eucharist: Christ giving his body and blood to us as an everlasting covenant and memorial of his death and resurrection. Exposition is not better or more powerful or more special, but it is one form of prayer that helps us remember the celebration of the Mass. After all, this is where the host comes from. Prayer in the presence of the Sacrament, not exposed, but in the tabernacle, with the doors to the tabernacle closed, is also vital and an important witness of prayer. Many churches place a candle near the tabernacle as a reminder of the presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament, contained within the tabernacle. It is helpful to also remember that the presence of Christ is contained in the altar of a church; this is why clergy reverence the altar with a bow and a kiss and why all, upon entering a church, should bow to this important symbol of Christ in our midst. Some churches will also have the *Book of the Gospels* enthroned as a reminder of the presence of Christ in the living word.

Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament is a liturgical rite. Therefore, the diocesan bishop must ensure that this ritual is performed well and within the liturgical rubrics and mandates. Candles, people available to pray, sacred Scripture, song and prayer should all be available for exposition of the Blessed Sacrament.

Many request or wish for perpetual adoration, praying continuously in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. This type of prayer, exposed or not exposed, is regulated by a diocesan bishop and requires his permission to begin. There are many reasons for this. First, there is the concern for the safety of everyone involved. Second, there is the need for there to be at least two people always present. Also, there is an assumption that the parish is regularly celebrating and having good attendance at Eucharist (Mass) and is celebrating the other official prayers of the church, the Liturgy of the Hours. This Morning and Evening Prayer takes precedence in the prayer life of the church. Additionally, hours of volunteer service for the community, prayer leading to action, are usually requested by the bishop so he can know that the community's prayer life impacts the larger community. Our ministry of prayer leads us to discipleship, service to God and one another.

Great care and ownership by many members from a parish and the surrounding community are needed to make a commitment to regular prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. Many places tend to schedule an hour for each person, based on the last hours of Jesus' life when the disciples and Jesus prayed for an hour in the garden of Gethsemane. During certain times of the year, more people are available; vacations challenge communities to have a full array of people. It is important to note that parishes that wish to have perpetual adoration need to have at least two people for each hour or 46 people a day. There should be a backup for each hour, which demands another 23 people. When you multiply this by the number of days (usually 6, because Sunday does not have as many occasions for prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, due to Mass) and allow for the availability for substitutes, there should be at least 483 involved in the ministry from a parish community.

There are two days within a year, other than

Sunday, when there is no prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament: Good Friday and Holy Saturday. There can be prayer in the church, but, the focus is on the cross on Good Friday and on preparation for the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday. Also, one should not schedule prayer time on legal and religious holidays so that the holidays may truly be observed and families are encouraged to be together.

Most parishes that are not large enough for perpetual adoration would do well to schedule holy hours, or times when they may pray in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. Certain parish groups could be asked to take an hour from time to time. In parishes that have regular meetings scheduled each month, meetings could be reserved for the parish to gather for prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament exposed.

Not every parish has every single ministry in the church's life. Each parish has its own charism, talents and abilities. If a parish can have the ministry of prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, it can become a worthy and wonderful ministry that can continue the faith formation and development of a community. Once the liturgical life of a parish has developed and become established, a natural outgrowth is to develop the devotional life around the Blessed Sacrament. Attend to the careful preparation of this ministry. Invite others to join in starting holy hours until a parish is able to receive permission to have regular prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, either exposed or not.

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Blessed Sacrament Father John Thomas Lane is pastor of the Roman Catholic community of Saint Charles, Albuquerque, New Mexico. He is a frequent speaker, writer, liturgical and vocation - al consultant, and the Webmaster for blessedsacrament.com.