

I have been asked to describe my rationale for desiring to reposition the Tabernacle in the St. Rose church. As I have already done so in the other two churches, I thought I would take this opportunity to describe that rationale for all three parishes. I was also asked to describe the rationale for positioning the tabernacle off center in the churches. I will attempt that in the following articles.

In the General Instruction for the Roman Missal (the document describing how, what, why, etc. for the Mass—also abbreviated as the “GIRM”) we read regarding the Tabernacle:

*314. In accordance with the structure of each church and legitimate local customs, the Most Blessed Sacrament should be reserved in a tabernacle in a part of the church that is truly noble, prominent, readily visible, beautifully decorated, and suitable for prayer...*

*315. 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. Consequently, it is preferable that the tabernacle be located, according to the judgment of the diocesan Bishop, either in the sanctuary, apart from the altar of celebration, in a form and place more appropriate, not excluding on an old altar no longer used for celebration; Or even in some chapel suitable for the faithful's private adoration and prayer and organically connected to the church and readily visible to the Christian faithful.*

So there is—and was—basic compliance with the GIRM in our churches even before I arrived.

Maybe a little space describing the parts of the church would be helpful now. There are two main areas of the church: 1) the nave, where all the pews are and the congregation remains for the Mass; 2) the sanctuary, where the bishop/priest with deacons and servers are through the Mass.

What are the foci in the sanctuary? There are three or four, depending on where the Tabernacle is. In no particular order of prominence they are: 1) the ambo—where the Bible is read; 2) the Altar of Sacrifice—where the bread & wine become the Body & Blood of



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Christ; 3) the celebrant's chair—where the bishop/priest leads the prayers from; 4) the Tabernacle—where the reserved Eucharist is kept .

After Vatican Council II, there was a move to highlight the importance of the Altar of Sacrifice that—from all records I have been able to find—was not an official teaching or preference of the Church. It was the thoughts of liturgical “experts” whose agendas I can only guess at. What I have heard from them were statements like: “We need to focus attention on the community gathered for the Mass, and not on the reserved Eucharist. Our focus needs to be on the community of the moment.” Or worse—and yes, I have heard this: “The Tabernacle doesn't mean anything, what matters is the body of Christ gathered for prayer.”

This attitude led some church architects in recent decades to position the Tabernacle in a room out of sight of everyone. Thankfully, that never happened in our churches.

So, why were Tabernacles moved from the center of churches in remodeling after Vatican Council II? It seems to me that there are primarily two main reasons given for this: 1) the priest did not want his back to the Tabernacle during the Mass—I understand this rationale, though I disagree with it for reasons I will describe in a later article; 2) there was an attempt to re-focus attention on the Altar of Sacrifice and the community aspects of the Mass.

Both of these reasons have some merit. However, I am convinced there are other issues that are being ignored as a result of this refocus of attention. Yes, the Altar of Sacrifice can be said to be more important than the Tabernacle **at the time of its use**, because that is where our focus should be. But the same can be said of the ambo and the presider's chair at their times of use.

I will be writing more on this topic in the weeks to come. I am not sure how many articles it will take to finish this instruction. The Church has given us her teaching to follow, and there is leeway in application. I hope to make my case in the articles that follow.

Fr. Frank

Let me begin with a quote from last week's article. I would like to address these two points this week.

*It seems to me that there are primarily two main reasons given for [the repositioning of the Tabernacle]: 1) the priest did not want his back to the Tabernacle during the Mass—I understand this rationale, though I disagree with it for reasons I will describe in a later article; 2) there was an attempt to re-focus attention on the Altar of Sacrifice and the community aspects of the Mass.*

This first point is laudable. It is considered a terrible insult to turn our back to anyone, especially someone of great importance. I read one objection to having the Tabernacle behind the Altar that described dissatisfaction with the idea that, as a priest bent forward to kiss the Altar, he was sticking another part of his anatomy out toward the Tabernacle. Now that may sound humorous to us, but it is a concern for those who see things in that way. Of course, no matter how hard you try to please everyone, in this regard, there will be some who are not happy. In a previous parish, I tried to avoid that issue by kissing the Altar where **we** place the Book of the Gospels — right on the front edge of the Altar. Someone accused me of treating the Altar like the Blarney Stone and kissing it upside down.

I suppose it comes down to the idea of simple reverence. If the Tabernacle, positioned right behind the Altar, is thought to be disrespected by its position there, then by all means it should be moved. Provided, and this is a big proviso, it can be repositioned in a place of honor, as is fitting and is described in the GIRM quote from last week's article. (And, yes, I agree that the place where the tabernacle is at St. Rose is in a position of honor and respect. However, I do not think it is in the **most** honorable and respectful position possible.)

I would like to move on now to the second point; as stated, it is laudable as well. First of all, it is affirmed clearly in the documents from the Church, that the Tabernacle is not to be positioned on the Altar of Sacrifice. Even when a High Altar was positioned in a church, as at Ss. Peter and Paul, the Tabernacle did not sit on the Altar. It was placed in the structure immediately above



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the Altar of Sacrifice. Now we are not using that Altar, because to use that Altar, the priest's back would be to the people. That common orientation of everyone facing the same direction was halted precisely for the reason

described in number two: *the community aspects of the Mass.*

There have been some obvious benefits to this type of change. Among the most important of them has been an increase in the participation of those at the Mass. Now, "participation" means different things for different people. As best I understand the intent of Vatican II, the desire for participation meant that people would no longer be doing private devotions, such as the rosary, during Mass. Rather, full participation in the Mass for the laity involves engaging heart mind and soul in the events of the Mass including the readings from Scripture, the Eucharistic Prayers, and the reception of Holy Communion. As I recall, the only things that were "understandable" in the old Tridentine Mass, were the homily, and the reception of Communion. (Yes, I am old enough to have some memory of the "old Mass".)

To be involved in the Mass, means that you, as participants in the Mass, are expected to join the priest as he prays the Eucharistic prayer. The way you pray the Eucharistic prayer is different than the priest, but it is nonetheless very important. Because of these changes, it is important that we engage one another — priest to laity — for the sake of our worship of our Lord. Seeing what is happening, and engaging with responses, means that everyone at Mass is intimately involved in the worship of Christ.

To the extent that we are engaging one another in worship during the Mass, the location of the Tabernacle during Mass is not of primary importance. Yet, the reason we are there for worship is because of Jesus, who is present both in the Tabernacle, and on the Altar, and in a different way, is present also in the community. The **Real Presence** (eucharistically), in my opinion (and I think I have the mind of the Church here), is of paramount importance. His presence in the community is secondary, comparatively. More later. God bless.

Fr. Frank

I ended my last article by talking about the Real Presence. To remind you, I said:

*The Real Presence (eucharistically), in my opinion (and I think I have the mind of the Church here), is of paramount importance. His presence in the community is secondary, comparatively.*

Christ is truly present in the community, whereas He Himself said, wherever two or three are gathered in His name He is there in their midst (see MT 18:20).

Yet, the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist is a more complete Presence than that of Him in the community. We recognize in the Eucharistic Presence of Christ His decision to be present to us in a humility that is both disconcerting and attractive.

His Presence is disconcerting because in his great Majesty He has chosen to humbly be with us. His Presence is attractive because of what we know he has done for us.

So we honor the Majestic, Humble, Eucharistic Presence of Jesus, by maintaining His Presence in the Tabernacle.

Now we come to my main concern. How do we best display His Majesty for all to see?

In all three parishes the same problem presented itself: the presider's chair was set on a higher level than the Tabernacle.

In St. Lawrence, the presider's chair **was** two steps higher than the Tabernacle. In Ss. Peter and Paul, the presider's chair **was** one step higher than the Tabernacle. In St. Rose, the presider's chair **is** two steps higher than the Tabernacle.

In my opinion, that is backwards. The Tabernacle should be in the highest location, if it is in the sanctuary. The priest should not be at a higher, and therefore more exalted, position than the Reserved Eucharist. In addition, where the Tabernacle is now at St. Rose, it is set on the Blessed Virgin's altar. That is clear by the emblem on the front of that altar - there are the initials "BV" superimposed on the front of the altar.



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There. Now you have the primary reason why I want to move the Tabernacle. As for the Tabernacle being immediately behind me while I celebrate the Mass, that makes sense to me precisely because it is Christ who is presiding

over all that we do. As a priest, I represent Christ. But I do so while still acknowledging His Presence to us. So it seems right to me that He be enthroned higher than any other place in the sanctuary, even if it is only by one step. It is as though His Presence is looking down from His throne on all the activity we do with the church. Rather than considering my back to being to the Tabernacle during the Mass, it is a question of me representing Christ in a way that clearly shows I am there representing the King.

With the Tabernacle off to the side, that Presence is not as central to the reality of our worship as it could and should be. I know: that is my perception. I have discussed this with Archbishop Curtiss as well, and he is of the mind that the Tabernacle should be in the center of the church, especially in churches where it was designed to be so.

If you remember in the first article I quoted from the GIRM - the definitive instruction on the Mass from Rome - *...it is preferable that the tabernacle be located, according to the judgment of the diocesan Bishop...* - so Archbishop Curtiss supports the idea of returning the Tabernacle to the high and center position of the sanctuary.

In closing, please let me repeat myself. The position of the Tabernacle at St. Rose is not in a wrong position, but I am convinced its best position is the highest place in the sanctuary. Christ, the King, and reason for our worship, should be in the highest place possible.

What to do with the Blessed Virgins altar? My suggestion is to move the Mother of Perpetual Help icon to the front of the church. I like having the Holy Family available together as we have it on the other side of the sanctuary.

Thank you for reading these articles. I invite your comments.

Fr. Frank