

**Reverencing the Tabernacle and the Altar  
(Before, During and After Mass)  
modification to EMHC position, and  
discontinuance of walking behind the Altar**



***Key Terms Associated with Catholic Liturgy***

- Eucharist:** The true presence of Christ in the form of his Body and Blood. During the Divine Liturgy of the Mass, bread and wine are transubstantiated by God into the very Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. Any excess of consecrated species (after the distribution of Holy Communion) remain sacred and are reserved in the Tabernacle.
- Tabernacle:** The locked, sacred container located within the Sanctuary, in which the Blessed Sacrament (Body of Christ) is reserved (for later distribution to the sick, etc.).  
(NB: Every Roman Catholic Church has a tabernacle with a vigil candle lit near or above it within the designated Worship Space. Only after the Holy Thursday liturgy (i.e., on Good Friday), is the main tabernacle found empty – while the Blessed Sacrament still remains in the Church – in an alternate tabernacle of repose.)
- Sacristy:** Rooms (located outside the sanctuary) where the clergy prepare and vest themselves in the appropriate liturgical garment(s) and where the appointed sacristan prepares the sanctuary area for scheduled liturgical celebrations (with books, vessels, etc.).
- Altar:** A solid wood or stone surface upon which the gifts of bread and wine are offered to God, prayers are proffered over the sacrifice, and the bread and wine are (by the power and action of the Holy Spirit) transubstantiated into the very Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ—never to be mere bread and wine again!
- Sanctuary:** Often referred to as the elevated “Altar area”, the Sanctuary is the proper name of the sacred area, which includes the Altar, Ambo (from where the Sacred Scriptures are read and the homily may be given), and the Presider/Deacon chairs.
- Nave:** The interior worship space of the church; where the Christian faithful prayerfully gather to pray, offer glory and praise to God, etc.
- Narthex:** The general/main entrance area or space of the church; between the exterior, entry doors and the Nave. Conversations, talking, etc., are restricted to this area please.
- Genuflection:** The act of bending at least one knee (normally the right) to the ground or floor as a gesture of deep reverence or respect toward God.

Whenever we are in the church’s worship space, we are in a ***holy place*** and walking upon holy ground. We are called to be especially cognizant that the church is a house of worship and prayer to God. Therefore, please respect those who are in silent prayer; refrain from eating or drinking in the church; talking or texting on cell phones; or using other electronic devices. We are also asked to dress appropriately to come into God’s House and to stand in the Presence of God.

**What is the proper manner to reverence the tabernacle and/or the altar when I enter the church?**

It is always appropriate to make a gesture of adoration to both the altar and the tabernacle; whenever they are not co-located in the sanctuary together. If the tabernacle is situated along with the altar in the sanctuary, it is ***not*** necessary to make two separate acts of reverence. (During Mass: reverence the altar. Outside of Mass: reverence the tabernacle (explained further below).)

## **I am serving at Mass in some liturgical role (altar server, cantor, reader, etc.). What do I do?**

Please remember that the sanctuary area is a holy place (akin to the Holy of Holies in the Temple mentioned in the sacred scriptures). Foot traffic is restricted in the space or area behind the altar and in front of the clergy chairs. Necessary traversing traffic (i.e., from the sacristy to the ambo or to the vigil candle stands; etc.) needs to be via the front of the altar.

Effective May 5, 2018: Parish mandated EMHCs will stand in line on the Ambo side of the sanctuary (not behind the altar) to receive Holy Communion and their respective communion vessels. Likewise, after distribution of Communion is completed, chalices will be returned to the credence table via the front of the altar (i.e., no longer walking behind the altar).

## **What about during Mass?**

The *General Instruction on the Roman Missal* (GIRM), which outlines liturgical instructions for the Mass liturgy, states that genuflections to the tabernacle ought not to take place during Mass. Why? The presence of the tabernacle, (while still sacred and important) is not our primary focus. Our primary focus is instead placed on the sacred altar (e.g., upon which the Eucharistic sacrifice occurs right before us). It is therefore, to the altar that we bow before entering the Sanctuary (during the Mass).

## **Do I have to bow or genuflect every time I pass by or in front of the altar or tabernacle?**

Before and after Mass, it is appropriate to genuflect only when you enter and leave the church. During Mass however, it is appropriate to bow (each time) when passing in front of the main altar. Outside the Mass, it is appropriate to bow (each time) when passing in front of the tabernacle. Genuflecting every time you pass by the altar or tabernacle, is not necessary. (GIRM 274, 275)

## **What is *more* important – the altar or the tabernacle?**

They are both important. Outside of Mass (when/where there is no Eucharistic sacrifice), the tabernacle is the central focus of attention within the church. During Mass (when/where the Eucharistic sacrifice is to be celebrated), the altar is the central focus of attention within the church. Additionally, the [priest] responsible for the church ... is to take care that the [tabernacle key where the Eucharist is reserved] ... is safeguarded most diligently. (Canon law 938§5)

## **Why is there a candle next to the tabernacle?**

Following our Jewish roots, from the very early years of the Christian Church, a lamp has been burning constantly near the tabernacle to indicate and honor the Presence of Christ. Over the years, it has also become known as the tabernacle vigil candle; as we await the second coming of Christ. (NB: Today, in Jewish synagogues you will find a vigil candle kept burning constantly by the Jewish tabernacle—which contains the Torah or sacred scroll(s).)

## **What happens to the tabernacle and the Blessed Sacrament when the church is used for other purposes, like concerts or other non-liturgical events or meetings?**

All such activities must be approved of the Bishop. If the activity is approved to occur within the church's Worship Space, the Blessed Sacrament must be reposed outside of the worship space area—in an effort to avoid any danger of profanation to the greatest extent possible. (GIRM 314)