



The Chapel for the Tabernacle

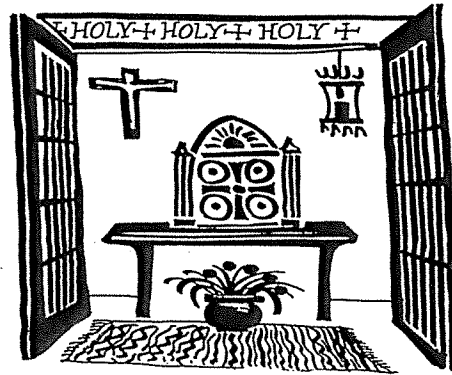
In early Christian tradition, the practice of reserving the consecrated bread after the liturgy was to provide communion for those who were sick and unable to join the community at the Lord's table. In communities where there was no daily Mass, the eucharist was also reserved for daily communion.

In some places, the laity were allowed to take the eucharist home with them. Eventually, the clergy reserved the eucharist, first in their houses, then in the sacristies. These sacristies were more like chapels. Eventually, the eucharist was reserved in a container near the altar — sometimes hanging above it in a vessel shaped like a dove!

The container used to hold the eucharistic bread (the consecrated wine was seldom reserved, even as now) was of various styles, and came to be known as the *tabernacle*. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, this tabernacle was located in a special chapel to accommodate the developing devotional practice of adoration. By the sixteenth century, in most places, the tabernacle became part of the main altar, where it was given prominence by architectural detail and liturgical reverence. In the liturgical reforms initiated by the Second Vatican Council, the church chose to return to the earlier practice of separating the tabernacle from the altar.

Various Roman documents from 1964 to 1983 show a strong preference for a distinct and distinguished chapel for the tabernacle. The 1983 Code of Canon Law states that the place where the tabernacle is housed must be "prominent, conspicuous, beautifully decorated and suited for prayer."

This chapel should accommodate the postures of prayer: sitting, kneeling, genuflecting. The tabernacle may be placed on a pillar or shelf, not normally on an altar. It may be recessed in the wall or suspended



from the ceiling. In all cases, it is to be secure and opaque. An oil lamp or candle should burn continuously near the tabernacle.

The chapel might be located next to the reconciliation chapel to provide the penitent with a place for prayer. If possible, it should be accessible even when the rest of the church building is occupied or otherwise unavailable.

This chapel is not intended to hide the tabernacle or diminish the importance of adoration; it is to provide appropriate honor for the reserved eucharist. When something is important to us, we make room for it, we create a shrine. When someone is important to us, we dedicate a space in our hearts and in our homes, both figuratively and literally, a private space for that one alone. This is the reasoning behind a chapel for the tabernacle.