

In Their Midst

Exodus: From Slavery to Covenant Presence

Session 10. Make Me a Sanctuary

Reading: Exodus 25:1-27:21

Part One

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim

The group discovers what the sanctuary's ordered spaces and furnishings reveal about holiness, access, sacrifice, and divine presence.

Catholic Touchstone

This session touches biblical worship, the fulfillment of the sanctuary in Christ and his Church, reverence for sacred places and objects, and Christ's Eucharistic presence reserved in the tabernacle.

Israel has already been redeemed, brought to God, instructed in covenant life, and joined to him through covenant sacrifice. Now the Lord gives detailed instructions for dwelling among his people. Help the group notice the movement from willing gifts to ordered spaces, from the outer court toward the ark, and from sacrifice toward the promised meeting place. Do not rush to assign a Christian meaning to every hook or socket. Let the cumulative design disclose holiness, mediated access, sacrificial approach, and gracious presence before considering its fulfillment in Christ.

What You Need to Know

The controlling purpose

Exodus 25:8 states the purpose of the entire section: Israel is to make a sanctuary so that God may dwell in their midst. The instructions are not decorative trivia. They answer a central question running through Exodus: How can the holy God dwell among a redeemed but still sinful people?

A freely offered response

The materials come from contributions offered by people whose hearts move them. Israel cannot purchase God's presence, and the sanctuary is built at God's initiative. Yet God dignifies the people by receiving their gifts and labor in the place where he chooses to meet them.

An ordered approach

The sequence begins with the ark, mercy seat, table, and lampstand, then moves to the tent and veil, and finally to the bronze altar and outer court. A worshiper approaching from outside would encounter these in roughly the opposite direction: court, altar, tent, holy furnishings, veil, and the ark. The arrangement teaches that God's presence is a gift, but access to the Holy One is neither casual nor self-designed.

The furnishings

The ark holds the covenant testimony. The mercy seat is the place above which God promises to meet Moses. The table bears the bread of the Presence. The lampstand gives light within the holy place. The veil marks restricted access. The bronze altar places sacrifice at the entrance to the sanctuary complex. The court establishes a real boundary between ordinary space and space consecrated for worship.

Pattern, not human invention

The repeated command to build according to the pattern shown on the mountain emphasizes revelation and obedience. Israel does not decide for itself how the Lord will be approached. Later biblical revelation will fulfill and transform these shadows in Christ, but fulfillment does not make the original pattern meaningless.

Avoid forced correspondences

Christian tradition has often read the tabernacle spiritually and typologically. Some interpretations are fruitful without being exclusive or doctrinally binding. Keep firm hold of what the text clearly establishes, then distinguish it from a saint's contemplative application. The Church does not require a fixed Christian counterpart for every curtain, ring, board, or measurement.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

From Eden to the sanctuary

Genesis 3:24 places cherubim at the guarded way to the tree of life. Exodus places cherubim over the ark and fashions the lampstand with branches and plant-like forms. These textual resonances invite readers to see the sanctuary as a place where God graciously restores a measure of sacred fellowship, while guarded access reminds Israel that the rupture caused by sin has not yet been fully healed.

Sinai in Israel's midst

At Sinai, cloud, fire, boundaries, divine speech, and a mediator mark God's holy presence. The sanctuary carries that pattern into Israel's journey. The God who descended upon the mountain now provides a dwelling that will travel among the tribes, without ceasing to be holy.

Christ and the greater sanctuary

John presents the eternal Word dwelling among us and identifies Jesus' body as the true temple. Hebrews describes the earthly sanctuary as a figure pointing beyond itself and presents Christ as the high priest who enters the greater and more perfect tent by his own blood. Revelation reaches the final horizon, where God and the Lamb are the city's temple and God's servants behold his face.

The Church and sacred buildings

Under the New Covenant, God's people are a living temple because they are united to Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. A Catholic church building is not a replacement for the Church as Christ's Body. It is a visible house of prayer set apart for the Church's worship, especially the Eucharistic sacrifice and the reservation and adoration of Christ truly present in the Blessed Sacrament.

Voices of the Church

Read these aloud where they land. Each is either a direct citation or an honest summary, labelled as such.

St. Gregory of Nyssa, c. 335-c. 395

St. Gregory reads the tabernacle shown to Moses as a mystery whose deepest fulfillment is found in Christ. The heavenly pattern is not grasped merely by cataloguing materials. It directs the contemplative reader toward the incarnate Lord, in whom divine glory truly comes among humanity.

The Life of Moses II.170-188.

How this is cited. This is a summary of St. Gregory's extended interpretation in the cited section, not a direct quotation. His treatment is highly contemplative, so the summary states its central Christological movement without presenting every detail as binding exegesis.

For the group. Let the details lead the group toward wonder at Christ rather than toward speculative code-breaking.

St. Bede the Venerable, c. 673-735

In summary of his teaching, St. Bede reads the tabernacle as an image of the Church and of the faithful soul being formed into a dwelling for God. Diverse materials and roles are joined in one ordered house, so holiness includes both communion and personal conversion.

On the Tabernacle, Book 1.

How this is cited. The attribution and broad theme are secure, but this wording synthesizes material across Book 1 rather than pinning the claim to one short passage.

For the group. Ask whether each person's gifts are being offered to build communion or merely to secure attention.

St. Teresa of Avila, 1515-1582

St. Teresa asks her sisters to imagine the soul as a radiant castle with many rooms, at whose center the great King dwells. Her image is not an interpretation of Exodus' measurements. It is a Christian application of the astonishing truth that God desires to dwell within his people.

The Interior Castle I.1.1.

How this is cited. This is a faithful summary of St. Teresa's opening image. The connection to the Exodus sanctuary is our application, not a claim that she is commenting on Exodus 25 to 27.

For the group. Sacred space should awaken the deeper question of whether we welcome God's presence within us.

Catechism Connection

The Catechism says

CCC 1094. The Church reads the events and realities of the Old Covenant as prefigurations of what God accomplishes in Christ, while respecting their place in salvation history.

CCC 1179, 1197. New Covenant worship is not confined to one earthly place, because Christ is the true temple and Christians are living stones built into it.

CCC 1180. Christians build churches, which are visible signs of God dwelling with a humanity reconciled in Christ.

CCC 1181. A church is a house of prayer, a worthy place for the Eucharist celebrated and reserved there.

CCC 1378. The Catholic Church expresses faith in Christ's real Eucharistic presence through reverence, adoration, and careful reservation of the consecrated hosts.

Thread Watch

Thread Watch

God dwelling among his people (develop). Place Exodus 25:8 at the center of the session. The sanctuary develops the promise of presence, but Exodus 40 will reveal the climactic arrival of the glory.

Mediators of deliverance (develop). Notice that God promises to meet Moses above the mercy seat and speak through him to Israel. Access is gracious, real, and mediated.

Where is the lamb? (develop). The bronze altar places sacrifice at the threshold, but this section does not yet prescribe every offering. Let the unresolved question of the definitive sacrifice continue toward Christ.

Why God brings Israel out (develop). Session 8 resolved the sealed guess with God's words about bringing Israel to himself. Now show the next development: the God who brought them to himself intends to dwell in their midst.

Fear of God versus fear of rulers (develop). Holy fear now appears as reverent obedience to God's revealed pattern, not terror before arbitrary power.

Deliverance through water (hold). Do not force the water thread into this passage. It will have clearer sacramental connections elsewhere.

Objection Bench

Leader only. Do not raise these unless someone in the room does.

If God is everywhere, setting apart one sanctuary seems to shrink him into a box.

The text never says that the ark contains God. God freely appoints a place to meet and speak with his people. His special covenant presence does not deny his universal presence.

The expense of sacred furnishings conflicts with care for the poor.

Scripture does not oppose reverent worship to justice. God requests willing gifts for a particular covenant purpose, not coercive luxury or personal display. Catholic practice must honor both divine worship and love of the poor.

Catholic altars, lamps, vestments, and tabernacles simply reconstruct the Mosaic system.

Catholic worship does not restore the Old Covenant sanctuary. Christ fulfills its sacrifice and priesthood. Sacred objects remain fitting because the Incarnation and sacraments involve material creation in worship, while the Eucharistic tabernacle serves the reservation of Christ's sacramental presence.

Session Goals

1. Identify the stated purpose of the sanctuary and the willing response requested from Israel.
2. Trace how the furnishings, boundaries, veil, altar, and meeting place establish an ordered approach to God's presence.
3. Discover from the New Testament how the earthly sanctuary points beyond itself to Christ's priestly work.
4. Distinguish Catholic sacred space from both the Mosaic sanctuary and the mistaken idea that God can be confined to a building.

5. Invite each participant to offer concrete gifts and habits that make room for God's presence.

Time Note

Planned for 75-90 Minutes

Allow 8 minutes for prayer and Win, 12 minutes for the selected reading and passage survey, 48 to 55 minutes for Build, 10 minutes for Send and Live It This Week, and 5 minutes for the memory verse and closing prayer.

If you are running long, cut in this order.

1. Cut the optional Dig Deeper material under questions 3 and 9 first.
2. Shorten question 6 by asking each group to report only one furnishing.
3. Discuss only one of the two Send questions aloud, inviting silent reflection on the other.

Part Two

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Pray together

Holy God, you heard Israel's cry, brought your people through the sea, fed them in the wilderness, and drew them to yourself. Send your Holy Spirit as we read. Teach us to receive your presence with gratitude, your holiness with reverence, and your word with obedient hearts. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win

Open questions. No wrong answers. Let everyone speak before you move on.

W1. What place helps you become quiet, attentive, or ready to pray, and what about that place helps you?

W2. When have you seen many people's different gifts come together to make something none of them could have made alone?

Keep this warm and concrete. Participants do not need prior knowledge of church architecture or liturgy.

Read

Read aloud

Use four readers. Read Exodus 25:1-22, 25:23-40, 26:1-6 and 26:31-37, then 27:1-8 and 27:9-21. Between readings, ask the group to scan the intervening verses for repeated materials, measurements, boundaries, and commands. Keep Bibles open throughout the discussion.

Build

Numbered inductive questions. Ask, wait, let the group work the text. The ANSWER boxes are for you to share after the discussion, not before it.

A willing offering

1. In Exodus 25:1-9, who initiates the sanctuary project, what are the people asked to contribute, and what condition is placed on their giving?

Take it as far as the room wants

Floor. List the materials and identify the repeated language about receiving contributions.

Ground. What does willing participation add to a project that God himself has commanded?

Depth. How does this protect worship from becoming either self-invented or merely passive?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The Lord initiates the project and names the materials. Moses is to receive contributions from those whose hearts move them. The sanctuary is therefore God's gift and command, yet the people are invited to participate through willing generosity rather than purchasing or controlling God's presence.

2. According to Exodus 25:8-9, what is the sanctuary for, and who determines its pattern?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Its stated purpose is that God may dwell in Israel's midst. The Lord determines the pattern and shows it to Moses. Divine presence is a gracious initiative received through obedient response, not something Israel manufactures through craftsmanship.

Dig Deeper

Compare this purpose with Israel's calling at Sinai. God did not bring them out merely to leave them independent in the wilderness. He brought them to himself and now provides for his dwelling among them.

What the arrangement teaches

Live discovery

Split the room. One half reads what God forbids in Exodus 20:4-6. The other half reads what God commands in Exodus 25:18-20. Each side reports only what its own passage says, without explaining the other. Let the tension sit in the room before anyone resolves it.

Let them find it. Exodus 20:4-6; Exodus 25:18-20

3. Working in small groups, trace one set of instructions: the ark and mercy seat, the table and lampstand, the tent and veil, or the altar and court. What is made, where is it placed, and what action or purpose is associated with it?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The ark contains the covenant testimony, while the mercy seat with cherubim marks the place where God promises to meet and speak with Moses. The table holds the bread of the Presence, and the lampstand supplies light. The tent and veil create differentiated spaces and restrict access. The bronze altar stands in the court where sacrificial approach occurs, and the court forms a boundary around the sacred complex. Notice too that the same God who forbids carved images to be made and worshipped commands two cherubim of hammered gold for the mercy seat. Exodus is not contradicting itself. What Sinai forbids is making an image to worship as a god; what Exodus 25 commands is a sign, made at God's own direction, at the very place where he promises to meet his people.

Dig Deeper

Ask the groups to notice which items receive an explicitly stated function and which details are simply commanded. This helps prevent imaginative interpretations from being treated as conclusions of the text.

4. Where do you see repetition of commands about making things according to a pattern, placing them correctly, or doing exactly as God showed Moses? What impression does that repetition create?

Take it as far as the room wants

Floor. Find one repeated command or phrase.

Ground. What does the repetition reveal about worship?

Depth. How can reverent obedience differ from lifeless rule-following?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The repetition makes the sanctuary feel deliberate, ordered, and received from God. Beauty and skill matter, but neither replaces obedience. The people are not free to approach the Holy One on whatever terms they prefer.

5. What boundaries or degrees of access appear in Exodus 26:31-37 and 27:9-19? What do the veil, screens, and court communicate before anyone explains them?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The sanctuary has an outer court, a tent, a holy place, and an inner space behind the veil. Screens and curtains distinguish these spaces. The visual message is that God truly dwells among Israel, yet his holy presence is not approached casually or indiscriminately. Nearness and guarded access stand together.

Dig Deeper

The veil is not evidence that God is unwilling to be known. It is part of the gracious arrangement by which a holy God remains among a people not yet fully cleansed from sin.

6. Put the major furnishings together. What do the ark, mercy seat, bread, lamp, veil, altar, and court collectively suggest about Israel's relationship with God?

Take it as far as the room wants

Floor. Choose one furnishing and name its plain function.

Ground. What becomes visible only when the furnishings are considered together?

Depth. Why would either nearness without holiness or holiness without nearness distort the picture?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Together they suggest covenant revelation, divine mercy, continuing fellowship, light, holiness, restricted access, sacrifice, and a people gathered around God's presence. No single furnishing explains the whole relationship. The ordered whole teaches that God is near and gracious, yet holy and approached according to his provision.

Live discovery: the greater tent

Live discovery

In pairs, find and read the assigned passage. One pair should list the sanctuary features it recognizes. Another should list every contrast involving access, priesthood, blood, conscience, or fulfillment. Report only what the passage actually says.

Let them find it. Hebrews 9:1-10; Hebrews 9:11-14; Hebrews 10:19-22

7. The New Testament returns to this sanctuary. What does it preserve from Exodus, and what does it say has now changed?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Hebrews recognizes the ordered tent, lampstand, table, bread, veil, ark, mercy seat, priestly service, and restricted access. It calls these arrangements symbolic for the earlier age and unable by themselves to perfect the worshiper's conscience. Christ enters the greater and more perfect tent by his own blood and opens a new and living way. The old sanctuary is neither mocked nor preserved unchanged. Its God-given pattern points toward fulfillment in Christ.

Build, then press

8. How would you answer this objection while granting everything in it that is true?

Build then press

The strongest form of the objection. The New Testament says Christians themselves are God's temple, Christ has opened direct access to the Father, and the Mosaic sanctuary belonged to an earlier covenant of shadows. Therefore, Christian sanctuaries, altars, lamps, vestments, and tabernacles risk rebuilding a system Christ fulfilled. At best they are unnecessary. At worst they obscure the sufficiency of Christ's finished work.

Answering from the text. The objection rightly insists that Christians must not return to the Mosaic covenant or treat a building as though it contained God. Yet fulfillment does not mean that embodied, ordered worship becomes opposed to Christ. The earthly sanctuary mattered precisely because it pointed beyond itself. In the New Covenant, Christ is the true temple and high priest, the Church is his living Body, and believers have access through his blood. Catholic sacred places and objects do not recreate the Mosaic sanctuary. They serve the worship Christ gives his Church, especially the Eucharist, and express through material signs the holiness of what God is doing.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

A strong answer begins by affirming Christ's fulfillment and the Church as God's living temple. It then distinguishes fulfillment from rejection of material worship. Exodus shows that matter, artistry, order, and sacred space can serve communion with God when God directs them. The New Testament discovery shows that the decisive change is Christ's priesthood, blood, and opened access, not a declaration that all sacred signs or ordered worship are now forbidden.

Presence and sacrifice

9. Exodus 40:6 and 40:29 place the bronze altar before the door of the tabernacle. Why do you think sacrifice stands on the path of approach, and what does that arrangement suggest about the relationship between sacrifice and access?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Exodus 25-27 gives the altar's construction and the boundaries of the court, but it does not itself state where the altar stands in relation to the tent. That placement is given later, at Exodus 40:6 and 40:29, where the altar of burnt offering is set before the door of the tabernacle. Read in the finished canonical arrangement, sacrifice stands on the path of approach: no one comes to the holy place without passing the altar. The arrangement places sacrifice on the path of approach to the sanctuary. Exodus 27 does not yet give the complete theology or ritual of every sacrifice, so we should not claim more than the text shows. Still, the placement makes clear that sinful Israel's approach to the Holy One involves sacrificial mediation rather than casual entry. The New Testament identifies Christ's own blood as the definitive basis of access.

Dig Deeper

Recall the Passover lamb and the blood of the covenant from earlier sessions. The sanctuary gathers those sacrificial threads without yet resolving the question of the final Lamb.

The heart of the sanctuary

10. Return to Exodus 25:8 and 25:22. If you had to explain the sanctuary's meaning using the words dwell, meet, speak, holy, and midst, what would you say?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The sanctuary is God's appointed means of dwelling in Israel's midst while teaching the people that his presence is holy. He promises to meet Moses and speak his commands from above the mercy seat. The sanctuary therefore holds together divine initiative, covenant communication, mediated access, and gracious nearness. Exodus is moving toward a people ordered around God's presence.

Send

Open questions. Let these land in silence if they need to.

S1. Which part of this passage most challenges the way you approach prayer or worship, and why?

S2. What gift, habit, or area of your life could you offer more deliberately so that God's presence shapes the community around you?

Live It This Week

Practices

1. Arrive at Mass at least ten minutes early. Put away your phone, acknowledge Christ's presence, and slowly pray Exodus 25:8 as a request that he make your heart ready for worship.
2. Offer one concrete gift for the building up of your parish or Catholic community. Choose time, practical skill, money, hospitality, music, setup, cleaning, or service to someone in need, and offer it without seeking recognition.
3. Make one small space in your room suitable for prayer. Place a Bible, crucifix, or sacred image there, and spend five minutes there on at least three days. The space does not contain God. It helps train your attention toward the God who desires to dwell with you.
4. Before receiving the Eucharist, consciously unite reverence and confidence. Remember that access is God's gift through Christ, then approach with gratitude rather than either casualness or fear.

Scripture Memory

Exodus 25:8

"And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst."

Exodus 25:8

Closing Prayer

Pray together

Lord Jesus Christ, true temple and great high priest, you have opened the way to the Father by your blood. Teach us to worship with reverence and confidence. Receive our gifts, order our lives, cleanse our hearts, and form us together into a dwelling place for your Spirit. Remain in our midst and make us faithful signs of your presence. Amen.

Part Three

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in order. Print this page and keep it in front of you.

Primary text

- **Exodus 25:1-27:21** Willing contributions, ark, mercy seat, table, lampstand, tent, veil, altar, court, and lamp oil.
- **Exodus 40:6, 29** Where the altar is finally placed.

Live discovery

- **Exodus 20:4-6** The prohibition of carved images.
- **Exodus 25:18-20** The cherubim God commands for the mercy seat.

Old Testament roots

- **Genesis 3:24** Cherubim and guarded access.
- **Exodus 19:3-20** Holy presence, boundaries, and mediation at Sinai.
- **Exodus 24:3-18** Covenant ratification and Moses' ascent into the glory cloud.

New Testament fulfillment

- **John 1:14** The Word dwells among us.
- **John 2:19-21** Jesus identifies his body as the temple.
- **Hebrews 9:1-14** The earthly sanctuary and Christ's greater priestly work.
- **Hebrews 10:19-22** Confidence to enter through the blood of Jesus.
- **1 Corinthians 3:16-17** The Church as God's temple.
- **Revelation 21:22-23** God and the Lamb as the temple of the final city.

Terms

- **sanctuary.** A place set apart as holy for God's covenant presence and worship.
- **tabernacle.** The portable tent or dwelling constructed according to the pattern shown to Moses.
- **mercy seat.** The gold cover over the ark, overshadowed by cherubim, where God promises to meet Moses.
- **typology.** The reading of persons, events, and realities in God's earlier saving work as divinely ordered prefigurations fulfilled in Christ.

Catechism

- CCC 1094. Old Covenant realities prefigure fulfillment in Christ.
- CCC 1179, 1197. New Covenant worship is not confined to one earthly place, because Christ is the true temple and Christians are living stones built into it.
- CCC 1180. Christians build churches, which are visible signs of God dwelling with a humanity reconciled in Christ.
- CCC 1181. A church is a house of prayer, a worthy place for the Eucharist celebrated and reserved there.

- CCC 1378. The Church adores Christ present in the Eucharist and reserves the sacrament reverently.