

The Reserved Sacrament

The following paper *The Use of the Reserved Sacrament* has been prepared at our request by The Reverend Paul Gibson. We commend it to you for your serious consideration:

1. We request that the bread and wine required for a eucharistic celebration be offered and consecrated at that celebration and not at an earlier time.
2. We request that normally the sacrament distributed at a eucharistic celebration be the sacrament that has been consecrated at that celebration.
3. The sacrament that remains from a celebration should be consumed immediately following the service, saving only that which is reserved for the sick and others who cannot be present in church.
4. In the Diocese of Toronto, it is not permissible for a deacon or lay person to administer communion from the reserved sacrament to the normal gathering in the absence of the priest, (i.e., so called “Deacon's Masses” are not permitted. (See p.113).
5. Apart from normal gathering of the faithful in church, lay administration of holy communion is permitted only according to the guidelines entitled, *Lay Administration of the Reserved Sacrament in Nursing Homes, Institutions, Hospitals or at Home*. (See p. 115).

June 1987

A. The Use of the Reserved Sacrament

The eucharist is, at root, a holy meal at which the sacramental bread and wine are usually consumed. However, it has often been the practice of Christians to reserve some of the sacramental food for use of one or another on a later occasion.

Reservation seems to have begun to provide ordinary Christians with opportunities for holy communion between celebrations of the eucharist. The sacrament was originally reserved not in the place of worship but **apart from** the place of worship, in the homes or on the persons of devout and faithful people. Reception of communion was, in fact, part of their daily prayer, usually a private act done in isolation from the Christian assembly.

The sacrament was also reserved in the sense that some of it was retained after the liturgy to be carried by ministers of the church to the sick and the imprisoned and others who could not be present at a celebration of the eucharist. Eventually it was reserved in the place of worship (stored in fact) for such delivery at a later time, or for the communion of those who gathered for worship on occasions when the eucharist was not celebrated, either for reasons of custom or because a priest was not available. Communion of the sick from the reserved sacrament survives in various churches to the present day. (See **Communion in Special Circumstances in *The Book of Alternative Services*, p. 256-260.**) In medieval monasteries and convents, it was customary for the abbot or abbess to distribute communion on weekdays, and in some parts of the Christian world certain days were regarded as unsuitable for the celebrations of the eucharist and communion was distributed from the reserved sacrament in conjunction with a



liturgy of the word. This survives among some eastern Christians on Wednesdays and Fridays in Lent and among some western Christians on Good Friday. (*The Book of Alternative Services* makes provision for this practice in the Good Friday liturgy.) Reservation of the sacrament for the communion of people who do not have the service of a priest is enjoying a certain revival in churches with many remote communities and relatively small numbers of clergy. The Doctrine and Worship Committee of the Anglican Church of Canada has recently developed guidelines for the use of bishops who wish to authorize this practice.

Reservation of the sacrament has traditionally been treated with some official suspicion among Anglicans. *The Book of Common Prayer* of 1549 provided for the sacrament to be reserved at a celebration of the eucharist and carried directly to the sick as soon as possible, but reservation vanished from the Prayer Books of 1552 and 1559 (although it reappeared in the Latin Prayer Book of Queen Elizabeth in 1560), and Article XXVIII of the XXXIX Articles notes that, “The sacrament of the Lord’s supper was not by Christ’s ordinance reserved, carried about, lifted up, or worshipped,” but stopped short of forbidding the practice of reservation.

The reference in Article XXVIII to carrying, lifting, and worshipping the sacrament may explain some of the suspicion with which reservation was treated in the Reformation period: the purpose of reservation had, in large measure shifted from communion when a celebration of the eucharist was impossible or difficult or inappropriate, to adoration of the sacramental presence of Christ. The extent of this shift was such that adoration of Christ present in the sacrament had for the most part replaced regular communion in the piety of medieval Christians, and this was an abuse to which the Reformers wished to address themselves (although it must be admitted that they met with greater success in suppressing reservation and the worship related to it than in persuading people to come frequently to communion).

Not only were lay people discouraged from coming regularly to communion but, in the Roman Catholic tradition, the communion when it occurred was eventually dislocated from its proper place in the liturgy. It became common practice to give communion to those lay people who wished to receive it from the reserved sacrament, either before the liturgy began or after it was over. It is only under the influence of the modern liturgical movement of renewal that this practice has abated, and it is still not unknown among anglo-catholics. Even when communion in the context of the eucharist was restored among Roman Catholics, the custom continued of giving communion to the congregation from the reserved sacrament and not from bread consecrated at that particular liturgy. Unfortunately, this practice (which has a certain convenience but no symbolic value) is showing signs of a new unexpected popularity among Anglicans as reservation of the sacrament becomes more common.

One of the principles of liturgical renewal is that the poetic order and inner logic of liturgical actions should be visible. Liturgy, like justice, should not only be done but should be seen to be done - vividly, and with integrity. Minimalist approaches to liturgy, in which people ask how little they have to do to make sure the rite is valid, reflect a misunderstanding of its very nature. If baptism is a washing, and a dying and rising, in water, then water should be present in quantity and its use should be visible and audible. If the eucharist is the gathering of the church at the table of Christ's Kingdom, the holy meal should be apparent: food should be brought, blessed, broken, and received.



There is no question that communion received from the reserved sacrament at a celebration of the eucharist is true communion. The question is whether it is appropriate. (Food consumed from a private supply at a banquet may be nourishing, but the banquet loses something if its symbolic value as a celebration based on a common sharing - as St. Paul was quick to note.) Abuses spring from small violations of the integrity of liturgical acts; they cause much misunderstanding and are reformed only with pain and difficulty.

The purpose of reservation is always to extend the eucharistic celebration to include in its communion those who cannot be present for the whole. The eucharist is an event; it is not a mechanism for confecting the sacrament as though it could have an existence apart from the event. Reservation extends the event.

Perhaps the best form of reservation is that which was proposed by the first Prayer Book and is now commended by *The Book of Alternative Services*: the sacrament is taken directly from a celebration of the eucharist to communicants who are unable to be present. An advantage of this form of communion in special circumstances is that it associates those who are absent with a particular celebration of the eucharist by a particular community and also provides opportunity for trained and authorized lay people, their fellow communicants, to share in a beautiful and sometimes moving aspect of pastoral ministry. However, reservation of the sacrament for extended periods of time, for communion of congregations when a priest is not present as well as for communion of the sick is legitimate when circumstances demand it, and appropriate lay ministers may be involved in this as well. *

The reserved sacrament should always be treated with reverence, but that reverence should not be allowed to expand into a piety which eclipses the purpose of reservation, i.e., communion. At this point the Anglican critique of reservation remains valid.

Paul Gibson
April 1987

* This is not the policy of the Diocese of Toronto, please see #2, above and also the following page.

B. Communion from the Reserved Sacrament in the Absence of a Bishop or Priest

Lay people and deacons are not authorized to preside over a part of the communion service and then to distribute the elements from the reserved sacrament.

When a priest is away from the parish and there is no other priest available to come for celebrations, lay persons may be authorized to read Morning Prayer at both the early service and the major service. It is strongly recommended that every priest facing this situation discover whether there is a celebration of Holy communion in a parish close at hand and so inform his/her people.

In terms of ministry to shut-ins, as an extension of the parish eucharist, deacons, and lay persons holding special episcopal licence, are permitted to take the reserved elements to sick communicants. (See guidelines p. 115).



C. The Care of the Reserved Sacrament

There are many churches in the diocese in which reservation of the sacrament takes place.

It is most important that where the sacrament is to be reserved an appropriate aumbry be provided, well built and with a strong lid or door attached. The sacrament is not to be kept in an open cupboard where anyone can get at it, nor simply left open in the sacristy.

We have strong sacramental theology as a church and if there are those who desire to reserve the sacrament, let it be done decently and in order.

