



The Tabernacle

The word *tabernacle* derives from the Latin *tabernaculum* (tent), and recalls the Jewish "meeting tent," which housed the ark of the covenant and thus embodied the presence of God among the people. In Catholic churches today, the tabernacle houses communion bread that has been consecrated at the liturgy. The practice of reserving the eucharist dates back in some places to the earliest days. In the second century, a small amount of consecrated communion bread was placed in an ambry or a pyx, often shaped like a casket or a dove. This vessel was small enough to be carried to the homes

of those who were unable to attend the community's eucharist. This was the only reason for reservation. Devotion to the reserved eucharist grew during the Middle Ages when the reception of communion declined. By the sixteenth century, the custom of a fixed container for the reserved eucharist — the tabernacle as part of the main altar — was in place; in 1614 it became prescribed practice for most places.

The normative guidelines of the church today indicate that the tabernacle be placed elsewhere than on an altar, and never on the altar used for the liturgy. An appropriate setting would be on a pillar, in a wall niche, or especially, in a chapel set apart from the main assembly area. (The chapel is the clear preference of Roman liturgical law.) Such a setting should also provide for the private devotion of the faithful. The tabernacle in its modern setting still recalls the ancient image of a house for the divine presence, and reminds the assembly of those in the parish who are confined to their households, waiting for the ministry of those who have celebrated the eucharist.

The tabernacle is made of noble materials, giving it a quiet dignity as the symbol of an ever-present God. A lamp burns nearby in silent witness of this mystery.

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