Procedures for Reverencing the Tabernacle and the Altar Before, During and After Mass

Key Terms:

Eucharist: The true presence of Christ in the form of his Body and Blood. During Mass, bread and wine are consecrated to become the Body and Blood of Christ. Whatever remains there are of the Body of Christ may be reserved and kept.

Tabernacle: The box-like container in which the Eucharistic Bread may be reserved.

Sacristy: The room in the church where the priest and other ministers prepare themselves for worship.

Altar: The table upon which the bread and wine are blessed and made holy to become the Eucharist.

Sanctuary: Often referred to as the Altar area, the Sanctuary is the proper name of the area which includes the Altar, the Ambo (from where the Scriptures are read and the homily may be given), and the Presider’s Chair.

Nave: The area of the church where the majority of worshippers are located. This is where the Pews are.

Genuflection: The act of bending one knee to the ground whilst making the sign of the Cross.

Soon (maybe even next weekend – August 25-26), the tabernacle will be re-located to behind the altar. How should I respond to the presence of the reserved Eucharist when it will now be permanently kept in the church sanctuary?

Whenever you are in the church, you are in a holy place, walking upon holy ground. Everyone ought to be respectful of Holy Rosary Church as a house of worship and prayer. Respect those who are in silent prayer. Please refrain from eating or drinking in the church or talking or texting on cell phones or using other electronic devices. We ask you to dress appropriately. When talking with others, be mindful of the types of conversations you are having. And remember that whenever two or more are gathered, God is present.

What is the proper way to reverence the tabernacle and the altar when I enter the church?

It is always appropriate to make a gesture of adoration to both the altar and to the tabernacle. When the tabernacle is moved to behind the altar, however, it is not necessary to make two separate actions; you can instead make one gesture to recognize both holy areas of the church.

If you are in the nave of the church, you ought to genuflect whenever you come closest to the sanctuary.

I am serving at Mass in some role (altar server, music minister, lector, etc). What do I do?

Remembering that the sanctuary is a holy place, there should be as little movement as possible in that space before and after Mass. If you are preparing in the sacristy, and need to come out into the sanctuary, it is appropriate that you use whichever entry ways are closest to where you need to go. If at all possible, enter the sanctuary by way of the main steps that lead up to the.

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altar, and genuflect, reverencing both the altar and the tabernacle. If you are already in the sacristy and are coming into the sanctuary, please genuflect towards both the altar and tabernacle, if you are able. But if you are carrying something (perhaps the books that contain the Scripture readings, or something else needed for Mass), then make a reverential bow in the direction of the tabernacle and the altar. Whatever you do, though, please be mindful of giving honor and reverence to the altar and the tabernacle which are such holy places in the church!

**What about during Mass?**
In the *General Instruction on the Roman Missal*, which gives us our directions for Mass, it stipulates that genuflections to the tabernacle ought not to take place during Mass. The presence of the tabernacle is de-emphasized, and instead, our primary focus should be on the altar. It is to the altar that we bow. There are some people who do come forward for communion who either genuflect or kneel. They may continue to do so, although this is not necessary for everyone to do.

**Do I have to bow or genuflect every time I pass by the altar or tabernacle?**
Before and after Mass, it is appropriate to bow and genuflect only the first time when you enter the church. During Mass, it is again appropriate to bow, both at the beginning and at the end of Mass. Bowing or genuflecting every time you pass by them is not necessary.

**What is more important – the altar or the tabernacle?**
They are both important. Outside of Mass, the tabernacle is the most important place in the church. But during Mass, we celebrate the action of the Eucharist (which is the Greek word for Thanksgiving). First of all, Christ is seen to be present among the faithful gathered in His name; then in his Word, as the Scriptures are read and explained; in the person of the minister; finally and in a unique way under the species of the Eucharist. Hence, during Mass, the altar, where the Eucharist is celebrated, becomes our primary focus, and not the tabernacle.

**Why is the tabernacle sometimes covered up?**
The tabernacle is to be covered by a screen during Mass, so that it is de-emphasized. Again, we remember that the altar is the place of focus. The screen aids us in focusing our attention not on the tabernacle, but on the altar.

**Why is there a candle next to the tabernacle?**
According to the traditional practice, a lamp should burn continually near the tabernacle as a sign of the honor paid to the Lord.

**What happens to the tabernacle and the Eucharist when the church is used for other purposes, like concerts?**
The screen that covers the tabernacle during Mass is also put in place when there are non-liturgical events taking place in the church.

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