

Which Way to Turn? A Tale of Two Citations

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o WASHINGTON, DC (CNS)--The Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments July 28 issued the first revision in 25 years of the General Instruction of the Roman Missal.

The new Latin-language instruction--released simultaneously in Washington in an English study translation--introduces numerous minor changes in the way Mass is to be celebrated.

It also makes a clear legislative decision on a controversy of recent years by declaring that it is "desirable whenever possible" for the priest to celebrate Mass facing the people.

o But what about the altar? In what direction should we pray during the Eucharistic liturgy? ... When the altar was very remote from the faithful, it was right to move it back to the people.... It was also important to distinguish the place for the Liturgy of the Word from the place for the properly Eucharistic liturgy.... On the other hand, a common turning to the east during the Eucharistic Prayer remains essential. This is not a case of something accidental, but of what is essential. (Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, Ignatius Press, 2000.)

Can these two citations be reconciled? What is the mind of the Church? Is it "essential" to face east during the Eucharistic Prayer? Or has there been a "clear legislative decision" that it is undesirable?

SOME RECENT HISTORY

The opening citation from the Catholic News Service—the official press agency of the American bishops—continues with this statement: "Some Catholic groups have been pressing for church officials to adopt the view that the preferable form of celebration is for priest and people alike to be facing eastward, which entails the priest having his back to the people."

This is partially true. Many Catholics have witnessed or participated in Mass celebrated with priest and people facing the Lord together on Mother Angelica's Eternal Word Television Network or, for example, at Msgr. Richard Schuler's St. Agnes Church in St. Paul, Minnesota. But no groups that I am aware of are "pressing for Church officials to adopt the view" that this is preferable. There are groups, though, who have sought a public clarification of the fact that both the eastern facing celebration (*ad orientem*), which was virtually universal in the Church of East and West for at least 1,600 years, and the now much more widespread celebration "facing the people" (*versus populum*) are in accord with liturgical law and permitted.

It is probable that most Catholics think the change to celebration *versus populum* was called for by

the Second Vatican Council. In fact, the Council documents are entirely silent on this subject, though it was permitted—but not mandated—by subsequent legislation. Because of what is in effect a taboo against the more traditional form of celebration—"traditional" meaning simply what has been the consistent and continuous immemorial practice of the universal Church—there are indeed groups who are convinced that the fact that this traditional form is equally legitimate should be made clear.

The extent of the confusion surrounding this matter can be gauged by the following. At the very time Cardinal Ratzinger was completing the manuscript cited above (Fall, 1999), Bishop David Foley of Birmingham, Alabama, sent a letter to his priests saying: "A well-intentioned but flawed and seriously misdirected movement has begun in the United States. Priests are encouraged, on their own initiative, without the permission of their local bishops, to take liberties with the Mass by celebrating in a manner called *ad orientem*, that is, with their backs to the people." Referring to this development, Bishop Foley continues, "As bishop of this diocese, I have, as the successor of the apostles in union with the Holy Father, the absolute duty to protect it from innovation or sacrilege."

This letter was accompanied by a decree forbidding any priest, including visiting priests, from celebrating Mass *ad orientem* at a free-standing altar or at a televised Mass. This was decreed "in virtue of our authority by the divine and the ecclesiastical law" and with the severest of penalties: "A priest who violates either of these laws is liable to suspension or removal of faculties."

Fortunately this decree had no effect in Rome where the Holy Father habitually celebrates Mass *ad orientem* in his private chapel. And Bishop Foley was later required by the Holy See to rescind what was in fact an invalid decree since it contradicted universal Church law. This rescision escaped public notice because it was camouflaged through Bishop Foley's substituting for the decree his "Norms for Televising the Mass in the Diocese of Birmingham in Alabama" in February of 2000. In this document the universal prohibition and penalty of suspension have disappeared, although one still finds the statement: "All televised Masses will be celebrated in such a way that when the priest is standing at the altar he is facing the people (*versus populum*)."

In light of this, one might ask whether it is merely "desirable whenever possible" to celebrate *versus populum*, or whether it would be "innovation and sacrilege" to do otherwise. But one might equally well ask whether any bishop has the authority to forbid an "innovation" that is over 1,600 years old. Fortunately, the Holy See itself has recently given authoritative answers to both questions. But before I cite the relevant documents, a few words need to be said about the context and origin of this controversial issue.

A SHORT PREHISTORY

Both before and after the Second Vatican Council, a number of prominent liturgists were advocating Mass *versus populum*. In addition to asserting that this would facilitate the "full, conscious, and active participation" which the Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy described as "the aim to be considered above all else" (no. 14), they also claimed two important

historical precedents for the celebrant facing the congregation: 1) the Last Supper; and 2) St. Peter's basilica in Rome—and other churches apparently modeled on it—where, because of the fact that the basilica itself faces west, the celebrant who faces east is therefore also facing the people.

Cardinal Ratzinger, in *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, addresses both the pastoral and historical claims. Addressing the latter, he states quite directly: "This is, of course, a misunderstanding of the significance of the Roman basilica and of the positioning of its altar, and the representation of the Last Supper is also, to say the least, inaccurate."

In regard to the Last Supper, Ratzinger quotes the eminent liturgist Louis Bouyer: "The idea that a celebration facing the people must have been the primitive one, and especially that of the Last Supper, has no other foundation than a mistaken view of what a meal could be in antiquity, Christian or not. In no meal of the early Christian era did the president of the banqueting assembly ever face the other participants. They were all sitting, or reclining, on the convex side of a C-shaped table.... Nowhere in Christian antiquity could the idea have arisen of having to 'face the people' to preside at a meal. The communal character of a meal was emphasized by just the opposite disposition: the fact that all the participants were on the same side of the table."

Cardinal Ratzinger again quotes Father Bouyer regarding the priest facing the people in St. Peter's basilica: "Never, and nowhere, before [the 16th century] have we any indication that any importance, or even attention, was given to whether the priest celebrated with the people before him or behind him. As Professor Cyril Vogel has recently demonstrated, the only thing ever insisted upon, or even mentioned, was that he should say the Eucharistic Prayer, as all the other prayers, facing East.... Even when the orientation of the church enabled the celebrant to pray turned toward the people, when at the altar, we must not forget that it was not the priest alone who, then, turned East: it was the whole congregation, together with him." So, in St. Peter's, when the pope or other celebrant faced east for the Eucharistic Prayer, he was also facing the backs of the eastward-facing congregation!

The historical precedents for the change, then, turn out to be revisionist speculation now recognized as either misunderstanding or fabrication.

Cardinal Ratzinger also addresses the pastoral question. While there have been many changes in the Mass over the centuries, with each new development the question, he says, must be asked: "What is in harmony with the essence of the liturgy, and what detracts from it?" The cardinal answers the part of his own question relevant here: "Despite all the variations in practice that have taken place far into the second millennium, one thing has remained clear for the whole of Christendom: praying toward the east is a tradition that goes back to the beginning. Moreover it is the fundamental expression of the Christian synthesis of cosmos and history, of being rooted in the once-for-all events of salvation history while going out to meet the Lord who is to come again."

But even if one grants that praying toward the east is a privileged expression of liturgical prayer, what about the subjective dispositions of those assisting at Mass? Hasn't the turning versus populum increased the "active participation" of the people?

The empirical evidence does not support this. Between 1965 and 1995, Mass attendance dropped from 55 percent to 25 percent in the United States. That this was not the result of larger cultural changes is demonstrated by the fact that during the same period, church attendance among Protestants rose from 40 percent to 45 percent. But judge for yourself: do you think that Mass versus populum has increased your active participation? Do you think your sense of awe, of reverence, of humility before the ineffable Sacrifice has been enhanced?

The Pope, apparently, does not. Addressing the US bishops of the northwest on the occasion of their ad limina visit in 1998, he pointedly remarked that "in some cases there has been a misunderstanding of the very nature of the liturgy...." What does he propose "in order more confidently to plot our course into the future which God has in mind for his cherished People"? "The challenge is to move beyond whatever misunderstandings there have been and to reach the proper point of balance, especially by entering more deeply into the contemplative dimension of worship, which includes the sense of awe, reverence, and adoration which are fundamental attitudes in our relationship with God." [Emphasis in original]

We are creatures of the senses—of signs and symbols. The turning toward one another has weakened the sense of turning toward God. The emphasis has shifted from the worship of God to the celebration of community. The celebrant, rather than the Sacrifice, has become the focal point. "In reality," the cardinal reflects, "what happened was that an unprecedented clericalization came on the scene. Now the priest—the 'presider', as they now prefer to call him—becomes the real point of reference for the whole liturgy. Everything depends on him.... The turning of the priest toward the people has turned the community into a self-enclosed circle. In its outward form, it no longer opens out on what lies ahead and above, but is closed in on itself." When priest and people faced the same direction, according to Ratzinger—here referring to Joseph Jungmann, one of the architects of the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Liturgy—"they did not close themselves into a circle; they did not gaze at one another; but as the pilgrim People of God they set off for the Oriens, for the Christ who comes to meet us.

But much of this is somewhat speculative. There will soon be a new Roman Missal, and its General Instruction has already been approved by the Holy Father. What does it have to say about the direction of the Eucharistic celebration?

THE MIND OF THE CHURCH

The Catholic News Service article cited at the beginning of this essay concludes its treatment of the "clear legislative decision on a controversy of recent years" by saying, "The 1975 instruction simply said the altar in every church 'should be free-standing to allow the ministers to walk around it easily and Mass to be celebrated facing the people.' The new instruction repeats those words, but after 'facing the people' it adds, 'which is desirable whenever possible.'"

This is accurate. This addition is found in no. 299 of the new General Instruction. But what does this addition mean? Does the new General Instruction now exclude Mass ad orientem? In fact this precise question was addressed to the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the

Sacraments. And a response was given which "will be published soon in the Notitiae [the official publication of the Holy See for liturgical legislation and interpretation], but it is already official and there is no reason it cannot be made public" (letter of Cardinal Jorge Medina Estevez to the prelate posing the question, 26 September, 2000).

The official response (author's translation from original Italian) reads as follows:

The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments has been asked whether the expression in no. 299 of the *Institutio Generalis Missalis Romani* constitutes a norm according to which the position of the priest versus apsidem [facing the apse; see below] is to be excluded.

The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, after mature reflection and in light of liturgical precedents, responds:

Negatively, and in accordance with the following explanation. [Underline in original]

The explanation referred to declares "that the word *expedit* [it is desirable] does not constitute an obligation, but a suggestion.... The clause *ubi possibile sit* [wherever possible] refers to different elements, as for example, the topography of the place, the availability of space, the artistic value of the existing altar, the sensibility of the people participating in the celebrations in a particular church, etc. It reaffirms that the position towards the assembly seems more convenient as it makes communication easier (Cf. the editorial in *Notitiae* 29, 1993, 245-249), without excluding, however, the other possibility."

Here it is at least clear that where the congregation desires *Mass ad orientem* ("their sensibility"), as in the hundreds of thousands of people who view the daily EWTN Mass and the hundreds who are present for it in the monastery chapel—and the logic applies to any congregation--it is certainly not prohibited.

The document adds: "The physical position, especially with respect to the communication among the various members of the assembly, must be distinguished from the interior spiritual orientation of all. It would be a grave error to imagine that the principal orientation of the sacrificial action is toward the community." [Underline in original]

It would be tedious to catalogue the instances where liturgists insist on liturgical symbols representing the reality symbolized as visibly as possible (e.g., pools with "living" water--i.e. a noisy pump--for baptismal fonts, hosts that look and taste like pita bread, red wine that produces lifelike stains on purificators, to name a few). Whether or not the principle is applied to excess in these or other instances, surely a modest application in the most central act of worship of the Church—whereby the "physical position" more perfectly symbolizes the "spiritual orientation"--ought not to be anathema to these same liturgists.

Regarding the novel expression "versus apsidem", the document explains: "It may be that when there were problems of space, or of some other kind, the apse represented the east symbolically.

Today the expression versus orientem often means versus apsidem, and in speaking of versus populum it is not the west but rather the community present that is meant."

The document concludes with a sentence which is—I believe by intention—a two-edged sword: "Taking a rigid position and absolutizing it could become a rejection of some aspect of the truth which merits respect and acceptance." It is to be expected that the liturgical establishment will interpret this to mean that anyone who considers that Mass ad orientem (or ad apsidem) to be preferable—or even permissible--will be "taking a rigid position and absolutizing it." But what is good for the goose is good for the gander. Cardinal Ratzinger, who is in a position to know what is meant, has commented: "All absolutizing of the direction versus populum has been rejected."

It is clear then that the new General Instruction of the Roman Missal does not, as asserted in the Catholic News Service article, "make a clear legislative decision on a controversy of recent years," at least not in the sense intended by the author of the article. In fact it does make a legislative decision: it leaves intact the possibility of celebrating Mass either versus populum or versus apsidem. And while the text itself may not be entirely clear, we now have an official interpretation by the competent authority.

But since Mass ad orientem is only an option, may a bishop forbid it as Bishop Foley of Birmingham, Alabama, has attempted to do? Here again, we have a recent official statement by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments.

The new General Instruction was prepared by this congregation and submitted to the Holy Father for his approval, which he gave on Holy Thursday, April 20, 2000. The congregation addresses this question of the authority of bishops in the matter of legitimate liturgical options in an official letter (Protocol No. 564/00/L) of April 10, 2000. It is not possible that this letter can have been "superseded" by the General Instruction. It is from the same person responsible for the drafting of the General Instruction, which was surely submitted to the Holy Father some time before he reviewed it and gave his approval, and therefore prior to this official document.

The relevant parts of the document, signed by both Cardinal Jorge Medina Estevez, Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, and Archbishop Francesco Pio Tamburrino, the Secretary of the Congregation, state:

(1) "This Dicastery [i.e. the Congregation] wishes to state that Holy Mass may be celebrated versus populum or versus apsidem. Both positions are in accord with liturgical law; both are to be considered correct."

(2) "It should be borne in mind that there is no preference expressed in the liturgical legislation for either position. As both positions enjoy the favor of law, the legislation may not be invoked to say that one position or the other accords more closely with the mind of the Church."

And (3) referring explicitly to Bishop Foley's Norms for Televising the Mass in the Diocese of Birmingham in Alabama: "The publication of such norms falls within the responsibility of the Diocesan Bishop in virtue of his role as moderator of the Sacred Liturgy in the particular Church

entrusted to his pastoral care. In exercising this responsibility, even though he is unable to exclude or mandate the use of a legitimate option [*italics added*], the Diocesan Bishop is competent to provide further guidance to priests in their choice of the various options of the Roman Rite."

In summary: celebrating Holy Mass in the traditional manner, *ad orientem*, which Cardinal Ratzinger has called "not something accidental" but "a rediscovery of something essential, in which Christian liturgy expresses its permanent orientation," is at the very least a legitimate option "in accord with liturgical law" and "to be considered correct." No bishop is able "to exclude or mandate the use of a legitimate option."

The inescapable corollary is that Bishop Foley is not correct when he criticizes, in his attempted decree, those who encourage priests "on their own initiative, without the permission of their local bishops, to take liberties with the Mass by celebrating in a manner called *ad orientem*, that is, with their backs to the people." In fact any priest may, "on his own initiative," so celebrate the Mass. It is not "taking liberties," but rather choosing a legitimate option which no bishop has authority to exclude. And they are not celebrating Mass "with their backs to the people" but rather are facing with the people the Lord who comes as the *Oriens*. And no "permission of their local bishops" is required.

Roma locuta est. Qui potest capere, capiat!

Instructio Generalis Missalis Romani, 1975, no. 262: *Altare maius exstruatur a pariete seiunctum, ut facile circumiri et in eo celebratio versus populum peragi possit.*

General Instruction of the Roman Missal, 1975, no. 262: [The high altar] should be freestanding to allow the ministers to walk around it easily and Mass to be celebrated facing the people.

Instructio Generalis Missalis Romani, 2000, no. 299: *Altare maius exstruatur a pariete seiunctum, ut facile circumiri et in eo celebratio versus populum peragi possit, quod expedit ubicumque possibile sit.*

The high altar should be freestanding to allow the ministers to walk around it easily and Mass to be celebrated facing the people, which is desirable wherever possible.

[AUTHOR ID] Rev. Joseph Fessio, SJ, is the publisher of Ignatius Press and Catholic World Report. He is a member of the California Province of the Society of Jesus.