



*Kings and Queens of Juda, Royal Portal, Chartres, France*

## PRAYING AD ORIENTEM VERSUS

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1) The Eucharistic celebraion is, by definition, connected to the eschatological dimension of the Christian faith. This is true in its most profound identity. Is this not perhaps the sense of the wondrous change (*mirabilis conversio*) of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of the Lord of glory, who lives always with the Father, perpetuating His paschal mystery?

2) The sober description of the Acts of the Apostles in the first summary concerning the life of the community speaks of the "joy" (*agalliasis*) with which those joined in the assembly (*epí to autó*), broke bread in the homes. This term (*agalliasis*) is the same that Luke used to indicate eschatological joy.

3) There is a logic of Ascension in the Eucharist: "This Jesus that you have seen ascend into heaven, will return. . ." In the Eucharist the Lord returns; He anticipates sacramentally His glorious return, transforming the profound reality of the ele-

ments, and He leaves them in the condition of signs of His presence and mediation of communion with His own person. It is for this that the various liturgical families underscored a common point in different ways: with the Eucharistic prayer the Church penetrates the celestial sphere. This is the meaning of the conclusion of the Roman prefaces, of the chant of the *Sanctus* and of the eastern *Cherubicon*.

4) In analyzing the origins of the Eucharistic prayer one is struck by the typically Christian variant introduced in the initial dialogue. The greeting, *Dominus vobiscum*, and the invitation, *Gratias agamus*, are common to the Jewish *berakha*. Only the Christian one, beginning with the first complete redaction that we possess—the Apostolic Tradition—inserts the *Sursum corda. Habemus ad Dominum*. For the Church, in fact, celebrating the Eucharist is never to put into action something earthly, but rather something heavenly, because it has the awareness that the principal celebrant of the same action is the Lord of glory. The Church necessarily celebrates the Eucharist oriented toward the Lord, in communion with Him and, through His mediation, toward the Father in unity with the Holy Spirit. The priest, ordained in the Catholic and apostolic communion, is the witness of the authenticity of the celebration and at the same time the sign of the glorious Lord who presides at it. Just as the bread and wine are the elements that Christ assumes in order to “give Himself,” the priest is the person that Christ consecrated and invited to “give.”

5) The placement of the priest and the faithful in relation to the “mystical table” found different forms in history, some of which can be considered typical to certain places and periods. As is logical when treating liturgical questions, symbolism took on a noteworthy role in these different forms, but it would be difficult to prove that the architectural interpretation of such symbolism could, in any of the forms chosen, have been considered as an integral and basic part of the Christian faith or of the profound attitudes of the celebrating Church.

6) The arrangement of the altar in such a manner that the celebrant and the faithful were looking toward the east—which is a great tradition even if it is not unanimous—is a splendid application of the “parousial” character of the Eucharist. One celebrates the mystery of Christ until He comes again from the heavens (*donec veniat de caelis*). The sun which illuminates the altar during the Eucharist is a pale reference to the “sun that comes from on high” (*exsultans ut gigas ad currendam viam*) (Ps. 18:6) in order to celebrate the paschal victory with His Church. The influence of the symbol of light, and concretely the sun, is frequently found in Christian liturgy. The baptismal ritual of the East still preserves this symbolism. Perhaps the Christian West has not adequately appreciated this, given the consequence of having come to be known as a “gloomy place.” But also in the West, at the popular level, we know that there remains a certain fascination for the rising sun. Did not Saint Leo the Great, in the fifth century, remind the faithful in one of his Christmas homilies that “when the sun rises in the first dawning of the day some people are so foolish as to worship it in high places?” He adds: “There are also Christians that still retain that it is part of religious practice to continue this convention and that before entering the Basilica of the Apostle Peter, dedicated to the only and true God, after having climbed the stairs that bear one up to the upper level, turn themselves around toward the rising sun, bow their heads and kneel in order to honor the shining disk” (Homily 27, 4). In fact, the faithful entering the basilica for the Eucharist, in order to be intent on the altar, had to turn their backs to the sun. In order to pray while “turned toward the east,” as it was said, they would have had to turn their backs to the altar, which does not seem probable.

7) The fact that the application of this symbolism in the West, beginning from very early on, progressively diminished, demonstrates that it did not constitute an inviolable element. Therefore, it cannot be considered a traditional fundamental

principle in Christian liturgy. From this it also arises that, subsequently, other types of symbolism influenced the construction of altars and their arrangement in churches.

8) In the encyclical *Mediator Dei*, Pius XII regarded as “archeologists” those who presumed to speak of the altar as a simple table. Would it not be equally an archeologizing tendency to consider that the arrangement of the altar toward the East is the decisive key to a correct Eucharistic celebration? In effect, the validity of the liturgical reform is not based only and exclusively on the return to original forms. There can also be completely new elements in it, and in fact there are some, that have been perfectly integrated.

9) The liturgical reform of the II Vatican Council did not invent the arrangement of the altar turned toward the people. One thinks concerning this of the witness of the Roman basilicas, at least as a pre-existing fact. But it was not an historical fact that directed the clear option for an arrangement of the altar that permits a celebration turned toward the people. The authorized interpreters of the reform—Cardinal Lercaro as the president of the Consilium—repeated from the very beginning (see the letters from 1965) that one was not dealing with a question of a liturgy that is continuing or passing away (*quaestio stantis vel cadentis liturgiae*). The fact that the suggestions of Cardinal Lercaro in this matter were, in that moment of euphoria, little taken into consideration, is unfortunately not an isolated case. Changing the orientation of the altar and utilizing the vernacular turned out to be much easier ways for entering into the theological and spiritual meaning of the liturgy, for absorbing its spirit, for studying the history and the meaning of the rites and analyzing the reasons behind the changes that were brought about and their pastoral consequences.

10) The option for celebrations *versus populum* is coherent with the foundational theological idea discovered and proven by the liturgical movement: “Liturgical actions are celebrations of the Church. . . which is the holy people of God gathered and ordered under the bishops” (SC 26). The theology of the common priesthood and the ministerial priesthood, “distinct in essence, and not in degree” (*essentia, non gradu*) and nevertheless ordered to each other (LG 10) is certainly better expressed with the arrangement of the *altar versus populum*. Did not monks, from ancient times, pray turned toward each other in order to search for the presence of the Lord in their midst? Moreover, a figurative motive is worth underscoring. The symbolic form of the Eucharist is that of a meal, a repetition of the supper of the Lord. One does not doubt that this meal is sacrificial, a memorial of the death and resurrection of Christ, but from the figurative point of view its reference point is the supper.

11) Furthermore, how does one forget that one of the strongest arguments that sustain the continuance of the uninterrupted tradition of the exclusive ordination of men, lies in the fact that the priest, president in virtue of ordination, stands at the altar as a member of the assembly, but also by his sacramental character, before the assembly as Christ is the head of the Church and that for this reason stands there in front of (*gegenüber*) the Church.

12) If from the supports we pass to the applications, we find much material for reflection. The Congregation of Divine Worship, taking into consideration that a series of questions has been rising up in this regard, proposes now the following guiding points:

1. The celebration of the Eucharist *versus populum* requires of the priest a greater and more sincere expression of his ministerial conscience: his gestures, his prayer, his facial expression must reveal to the assembly in a more direct way the principal actor, the Lord Jesus. One does not improvise this; one acquires it with some technique. Only a profound sense of the proper priestly identity in *spiritu et veritate* is

able to attain this.

2. The orientation of the altar *versus populum* requires with great care a correct use of the different areas of the sanctuary: the chair, the ambo and altar, as well as a correct positioning of the people that preside and serve in it. If the altar is turned into a pedestal for everything necessary for celebrating the Eucharist, or into a substitute for the chair in the first part of the Mass, or into a place from which the priest directs the whole celebration (in almost a technical sense), the altar will lose symbolically its identity as the central place of the Eucharist, the table of mystery, the meeting place between God and men for the sacrifice of the new and eternal covenant.

3. The placement of the altar *versus populum* is certainly something in the present liturgical legislation that is desirable. It is not, nevertheless, an absolute value over and beyond all others. It is necessary to take into account cases in which the sanctuary does not admit of an arrangement of the altar facing the people, or it is not possible to preserve the preceding altar with its ornamentation in such a way that another altar facing the people can be understood to be the principal altar. In these cases, it is more faithful to liturgical sense to celebrate at the existing altar with the back turned to the people rather than maintain two altars in the same sanctuary. The principle of the unicity of the altar is theologically more important than the practice of celebrating facing the people.

4. It is proper to explain clearly that the expression "celebrate facing the people" does not have a theological sense, but only a topographical-positional sense. Every celebration of the Eucharist is praise and glory of God, for our good and the good of all the Church (*ad laudem et gloriam nominis Dei, ad utilitatem quoque nostram, totiusque Ecclesiae suae sanctae*). Theologically, therefore, the Mass is always facing towards God and facing the people. In the form of celebration it is necessary to take care not to switch theology and topography around, above all when the priest is at the altar. The priest speaks to the people only in the dialogue from the altar. All the rest is prayer to the Father, through the mediation of Christ in the Holy Spirit. This theology must be visible.

5. At last, a conjectural consideration that is not to be left in silence. Thirty years have passed since the constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. "Provisional arrangements" cannot be justified any longer. In the re-organization of the sanctuary if a provisional character is maintained which is either pedagogically or artistically badly resolved, then an element of distortion results for catechesis and for the very theology of the celebration. Some criticisms of certain celebrations that are raised are well-founded and can only be taken with seriousness. The effort to improve celebrations is one of the basic elements to assure, in so far as it depends on us, an active and fruitful participation.

# REVIEWS

## Books

*The Reform of the Roman Liturgy: Its Problems and Background* by Klaus Gamber. Foundation for Catholic Reform, P.O. Box 255, Harrison, NY 10528. 1993. \$19.95.

Twenty years ago (Winter 1974) *Sacred Music* published an article by Klaus Gamber entitled "Mass 'Versus Populum' Re-examined." It caused little or no interest, although it proposed a thesis that was in 1974 totally in conflict with the universal practice in the United States of offering Mass "turned toward the people." Gamber, a German historian of liturgy, said that no evidence existed that in the early churches, especially in Rome, was Mass said with the priest turned toward the congregation.

Monsignor Gamber died in 1989. This summer two works of his were posthumously published in French translation. Each volume carried a preface by Cardinal Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, in which the cardinal indicated his interest in the research of Gamber, and later in an interview with the Italian paper, *Il Sabato*, he gave an opinion that perhaps the time would come for returning altars to their historic position.

The evidence given by Gamber falls into two categories. First, that historically altars in both the East and the West were not turned toward the people. Rather, the people and the priest faced toward the East, awaiting the second coming of Christ. If the church building for any reason was facing toward the East instead of the West, then the congregation looked toward the East with their backs toward the altar and the priest also faced the East. The people turned toward the altar only at certain times during the Mass. The issue had nothing to do with the direction the priest faced, but rather the need for facing East. A second, and more important, element was the very nature and understanding of the altar with its Victim and the God for whom it was built. The priest led his people, as was done in Jewish and pagan worship also. The idea of sacrifice was paramount with the notion of a supper table being much less important, until Martin Luther introduced his *Abendmahl* or supper.

The reforms introduced soon after the II Vatican Council went far beyond the intentions of the council fathers. A new missal, new ceremonies caused by the changed position and understanding of the altar, the extension of the vernacular languages beyond the original intentions resulted in the destruction of the Roman rite, which was the oldest of all the many rites in both East and West. Gamber suggests that Paul VI went beyond the power and authority of the pope

when he introduced the new missal in 1970. Certainly he approved greater changes than any previous pope. If the liturgical reforms of these post-conciliar years are to be judged on their effects on the Church today, it must be said that they have wrought great devastation. But Gamber's judgment is one of the historical accuracy of claims that altars were *versus populum* in the early Church and the misunderstanding of the role of the altar in early worship. He faults the liturgists of our day for ignorance and error in spreading the current practice of having the priest face the people. It is no longer essentially a sacrifice, but rather it is a meal; we have no longer a priest at an altar, but a leader who presides over the assembly.

The beginning of experimentation with the altar is traced to the German youth movement of the twenties and a little later to the liturgical movement especially in Austria with Pius Parsch. I, myself, in the fifties celebrated two Masses each Sunday at an altar in the crypt of a parish church in Saint Paul, Minnesota, set up *versus populum*, a rather advanced and progressive experiment for those days. But it had little if any effect on the congregation except for some shallow interest in some of the movements made by the priest over the *oblata*, gestures that could only be seen if the priest turned toward the people. As for any spiritual benefit, I perceived none.

Perhaps something that has suffered most from the turned-around altar is the traditional solemn Mass with deacons, who now simply disappear behind the altar. When they were lined up behind the celebrant they added to the concept of the approach to God, represented in the crucifix and present in the tabernacle. The steps moved the ministers toward the holy of holies upon which only the elements of the sacrifice were placed.

Mystery, sacrament, the holy, the secret and reverence are essential to worship. In the East these were achieved by separating the sanctuary from the congregation by veils and the iconostasis. In the West much of the same result came from the silence invoked for the holiest parts of the Mass, but the altar itself possessed all the elements of mystery and reverence until our day when it has been abused by serving as little more than a shelf or table as wedding parties, choirs, tourists and orchestras enter the sanctuary for their various purposes. If the tradition of the holy place which lasted through many centuries were maintained, such conduct would not be tolerated. But the altar of sacrifice is no longer the center of the community gathering. It has been replaced by the meal and human fellowship.

Monsignor Gamber's works need to be widely circulated and should be studied in every seminary. Truth about early liturgical practices must be known. The false assertion that in the early Church the priest faced the people must be corrected. Parish priests

should know that they were victims of a propaganda that caused them, often against their wills and better judgment, to destroy the works of art in their churches. Bishops who ordered altars to be removed, rebuilt and even destroyed were misinformed. Some of the reformers did more harm to churches in the Midwest than the Vandals ever did in Spain and in North Africa.

Recently, *Notitiae* published a study and some directives coming from the Congregation of Divine Worship. (See p. 14 in this issue for the text.) In it, guidelines are given indicating that in churches with altars that are themselves works of art, they should not be destroyed and a portable altar should not be placed in the sanctuary. Rather, the main altar, with the priest facing toward God, is to be used. The readings, of course, are made toward the people. But the sacrifice is performed with the priest at the head of his congregation, offering Jesus Christ to the Father.

In my parish church, Saint Agnes in Saint Paul, Minnesota, a great baroque building with a beautiful marble altar with mosaics and statues, Mass is celebrated as the rubrics of the *Missale Romanum* of 1970 direct. That missal, published by order of Pope Paul VI, in at least five places, directs the priest at the altar to turn toward the congregation to say *Dominus vobiscum*, *Ecce Agnus Dei*, *Orate Fratres*, etc. The rubrics in Latin are *conversus ad populum* (having turned toward the people) *sacerdos dicit* (the priest says). The norm expressed in the missal does not conceive of the priest looking toward the people. I can truthfully say that with the main altar in use, the reverence toward the sanctuary is maintained and Mass itself is understood to be the Sacrifice of Calvary, the parish coming to God with the sacrifice offered by the parish priest on the parish altar, the center of parochial worship.

It is to be hoped that Monsignor Gamber's work and Cardinal Ratzinger's interest in it may cause interest and discussion in this country as it has in France.

R.J.S.

*Where Have You Gone, Michelangelo? The Loss of Soul in Catholic Culture* by Thomas Day. Crossroad Publishing Co., 370 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10017. Pp. xii + 226. \$19.95.

In this sequel to his best selling and highly controversial book, *Why Catholics Can't Sing*, Thomas Day endeavors to examine in a more extensive, in-depth manner "the loss of soul in Catholic culture." Those familiar with his first volume will immediately recognize Day's personal, anecdotal, often trenchant style, a style that brings laughter, tears, indignation, and even outrage—but never boredom—to his readers. Mr. Day begins with a chapter that offers a succinct and enlightening history of Catholicism in

America, especially during this century, and proceeds to elucidate a "style" or "mood" that characterized pre-Vatican II Catholicism. No mawkish, sentimentalized view of the past will be found here; Day is as pointed in his criticism of pre-conciliar abuses in the Church as he is of post-conciliar offenses. His condemnation of the hideous, pill-box, gymnasium-type churches of the fifties and sixties is no less sharply barbed than his assault on the lecture-hall, sheepshod type structures of the seventies and eighties.

Unlike most Catholic laymen and clergy, Day has obviously read and studied the documents of the Second Vatican Council with care. He repeatedly illustrates that the council itself is not actually the agent of abuse in today's Church; rather, the responsible parties are those who, more often than not through intentional misrepresentation of the spirit of the council, have distorted its message to the faithful. Perhaps the most egregious example of such misrepresentation, vividly illustrated in Day's chapter, "The Late Latin Mass," is the propaganda that has been shoved down the throats of the faithful about the rightful place, or rather the lack of a place, for Latin in contemporary Catholic worship. No less than four articles of the Second Vatican Council's constitution on the sacred liturgy (Cf. Articles 36, 54, 114, and 116) proclaim the prerogative of the Latin language and of music in Latin for the liturgy. Talk to the typical Catholic on the street, however, and you will be told in no uncertain terms that "Latin went out with Vatican II," or "Latin Masses are no longer permitted."

As the reader proceeds through the book, a portrait of two modes of worship, based on two antithetical philosophies, emerges. The first mode is that which has characterized Christian worship, in both East and West, for most of its history; it is undergirded by the philosophical premise that the sacred and profane belong to two different realms. When the worshiper enters the church, everything—architecture, art, music, language—conspires to transport him from this worldly vale of tears into a different realm, timeless and spaceless, where mere mortals can experience the miracle of the sacrifice of Calvary, the "foretaste" of the heavenly banquet to come. The focal point of worship, for the people and the priest, is the altar, above which in the tabernacle resides the Blessed Sacrament, the Incarnate God.

In the majority of post-conciliar churches, on the other hand, the philosophical premise for worship has shifted radically. The modern church building is too often a structure that might pass for any number of things: a concert hall, field house, or a theatre. The interior decoration is nondescript; there may be a few burlap wall hangings, several plants, perhaps a pool of water. The seats face inward towards each other, and the focal point, if one can be identified, is usually the chair, or throne, of the "presider." A