



SILENT HOMILIES

The Tent That Stayed

*The tabernacle, and the light
that is not for show*



Silent Homilies

Little Treasures



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The tabernacle, and the light that is not for show

Before You Begin



Most of us meet the tabernacle as a box we already understand. It sits near the altar, or in a side chapel. A small lamp burns beside it. We genuflect, or we forget to genuflect, and we go to our seat.

Then somebody calls it a safe. Somebody else treats it as a shrine for looking at. The Church's actual teaching sits between those two ideas, and often nobody hears it.

The Latin word is older than the metal box. *Tabernaculum* means a tent, a hut, a small dwelling. Israel knew a tent in the wilderness where the presence of God was not a mood. It was a claim. The Church did not invent a pretty cupboard and then hunt for a Bible word to decorate it. She reserved the Body of the Lord for the dying, and only later built a house around that reserve. The house came after the need. The need was a person who could not come to Mass and must not be left without food for the journey.

This little book is not a campaign about where the box should stand, and it is not a catalogue of bronze. It walks through what the Church actually did with the reserved Eucharist: bread carried home for the sick, a golden dove hanging on a chain, a cupboard cut into a wall, a lamp that is not interior design, a veil that is never black, and one night of the year when the door stands open and the light goes out.

Read it if you have bowed toward that door for forty years and could not quite say why it is a door. Read it if you have only ever heard it called a box and suspected there was more. The more is not gold. The more is a tent the Church declined to take down when the meal was over.

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Chapter 1

Not a Safe, and Not a Showcase



A safe exists to keep thieves out. A showcase exists to let eyes in. The tabernacle is asked to do something else, which is why both comparisons always feel slightly wrong. It must be solid, locked and opaque. Canon law is blunt about that. The vessel is not to be glass. The door is not to be a window with a Host arranged for viewing. Reservation is not exposition. Exposition has its own furniture, the monstrance, and its own hours. The tabernacle's work is quieter. Someone is at home. The house is not empty. That is enough.

People who dislike the reserved Sacrament often dislike it as magic: a God trapped in a cupboard. People who love it too quickly sometimes treat it as a lamp they own, a comfort they can switch on. The Church's sentence is less useful to both sides. Christ remains under the appearance of bread because He gave Himself as food, and food can be kept for the person who could not be at the table. The first reason for a tabernacle was never a holy hour. It was viaticum: food for the road, given to the dying. Everything else grew from that mercy.

St Paul already speaks of the Eucharist with a realism that will not let us treat it as a symbol we manage. The cup of blessing is a communion in the Blood of Christ. The bread we break is a communion in His Body. That is why the Church will not leave the remaining hosts as leftovers. If this is what we say at the altar, then what remains after Mass is not a problem of storage. It is the same Lord.

This is why the door has a key, and why the key is not a souvenir. A child may be told, without embarrassment, that the small house is locked because what is inside is not ours to rearrange. The same child can be

told that the lock is not fear of God escaping. God is not a prisoner. The lock is courtesy toward a Presence that does not need our supervision and will not be treated as a display.

The next time you walk in, do not begin with the metalwork. Begin with this. Could a stranger tell, looking at that object, that someone is being kept for the sick and for prayer, and not merely stored? And could the same stranger tell that the people who pass it are not owners of a treasure, but guests in a house that was already occupied when they arrived? Both questions belong. The Church has spent a long time trying to keep them both awake on the same small door.

Reflection

Catholics protect the Eucharist because it does not belong to us. That sentence is easy to say and hard to live.

We receive Christ. We do not own Christ. The difference matters. Religious people can begin to behave as owners of holy things. We speak of our church, our sanctuary, our tabernacle, as if the Presence inside were a parish possession we manage well.

A safe is something we own and lock against other people. A showcase is something we own and display to other people. The tabernacle is neither, because the One inside is not a possession. He gave Himself. The Church only keeps what He first placed in her hands.

That is why reverence and humility belong together here. Reverence without humility can become pride in the furniture. Humility without reverence can become casualness dressed up as warmth. The small door asks for both.

If you have ever walked past it as if it were a box you had already understood, you are not unusual. Most of us do. The conversion this chapter asks for is not a new theory. It is a slower step the next time you enter, and the honest admission that the house was occupied before you arrived.

A Short Prayer

Lord who gave Yourself as food, keep us from treating the small door as a safe we boast about or a case we stare into. Teach us to receive You, not to own You. Amen.

Chapter 2

A Tent in the Wilderness



When the Book of Exodus speaks of the tabernacle, it is not giving later sacristans a design brief. It is describing a portable dwelling in which the God of Israel agreed to travel with a people who could not yet stay still. A tent, not a temple. Curtains, poles, a lamp that was not to go out. In Exodus 25 God says, “Let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst.” The Holy of Holies was a room inside a room, and even Moses did not stroll in as if the furniture were his. The point was presence, and the discipline that presence required.

There was also bread in that first sanctuary. Leviticus speaks of the Bread of the Presence, set before the Lord continually. Exodus tells Israel to keep a lamp burning before Him from evening to morning. These things are not the Catholic tabernacle in advance. They are older signs of a God who is willing to be sought in a particular place. Later Christian faith saw them fulfilled, not copied, in Christ.

John’s Gospel takes the image further. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” The Greek verb carries the idea of pitching a tent. If the Word has tabernacled among us in flesh, then a Church that keeps His Body after Mass is not inventing a new religion. She is refusing to pack the tent away when the assembly has gone home. The meal ends, but the Guest is still willing to remain.

There is a danger in the comparison, and the Church has usually seen it. The old tent held a presence that was not yet the Incarnation. The new tabernacle holds the same Lord who sat at a table and was nailed to a hill. We do not climb toward a cloud. We kneel toward bread that has ceased to be only bread. The wilderness image helps, so long as we do

not force it. It simply teaches that God is willing to be found in a place small enough to lock. That still startles anyone who would rather keep God safely large.

Stand in an empty church on a Tuesday afternoon and the old word becomes almost practical. The building is a larger tent. The tabernacle is the smaller one inside it. The lamp is the sign that the smaller tent has not been folded. You do not need a vision. You need only to notice that the Church declined, at some point in her history, to send Him home with the congregation. She kept a room. She left a light.

Reflection

God did not wait for Israel to reach the Promised Land before dwelling among them. That is one of the most surprising sentences in Exodus, once you let it settle.

The people were still travelling. They were still complaining. They were still unfinished. And God said, make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst. God came to dwell with them before they had arrived.

Christ does not wait until our lives are settled before remaining with us either. The tabernacle is not a prize for a tidy parish. It is an address among people who are still on the way.

That can be a comfort, and it can be an examination. If God is willing to stay with unfinished people, then unfinished people have no excuse for treating Him as a visitor who should only be allowed in when the house looks presentable.

There is something deeply Catholic here. God chooses a place. He does not remain a vague idea. The Word pitches a tent. The Church keeps a room. Our faith is not less spiritual because it has an address. It is more demanding, because an address can be ignored as well as honoured.

A Short Prayer

Word who pitched Your tent among us, do not let us fold the small house when the singing stops. Stay with us while we are still travelling. Amen.

Chapter 3

Bread Taken Home for the Dying



The oldest reason for reserving the Eucharist is written into a council most Catholics could not date. The bishops at Nicaea in 325, in their thirteenth canon, said that the ancient rule must stand. No one on the point of death is to be deprived of the last and most necessary viaticum. The word means provisions for a journey. The dying were not to be left without the Food the living had received at the table.

How the bread was kept in those first centuries would surprise a modern sacristan. It was often taken home. Eusebius copies a letter of Dionysius of Alexandria in which a dying man named Serapion sends a boy by night to a sick priest. The priest cannot walk, so he gives the child a portion of the Eucharist to carry. A century earlier, Justin Martyr already assumed that deacons took the sacrament to those who were absent from the Sunday assembly. The reserve was not first a shrine. It was a mercy that could travel.

Houses, then sacristies, then a chest near the altar: the address changed as the Church came out of hiding, and as theft and carelessness became easier to imagine. By later centuries in the West, keeping the Sacrament in private homes had largely faded. What did not fade was the original sentence. Reservation exists first so that a priest can leave the church at two in the morning with a pyx in his coat and find a person who will not see another sunrise.

Adoration grew later, and it grew honestly, from the same faith. It did not replace the sick-call. It surrounded it. St Cyril of Jerusalem taught his hearers to receive the Body of Christ with care that would have made a later sacristan nod. St Ambrose and St Augustine speak of the

Eucharist as the Lord Himself, not as a token. When the Church later built a locked house for what remained, she was not becoming more pious than the apostles. She was trying to keep the same realism from being lost.

If your parish tabernacle is opened more often for a holy hour than for a journey to a hospital, that is not a corruption. It may even be a grace. It becomes a problem only when the original errand is forgotten, when no one can remember that the small door was first a larder for people who could no longer come to the table. The Church is at her most herself when the key turns for both reasons in the same week.

Reflection

The tabernacle did not begin because Christians wanted something beautiful to look at. It began because someone was missing from the table.

Someone was ill. Someone was dying. Someone could not come. The Church kept the Eucharist because she remembered the absent person. That is a much more demanding origin than we usually admit.

A parish can become absorbed in its sanctuary and forget the Catholic lying alone in hospital. The lamp can burn beautifully while nobody has been near a bedside all week. The small door was never meant to keep Christ only for those who can still walk in.

Viaticum means food for the road. The last road is not a metaphor. It is a corridor, a ward, a room that smells of medicine, a person who may no longer be able to speak. The Church takes Christ there because He first gave Himself as food, and because the dying are still members of the Body.

If you wonder what the tabernacle is for, follow the pyx. The little door eventually becomes a pocket and a journey. That is not a lesser use of the reserved Sacrament. It is the first use. Everything else, including our quiet sitting before the lamp, grows from that mercy and should lead back toward it.

A Short Prayer

Food of the last road, go with those who cannot come to the table. Keep the key from becoming only a ceremony. Amen.

Chapter 4

A Dove on a Chain



Before the tabernacle looked like a small house, it often looked like a bird. In many medieval churches of France and England the reserved Sacrament hung above the altar in a vessel shaped as a dove, a *columba*, suspended by a chain from the canopy. The Host sat inside the hollow body. A veil often wrapped the whole thing. To bring the Sacrament down, someone lowered the chain. The arrangement now sounds unsafe, and in some places it was. It was also a theology you could see without a lecture. The Spirit who overshadowed the bread at the altar had not left the bread when the Mass ended.

The idea is older than the Gothic nave. The *Liber Pontificalis* records gifts of towers and golden doves to the great Roman basilicas as early as the fourth and fifth centuries. Constantine is said to have given Saint Peter's a tower and a dove of gold. That book is not a modern archive. Some of its gift-lists are later tradition. What they still show is that Christians were already unwilling to leave the reserved Bread in an ordinary box under a bench.

Limoges enamel doves from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries survive in museums, which is a mixed blessing. They are beautiful, and they are no longer working. A few communities have revived the hanging pyx with care. Quarr Abbey on the Isle of Wight is one name often mentioned, and Hauterive in Switzerland another. The revival is not a demand that every parish put a bird over the stone. It is a reminder that the locked cupboard on the reredos is only one later form of a much older practice.

Italy often preferred the wall. Germany built sacrament-houses that rose like stone towers toward the vault. France kept the dove longer than most. There was no single Catholic shape. There was one Catholic refusal. After the blessing, the Bread was not to be treated as leftover. Whether it hung, stood, or hid in a wall, it was kept as if Someone had declined to go.

Reflection

A medieval Catholic may have looked up. We may look toward a wall. The furniture changed. Christ did not.

That is one of the quiet lessons of Tradition, and it is easy to get wrong. Tradition is not the duty to keep every piece of old furniture. It is the duty to hand on what the furniture was trying to protect.

The dove on a chain can look strange to us. A wall cupboard can look primitive. A bronze box on a reredos can look inevitable, until you learn that it is only one settlement among several. If we fall in love with the shape, we may forget the Guest. If we despise the older shapes, we may forget that our grandparents were not waiting for us to invent reverence.

Forms change because churches change, thieves change, and the way a people prays changes. Faith remains if the Church is still doing the same thing: keeping the Body of the Lord with honour, for the dying and for prayer.

When you see an old dove in a museum case, do not only admire the enamel. Ask why it is in a museum at all. Something that was meant to hang above an altar has become an object under glass. The Church's work is to make sure that does not happen to the faith itself.

A Short Prayer

Spirit who once appeared as a dove, teach us to see every hanging chain and every small door as a refusal to treat You as leftover. Amen.

Chapter 5

The Cupboard in the Wall



Walk the north wall of an old English chancel and you may find a scar: a shallow niche, sometimes with the hinge-marks of a door that is no longer there. That was an aumbry, a cupboard cut into the stone, and in many churches it was where the Sacrament lived. The same word served for the cupboard that held the holy oils. Context told you which. A lamp nearby, or the memory of one, told you more.

On the continent the cupboard grew ambitious. German sacrament-houses of the late Middle Ages could stand free of the wall and climb, carved and pinnacled, almost to the roof. They were tabernacles that had decided to become architecture. Pilgrims could see from the nave that the church had a second tower inside it, and that this tower was not for bells. In 1863 the Sacred Congregation of Rites asked most places to give these towers up in favour of a tabernacle on or near the altar. Security and a more uniform custom won. Something visually astonishing left the room.

The Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 had not drawn a picture. It had only required that the reserved Eucharist be kept under lock, honourably and safely. Bishops then spent centuries arguing about what “honourably” looked like. Exeter’s Bishop Quivil, at the end of the thirteenth century, already wanted a fixed, locked tabernacle rather than a hanging vessel. Charles Borromeo in Milan, following Gian Matteo Giberti of Verona, wanted the tabernacle set well and firmly on the main altar, so that sacrilegious hands could not carry the whole house away.

A visitor who only knows the later box on a reredos is not looking at “the traditional tabernacle.” He is looking at one hard-won settlement.

The wall cupboard, the hanging dove, the sacrament-house, the iron safe: each was an attempt to keep the same Guest from being lost, stolen, or treated as ordinary bread. That variety is not chaos. It is more like a long family argument about how to receive a Guest properly.

Reflection

An empty aumbry can preach. That is an odd thing to say about a hole in a wall, but it is true.

Something was taken. The hinges remain. The niche remains. People still walk past it, sometimes without knowing what they are looking at. Physical removal does not always remove memory. In some English churches the scar is all that is left of a Presence that once had an address in that stone.

Places where Catholic worship disappeared and later returned know this in another way. A building can be used for something else and still keep the shape of what it was. Restoration, when it comes, is never only a matter of putting a new door on an old cupboard. It is the slower work of teaching a people again that Someone may live there.

Do not romanticise the scar. Empty niches are not automatically holy. Some are only damage. But they can remind us that reverence is fragile. What one generation cuts into stone, another can tear off. What one generation treats as obvious, another can forget.

If your own church still has a working door and a living lamp, that is not an achievement you invented. It is an inheritance that survived. The proper response is not superiority over the past. It is care in the present.

A Short Prayer

Lord of every wall-cupboard and every tower, forgive the centuries that tore the doors off, and bless the plain locks that still do their quiet work. Amen.

Chapter 6

Why the Door Has a Key



Present law is almost severe in its plainness. There is ordinarily to be only one tabernacle in a church. It is to be immovable. It is to be of solid and inviolable material that is not transparent. It is to be locked so that profanation is prevented as far as possible. Before it is used, it is fitting that it be blessed. Inside, the older manuals wanted gilt or white silk, and a corporal for the ciborium to stand on. Outside, a veil — the *conopaeum* — was the classic sign that the house was occupied.

The key is not a metaphor. It is kept by the one who has charge of the church, which in practice means the priest or the person he trusts. A tabernacle left open “because we are a welcoming community” is not a warmer theology. It is a failure of the first job the reserve ever had: to be there, unharmed, when a dying person needs it at an hour no committee sits. Welcome is a way of speaking. Looking after the reserved Sacrament is a duty.

Opacity matters more than people think. A glass tabernacle turns reservation into a permanent exposition and turns the Host into an object under glass, which is precisely what the Church has tried not to do. The door is a door because a door can be shut. Behind it, the same Lord is present as at the moment of Communion. The closed door is not distance. It is rest. In this sacrament God is allowed a room that does not have to be on display.

Theft is not a medieval scare. Churches are still broken into. Hosts are still taken for reasons that range from muddled devotion to open hatred. The lock will not convert the thief. It will make the theft a crime instead of an accident, and it will tell the congregation that what they bow to is

not a mood they share but a Presence they do not own. That is a great deal of teaching for one small piece of metal.

Reflection

A key means that not everything holy must always be accessible on my terms. Modern life assumes the opposite. If a thing matters, it should open at once. If it does not open, we call it unfriendly.

A locked tabernacle quietly contradicts us. It does not say that God is unwilling. It says that God is not a facility. You cannot treat the reserved Sacrament as a tap you turn when you feel spiritual.

This is practical, not mystical for its own sake. The priest who holds the key is not collecting a badge. He is responsible for a Presence that other people will need at two in the morning. The lock protects the sick as much as it protects the Host.

There is also a lesson for the rest of us. We do not have a right to rearrange holy things because we find them inconvenient. Some doors remain closed until the proper person opens them. That can feel offensive in a culture of immediate access. It may also be one of the last remaining signs that the sacred is not ours to manage.

If the key irritates you, ask why. Sometimes the irritation is only impatience. Sometimes it is the older wish to be in charge of God.

A Short Prayer

Keeper of the keys of death and of the house, teach those who hold this small key to carry it as a burden and not as a badge. Amen.

Chapter 7

A Lamp That Does Not Sleep



The General Instruction of the Roman Missal still wants a special lamp, fed by oil or wax, to shine continually near the tabernacle as a sign of honour to Christ. Electric bulbs have crept in, as they creep into everything, and a parish can argue about whether a filament counts. The argument is less interesting than the habit. Someone is supposed to notice when the flame has died and do something about it. A light that no one tends is not a sign. It is a prop.

Exodus already knew a lamp that had to be kept burning before the Lord from evening to morning. The Christian sanctuary lamp is not that lamp continued by a secret pipeline. It is a later sign with an older instinct: presence should not be left unmarked, and the mark should cost somebody a little attention.

The old custom preferred an odd number of lamps in greater churches — one, three, five — hanging in a line. The number was courtesy, not arithmetic. What mattered was that the light was a flame, that it consumed something, that it could go out. A flame is a poor servant. It asks to be fed. That is why it is a good servant of this mystery. The Presence does not need oil. The people need a reminder that they do.

On Good Friday, after the Communion of the Passion liturgy, the reserved Sacrament is taken to a place less public, and the main tabernacle stands empty. The door is left open. The lamp is put out. Visitors who walk in by chance sometimes think the church has been burgled. They are not entirely wrong. The emptiness is deliberate. For a few hours the building tells the truth of a death. Then, sometime in the

night that ends in fire and water and a sung Alleluia, the Lord is back in the small house and the flame is lit again. The relighting is one of the quietest joys of the year, and most of us miss it because we are already thinking about lunch.

If you have charge of a lamp, treat the oil as a duty you have to keep. If you do not, glance at the flame when you come in. A dead lamp in a church that still has the Sacrament is a small lie the building is telling. A living lamp in a church whose people have stopped noticing is a small truth the building is telling without them. Either way, the flame is not decoration. It is a watch that does not get to sit down.

Reflection

Somebody has to notice when the lamp needs oil. That sounds like a small remark about parish rotas. It is actually a picture of how much Catholic faith survives.

Someone washes the linen. Someone unlocks the church. Someone visits the sick. Someone replaces the candle. Someone prepares the altar when nobody thanks them. A great deal of holiness, in a parish, is simply keeping things going.

We prefer more visible work. We prefer the moment that feels like a feast. The lamp does not offer that. It only burns, or it does not. If it does not, the building begins to lie. If it does, almost nobody comments.

This is close to the hidden life of Christ in the tabernacle itself. He remains when the crowd has gone. He remains when the music has stopped. The person who fills the lamp is doing something that matches that hiddenness. They are keeping a sign alight for a Presence that does not advertise.

If your name never appears in the newsletter and you are the one who notices the flame, do not despise that work. Much of the Church continues because somebody notices. Heaven may remember the oil as carefully as the speeches.

A Short Prayer

Light of the world, keep the small flame honest, and keep us from calling a dead bulb a tradition. Teach us the holiness of noticing. Amen.

Chapter 8

The Cloth That Is Not Black



The veil that covers a tabernacle has a name most parishioners have never been told: *conopaeum*, a canopy, a little tent over the tent. In the older Roman practice it was not optional decoration. It was the ordinary public sign that the Blessed Sacrament was within. The door might be handsome. The veil still went over it. A tabernacle without a veil, in that language, looked underdressed, as an altar without cloth looks underdressed.

Colour followed the day, or stayed white. It was never black. Even at a funeral the veil went violet if it changed at all. Black is the colour of a death with no immediate next word. The reserved Eucharist is already the next word. To wrap the small house in funeral black would be to dress the living Lord as if the story had ended. The Church declined. Violet can mourn. Black, on that particular door, may not.

Many modern tabernacles stand unveiled, their bronze or wood doing the talking. Law now allows another suitable way of indicating the Presence, and the lamp often carries that duty alone. The loss is not heresy. It is a thinning. A cloth that comes off when the house is empty and goes back when the Lord returns is a catechism a child can read without a leaflet. Parishes that recovered the veil after years without it often report a change that has nothing to do with taste. The door looks inhabited again.

Inside, unseen, another cloth works. The ciborium stands on a corporal, as it does on the altar. Fragments are not an afterthought here either. The inner lining, gilt or white silk, is not luxury for its own sake. It is the old refusal to let the Body rest against raw wood or bare iron.

What you cannot see is still a form of speech. The house is finished on the side that faces Him, not only on the side that faces us.

Reflection

The Church teaches through things people hardly notice. Colour. Cloth. Gesture. Light. Silence. A child can understand that something has changed before understanding the theological vocabulary.

That is why liturgical signs matter. They are not extras added for people who like decoration. They are how a bodily religion speaks to bodily people. We kneel. We cover. We uncover. We light. We put out. The faith is not less true because it uses cloth.

But signs must serve reality. A veil that nobody understands, and that nobody bothers to change when the house is empty, has become costume. A parish that argues for a year about fabric and never takes Communion to the sick has forgotten what the cloth is for.

The ban on black at the tabernacle is a small, exact sentence. The Church will mourn. She will not dress the reserved Lord as if He were only a memory. Even our textiles are asked to tell the truth about Easter. Notice one thing this week that you usually walk past: the veil, or the lack of one, or the corporal you never see. Ask what it is trying to say. Then ask whether the rest of the parish's life agrees with it.

A Short Prayer

Lord who was wrapped in linen and is wrapped still, let every veil on a small door tell the truth about who is at home. Amen.

Chapter 9

Thursday Night, Friday Empty



Holy Thursday evening is the one night of the year when the tabernacle's whole history walks through the building in public. After the Mass of the Lord's Supper the Blessed Sacrament is carried to an altar of repose, often a side chapel dressed with flowers and light, and left there for a while so that people may watch. The main tabernacle is emptied. The watch is not a new devotion invented to fill an awkward gap. It is the Church taking the garden of Gethsemane seriously enough to stay awake for an hour.

The procession itself is simple and strangely moving even in a poor parish. A humeral veil is put over the priest's shoulders so that his hands do not touch the vessel as if it were his. A canopy may go above. The people follow, or kneel as it passes. Then the door of the place of repose is closed, and the lamp burns there instead. The rest of the church is stripped. The contrast is the point. One small room is full. The rest of the house has been told that the Bridegroom has been taken.

Good Friday continues the sentence. Communion is given from what was consecrated the night before. No Mass is celebrated. After the liturgy the Sacrament that remains is taken to a less conspicuous, locked place, often a cupboard in the sacristy, so that viaticum can still be carried if someone is dying. The public tabernacle stays open and dark. Medieval England had its own version of this drama in the Easter sepulchre: a niche or chest in which the Sacrament, and sometimes a crucifix, was laid until before dawn on Sunday. Later piety sometimes confused the furniture. The instinct was sound. The Lord who was laid in a tomb is the Lord who is laid in the small house all year.

If you can, visit a church in the middle of Good Friday afternoon. The open door will teach you more about the tabernacle than a dozen leaflets. You will see what the lamp was for, because it is not there. You will see what the veil was for, because it is not there. You will understand, without a sermon, that the little house is not a permanent ornament. It is a room that can be emptied, and the emptying is part of its truth.

Reflection

We often notice a person only when their chair is empty. Absence teaches us what presence meant.

Good Friday does that with the tabernacle. The door we pass all year without thinking is suddenly open. The flame is gone. Visitors can think the church has been robbed. In a way they have understood something. The One who was usually there is not there in the usual place.

This is not a game the Church plays with furniture. It is a way of letting the Triduum reach the body. On Thursday we stay. On Friday the public house is empty. On Saturday night the light returns. The same Lord is followed through supper, death and rising, not only in readings but in rooms.

If you find the empty tabernacle more moving than the full one, that is not a failure. It may mean you have been walking past presence for eleven months. The emptiness has finally made you look.

Carry that look back into ordinary time. The point of Friday's open door is not to make Holy Week dramatic. It is to teach us what we have been given on every other day, when the door is shut and the lamp is lit and nobody is making a speech about it.

A Short Prayer

Lord of Thursday night and of Friday's open door, teach us to watch when the house is full, and not to panic when, for a few hours, it is not. Amen.

Chapter 10

Where Should the Tent Stand?



No sentence in this little book has caused more parish meetings than the question of place. Should the tabernacle stand on the old high altar? Should it have a chapel of its own? Should it be in the sanctuary but to the side, so that the altar of celebration can be walked around? The Missal and the Code of Canon Law refuse to pick a single piece of furniture for every building. They pick a set of conditions. The place must be truly noble, prominent, readily visible, worthily decorated, and suitable for prayer.

The present General Instruction adds a preference that is often misread as a ban. It is more appropriate, as a sign, that the altar on which Mass is celebrated should not have the tabernacle on it. The two mysteries are both Eucharistic and they are not the same sentence. One is the Lord being offered now. The other is the Lord remaining. Putting both on one stone can make the remaining look like a centrepiece and the offering look like a performance in front of a cupboard. Separating them can make the remaining look like an afterthought in a corridor. Both mistakes have been made with confidence.

A chapel of reservation, organically joined to the church and easy to find, is one honourable answer. A tabernacle on the old high altar, no longer used for the Mass, is another. A place in the sanctuary, apart from the table of celebration, is a third. What the law will not bless is hiding. A Sacrament put behind a screen because the room is used for concerts, or tucked where only the cleaners pass, has lost the word “conspicuous.” Prominence is not the same as blocking the priest’s movement. It is the opposite of being embarrassed.

Arguments about place are rarely only about place. They are about whether a parish still believes that someone is there when the singing stops. A community that cannot bear a tabernacle in sight will not be healed by a better drawing. A community that treats the small door as the only holy object in the building, and the altar as a handy shelf in front of it, has the opposite fever. The cure for both is the same. Remember that the tent stayed so that the sick could be fed and so that the rest of us would have a room in which to be quiet. Furniture after that is obedience, not victory.

Reflection

Catholics can spend enormous energy arguing about where Christ's tabernacle should stand, and very little time standing before the Lord who is within it.

That is an uncomfortable sentence. It is also, in some parishes, an accurate one. Correct liturgy matters. Church law matters. Architecture matters. Winning an argument about location is not the same thing as adoring Christ.

The law is often more patient than our parish meetings. It allows more than one honourable arrangement, provided the place is noble, visible and fit for prayer. That patience should humble both sides. The older high altar is not automatically more faithful. The side chapel is not automatically a betrayal. Hiding is the real failure.

If you care about this question, good. Care enough to pray in the place you are defending. Care enough to visit the sick who receive from it. Care enough to teach a child why the lamp is burning, wherever it hangs. Place should serve presence. When place becomes the whole conversation, we have already postponed the more important thing.

A Short Prayer

Lord of the chapel and of the high altar, settle our arguments about place by settling us in front of You, wherever the Church has allowed the tent to stand. Amen.

Chapter 11

What Happens When the Door Is Forced



English parish churches still show the wounds. Aumbries with the doors wrenched off. Niches empty since the sixteenth century. A visitor at Ely can still be shown a small wall-tabernacle bound up with later memory of viaticum and of hands that took the Lord away. Not every local story can be pinned to a date. The emptiness itself is evidence enough. Magdalene's sentence still fits: they have taken the Lord, and we do not know where they have laid Him.

Other centuries have forced other doors. Soldiers have stabled horses in naves and used sacred vessels as cups. In more ordinary towns, thieves have taken the metal and left the Hosts on the floor, or taken the Hosts for reasons no parish wants to write down. The Church's response is not only a police report. There is a rite for reconciling a violated church, because the building itself has been treated as if no one lived there.

Saints gather around this particular grief. Tarcisius, a Roman boy of the third century according to the old Roman tradition, was beaten to death on the road rather than give up the Eucharist he was carrying to prisoners. The details of his age and death come to us through later telling, but the Church has kept his name because the instinct is true. Paschal Baylon, a Franciscan lay brother of the sixteenth century, became the friend of every later parish that keeps a holy hour. Peter Julian Eymard, in the nineteenth, founded a family of religious whose whole work is to watch the small door as if it were the heart of the city. None of them made the tabernacle into a fortress. They made their lives into a kind of veil.

If your own church has never been broken into, that is not because the world has grown kind. It is a mercy you did not earn. The proper thanksgiving is not only a better alarm, though alarms have their place. It is a congregation that still knows how to genuflect when no one is watching, and a priest who still takes the pyx into the night. Doors are forced. The answer to a forced door is not a theory. It is another journey to a bedside, made the same week.

Reflection

Sacrilege is real. So is panic. They are not the same thing, and panic is not the Catholic answer.

When a door is forced, anger comes quickly. It should. The Eucharist is not a biscuit that can be treated as loot. But the deepest repair is not a louder alarm. It is renewed reverence among the people who still have a working door.

St Tarcisus is remembered not because he built a better safe. He is remembered because he loved what he was carrying more than he loved getting home unhurt. The opposite of sacrilege is not merely better security. It is love.

A parish that talks only of CCTV after a theft has understood the crime and missed the wound. A parish that only feels sentimental and never locks the door has understood the love and missed the duty. Both halves belong.

If your church is still intact, do not congratulate the neighbourhood. Use the peace. Visit. Genuflect. Let the priest go out at night with the pyx. The best answer to a forced door somewhere else is fidelity here.

A Short Prayer

Lord who was taken in a garden and is still taken by thieves, stay with the churches whose doors have been forced, and stay with the ones that have not. Amen.

Chapter 12

Living as If Someone Is Home



You cannot bless the tabernacle in your parish. That work belongs to the rite and to the man who has the key. You can decide whether you will treat the small door as a piece of furniture you have already understood. A genuflection that reaches the floor is one language. A slower walk when you have to pass close is another. Teaching a child not to use the step as a shelf for a hymn book is a third. None of these gestures save you. All of them admit that the house is occupied.

Matthew ends his Gospel with a promise that must not be narrowed into a slogan about reservation: "I am with you always, to the close of the age." That promise is larger than a tabernacle. It is the whole life of the Church. The reserved Sacrament is one of the most concrete ways Catholics have believed it. Christ remains. Not only as a memory. Not only as a feeling after a good Mass. He remains.

If you serve at Mass, learn when the tabernacle is opened and why. Do not treat the door as a cupboard for spare hosts you rummage through. Do not leave it standing open for convenience. The rite has moments when the door should be shut, even during Mass, so that the altar can be the altar and the reserve can be the reserve. These are small refusals. They train the body in a doctrine the tongue can recite without noticing.

If you sit in the nave, glance at the lamp. Notice whether a veil is there. Notice, in Holy Week, the shock of the open door. Remember that someone in your town will receive from that house before they die, and that this is why the house was built. Remember that the same Lord is content to stay in a room the size of a cupboard so that a church the

size of a barn will not be empty on a Tuesday.

The tabernacle will still be there on the Monday morning when no one is singing. That is its most Catholic hour. A shrine that only exists when the community feels gathered is a shrine the community owns. A small door that waits in an empty church is a door that has a claim on the community. The difference is the whole of this little book. We did not put God in a box. We discovered that He was willing to remain in one, and that the willingness was for us.

Reflection

What would actually change if I believed, every time I entered an empty Catholic church, that He is here?

Would I hurry differently? Would silence feel different? Would loneliness feel different? Would Tuesday afternoon feel different?

The tabernacle is most extraordinary when nothing extraordinary is happening. That may be the last thing this book needs to say. We are trained to notice presence when there is music, a crowd, a feast. The reserved Sacrament trains us to notice presence when there is none of that.

This is not a demand that you spend hours in church if your life will not allow it. It is a demand that the minutes you do have should be truthful. Walk in as a guest. Leave as a guest. Do not use the step as a shelf. Do not talk across the door as if the room were empty. If you can, stay long enough for the fact to become more than a fact.

Then go home. The point of knowing that Someone is home in the church is not to live in the church. It is to live the rest of the week as a person who has an address for God, and who has been given food for the road when the last journey comes.

A Short Prayer

Lord of the empty church and of the crowded one, keep us from owning the small door, and let the One who stays behind it go on quietly owning us.

Amen.

A Last Word



A tent in the wilderness. Bread carried through a dark street for a dying man. A golden dove on a chain. A cupboard cut into an English wall. A key that is not a souvenir. A lamp that can go out. A veil that may be violet but may not be black. A Thursday procession. A Friday door left open. A scar where the hinges were.

That is enough of the tabernacle for one sitting. The rest is in the law that still wants one house, solid and locked, and in the quiet competence of the person who fills the lamp before we arrive.

If these pages have done their work, you will walk into your parish church in a few days, see the small door and the flame, and realise that you have passed them hundreds of times without quite seeing what they were saying.

May every parish keep a door that can be shut without shame and opened without drama. May the dying still be fed from it. May the flame be a flame. And may we walk past the small house as if someone were home, because Someone is.

St Tarcisius, pray for us. St Paschal Baylon, pray for us. St Peter Julian Eymard, pray for us.

Sources and Further Reading

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Holy Scripture, especially Exodus 25:8; Exodus 27:20–21; Leviticus 24:1–9; John 1:14; John 6; Matthew 26:26–28; Matthew 28:20; Luke 24:28–35; 1 Corinthians 10:16–17 and 11:23–29. Biblical wording in this booklet follows the Revised Standard Version, Second Catholic Edition, or is closely paraphrased with the reference given in the text.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1322–1419 on the Eucharist, 1373–1381 on the Real Presence and reservation, 1378 on worship of the Eucharist, and 1517 on Viaticum.

Code of Canon Law, canons 934–944, especially 938 on the single, immovable, solid, locked tabernacle. General Instruction of the Roman Missal, 314–317 on the place of reservation and the sanctuary lamp.

First Council of Nicaea (325), canon 13, on Viaticum. St Justin Martyr, First Apology 65–67, on deacons taking the Eucharist to the absent. Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 6.44, for the letter of Dionysius of Alexandria concerning Serapion. Fourth Lateran Council (1215), constitution 20, on keeping the reserved Eucharist locked and secure.

On hanging pyxes, Eucharistic doves, aumbries and sacrament-houses, see the standard liturgical histories. The gift-lists of the *Liber Pontificalis* for Constantine should be read as later tradition rather than as a modern inventory. The 1863 instruction of the Sacred Congregation of Rites belongs to the later Roman preference for a tabernacle on or near the altar.

On Holy Thursday and Good Friday reservation, see the current Roman Missal for the Sacred Paschal Triduum. On St Tarcisus, the Roman liturgical tradition and later hagiography; the earliest details are not a modern case-file. On St Paschal Baylon and St Peter Julian Eymard, their lives and the later Eucharistic apostolates associated with them.

If these little books are to remain



This little book has been about a Presence that remained when everyone else had gone home. I hope the Little Treasures can remain available too — freely, quietly, for whoever happens to find them.

I choose to offer them that way because I want anyone to be able to read them. Free to read is not the same as free to make. Each booklet takes research, books, the checking of Scripture and Catholic teaching, writing, rewriting, design, a website, and above all time.

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If giving is not possible, please do not feel uncomfortable. Read it. Share it with somebody who may enjoy it. Remember the work in your prayers. That too helps these little books travel further than I can.

Thank you for letting this one stay with you for a while.

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