



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

What is a Sanctuary Lamp?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.

These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.

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Some Lutheran church sanctuaries (the area around the communion table/altar) feature often-called sanctuary lamps or eternal flames, which are usually suspended from the ceiling by a chain over the altar area. Another variant is to have a lamp attached to the sanctuary wall behind or on either side of the altar.

The history surrounding the use of these lamps is difficult to determine. Often the origins are linked to references in the Old Testament. God gave directions for the building of the tabernacle that included a lamp stand (Exodus 25:31-40) and told the Israelites to have oil burning lamps in the meeting tent "from evening to morning" as a perpetual ordinance (Exodus 27:20-21).



Modern sanctuary lamps used in Christian worship spaces are linked more directly to the Roman Catholic practice (beginning in the 12th century) of burning a light in front of the reserved sacrament (consecrated bread and wine left after a communion service), to signify and honor the presence of Christ in the elements of bread and wine (see also, [“Where do we keep sacramental elements?”](#)) In Roman Catholic usage the light near the reserved sacrament is enclosed in glass and is placed near the tabernacle (a box traditionally recessed into the wall behind or to the side of the altar to house the reserved sacrament).



In some non-Roman churches, primarily Episcopal and a small number of Lutheran churches, a clear glass lamp is kept lit (in a similar manner to Roman Catholic practice) near an aumbry (a box attached to the wall on one side of the altar to house the reserved sacrament).

Some Protestant churches imitated the Roman Catholic practice by including lamps in their worship spaces but without maintaining tabernacles or the reserved sacrament. Lights in most Protestant churches are housed in a red glass casing. The reason usually given for their presence in the worship space is to signify the eternal presence of God in the church.

Current Roman Catholic building design philosophy does not recommend the presence of sanctuary lamps, whether red for general usage or clear for the reserved sacrament in the worship space. This design theology affirms that the primary purpose of the worship space is for the assembly of God's people around Word and Sacrament, not for contemplation of the reserved sacrament. Thus new Roman Catholic buildings often place tabernacles in separate chapels or other quarters of the church more appropriate to reservation.

While some assemblies may continue this custom of a sanctuary lamp, it may be a case of something practiced that is not understood, a kind of "we've always done it" but without being clear why. A congregation will need to ask what is communicated by the presence of such a lamp. Does it suggest that God is always present because the light is on? What if the light is accidentally extinguished? The people of God can be assured that God's presence is with them eternally regardless of whether a sanctuary lamp is present in the worship space.

RESOURCES

[Frequently Asked Questions:](#)

↪ [Where Do We Keep Sacramental Elements?](#)

[Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:](#)

📖 Stauffer, S. Anita. *Altar Guild and Sacristy Handbook*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000.

📖 VanLoon, Ralph R. and S. Anita Stauffer. *Worship Wordbook: A Practical Guide for Parish Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995.

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