

This House of Prayer

4th in a series of 5

August 20, 2006

Our Cathedral is a tangible invitation to prayer and reflection. During the past few weeks, we have visited different places in the Cathedral, and explored how they call us to prayer. This week, we meditate on the Blessed Sacrament Chapel. Next week, the series concludes as we take a closer look at the ambo, the place of the word.

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood
remains in me and I in him (John 6: 56)

THE GIFT OF THE EUCHARIST

In the Gospel of a few weeks ago, Jesus fed the 5,000 with a few loaves of bread and two fish. In today's Gospel, Jesus reveals that he wants to feed not just the bodies of his people, but their souls. Through the sharing of his body and blood, Jesus wants to remain with and in his people for all time.

The Eucharist is Christ's great gift to the Church—his abiding presence in our midst. The Catholic belief that Jesus is not just symbolically, but *really* present in the bread and wine that we share in the Eucharist, led naturally to the Catholic practice of reserving the Blessed Sacrament in our churches. From here the sacrament could be taken to those who are sick and unable to join the assembly for Mass. And the place where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved becomes a place of special closeness to Jesus—the perfect place for adoration.

Through the ages, the Blessed Sacrament has been reserved in many different kinds of places. In the early Church, when small communities gathered in private houses to worship, people would take some of the consecrated bread home each week! Gradually, the place for the reservation of the sacrament became more and more grand, until in many places it dominated the altar.

The latest *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* says that "it is more in keeping with the meaning of the sign that the tabernacle in which the Most Holy Eucharist is reserved not be on an altar on which Mass is celebrated" (315). Rather, the Blessed Sacrament should be reserved "in a part of the church that is truly noble, prominent, readily visible, beautifully decorated, and suitable for prayer" (314).

A PLACE OF ENCOUNTER: THE BLESSED SACRAMENT CHAPEL AT ST. JAMES CATHEDRAL

In keeping with the *General Instruction* and other church documents, at St. James Cathedral the Blessed Sacrament is housed in a prominent chapel, separate from the main altar. The transparent gates of the Chapel allow the tabernacle to be seen from all over the Cathedral, and the unusually large sanctuary lamp (it has burned in St. James Cathedral since December 22, 1907!) calls further attention to this holy place. A small oculus brings natural light into this place, and creates a visual link with the main altar.



The tabernacle itself is one of the newest works of art in the Cathedral. It was created by Ulrich Henn, the German sculptor who also created the ceremonial bronze doors, and was dedicated on February 2, 2003. Henn drew his inspiration from the story of Moses and the burning bush, in the book of Exodus. In going forward to investigate the bush—on fire, and yet not consumed—Moses encounters the living God.

The Blessed Sacrament Chapel is for us, too, a place of encounter. In this place where the consecrated hosts are kept, we come close to Jesus, who lives with us and in us through the sacrament of his body and blood. And the longer we listen to him in the rich silence of this place of prayer, the more clearly we hear the challenge to go forth to love and serve others as Jesus did.

FOR REFLECTION

What is the difference between the altar and the tabernacle?

The prayer over the gifts today calls the Eucharist "a holy exchange of gifts." What do you bring to the Eucharist? What does the Eucharist bring to you?

PRAYER

Very Bread, good Shepherd, tend us,
Jesu, of your love befriend us,
You refresh us, You defend us,
Your eternal goodness send us,
In the land of life to see. Amen.

*From the sequence for Corpus Christi,
attributed to St. Thomas Aquinas*