

Eucharistic Adoration at St. Patrick

Article 3: Reserving the Blessed Sacrament

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The practice of “reserving” the Blessed Sacrament in our churches between Masses arose gradually in the history of the Church. It was not fully established until the late Middle Ages. Keep in mind that church buildings did not even exist until the Roman persecutions ended, several centuries into the Christian era. More importantly, however, the teachings involved in Eucharistic devotion developed over time.

This should not surprise us. All that Christians say and do and teach did not start fully developed on the day of Pentecost! Such development was foretold by Jesus in John 16:12-13: “I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now. But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth.” Blessed John Henry Newman, the great 19th century English Cardinal, helped us understand this in his famous book *On the Development of Doctrine*.

The word “development” means an “unfolding.” Under the guidance of God’s Holy Spirit, the Church “unfolds” over time the full meaning of the essential revelation given to us in the Bible. Another image of doctrinal development would be that of a plant which grows from a seed. It remains the same organism but its full potential unfolds over time. New developments in doctrine and practice must grow organically out of what has gone before. They must be in continuity with the past, not sudden breaks. The Spirit guides the Church in making the necessary discernments.

One very early practice makes it clear that the Real Presence in the Eucharistic bread and wine was always thought to extend beyond the Mass itself. In the very earliest times it was already customary to bring Communion to those who were unable to be present at Mass. Around the year 150, St. Justin Martyr testifies to this practice. Obviously, for this to happen, the Eucharist had to be in some way “reserved,” even if there were no churches or tabernacles at the time.

Eventually, to make a long story short, the reserved Sacrament became itself the focus of prayer and devotion. As the Church came out of secrecy into broad daylight, buildings arose. These were primarily for the Mass itself, but in time the reserved Sacrament became a central aspect of the worship space. It began to be reserved in a special, ornate box on the altar, which we call the Tabernacle. Thus did the church building become a “sacred space,” a place for prayer and worship even outside of Mass, a place to encounter the Lord in his sacramental Presence.

At some point, the custom arose of holding special ceremonies in which the consecrated Bread was “exposed” for prayer and worship in an ornate display-case called a “monstrance,” from the Latin “monstrare,” meaning “to show.”

Such prayer before the exposed Blessed Sacrament was not the only practice associated with the teaching on the Real Presence. People were also encouraged to visit the church and pray at any time. Eucharistic processions developed, such as that on the feast of Corpus Christi, which was itself instituted to celebrate the Church’s faith in the Real Presence. The Forty Hours devotion became popular as well. Associated with all these, there developed the practice of blessing the people with the Sacrament, a gesture we call Benediction.

We must admit that at some times in the past, adoration from a distance became a sort of substitute for actually receiving Holy Communion. Due to some distorted teachings that prevailed for a while, many people thought themselves generally “unworthy” to receive Communion. This situation was common even as recently as my own childhood. Many only received Communion once a year, after going to Confession (the “Easter Duty”).

Fortunately, we are beyond this puritanical approach to Communion. Unfortunately, on the other hand, the pendulum has swung too far in the other direction. Today, almost everyone who comes to Mass takes Communion, often casually, without thought or devotion.

It is time for us to renew our faith in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Our practice of Adoration at St. Patrick will go far in helping us to do this. Attention to this central teaching and practice of the Catholic faith has the potential to transform our lives and the life of our parish.