

The Reform of the Liturgy and the Position of the Celebrant at the Altar | Uwe Michael Lang | From [*Turning Towards the Lord: Orientation in Liturgical Prayer*](#) (2nd edition)

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The reform of the Roman Rite of Mass that was carried out after the Second Vatican Council has significantly altered the shape of Catholic worship. One of the most evident changes was the construction of freestanding altars. The *versus populum* celebration was adopted throughout the Latin Church, and, with few exceptions, it has become the prevailing practice during Mass for the celebrant to stand behind the altar facing the congregation. This uniformity has led to the widespread misunderstanding that the priest's "turning his back on the people" is characteristic of the rite of Mass according to the Missal of Pope Saint Pius V whereas the priest's "turning towards the people" belongs to the *Novus Ordo* Mass of Pope Paul VI. It is also widely assumed by the general public that the celebration of Mass "facing the people" is required, indeed even imposed, by the liturgical reform that was inaugurated by Vatican II.

However, the relevant conciliar and post-conciliar documents present quite a different picture. The Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, speaks neither of a celebration versus populum nor of the setting up of new altars. In view of this fact it is all the more astonishing how rapidly "*versus populum* altars" appeared in Catholic churches all over the world. [1] The instruction *Inter Oecumenici*, prepared by the *Consilium* for the carrying out of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy and issued on September 26, 1964, has a chapter on the designing of new churches and altars that includes the following paragraph:

Praestat ut altare maius exstruatur a pariete seiunctum, ut facile circumiri et in eo celebratio versus populum peragi possit. [It is better for the main altar to be constructed away from the wall so that one can easily walk around the altar and celebrate facing the people.] [2]

It is said to be desirable to set up the main altar separate from the back wall, so that the priest can walk around it easily and a celebration facing the people is *possible*. Josef Andreas Jungmann asks us to consider this:

It is only the possibility that is emphasized. And this [separation of the altar from the wall] is not even prescribed, but is only recommended, as one will see if one looks at the Latin text of the directive.... In the new instruction the general permission of such an altar layout is stressed only with regard to possible obstacles or local restrictions. [3]

In a letter addressed to the heads of bishops' conferences, dated January 25, 1966, Cardinal Giacomo Lercaro, the president of the *Consilium*, states that regarding the renewal of altars "prudence must be our guide". He goes on to explain:

Above all because for a living and participated liturgy, it is not indispensable that the altar should be *versus populum*: in the Mass, the entire liturgy of the word is celebrated at the chair, ambo or lectern, and, therefore, facing the assembly; as to the eucharistic liturgy, loudspeaker systems make participation feasible enough. Secondly, hard thought should be given to the artistic and architectural question, this element in many places being protected by rigorous civil laws. [4]

With reference to Cardinal Lercaro's exhortation to prudence, Jungmann warns us not to make the option granted by the instruction into "an absolute demand, and eventually a fashion, to which one succumbs without thinking". [5]

Inter Oecumenici permits the Mass facing the people, but it does not prescribe it. As Louis Bouyer emphasized in 1967, that document does not at all suggest that Mass facing the people is always the preferable form of Eucharistic celebration. [6] The rubrics of the renewed *Missale Romanum* of Pope Paul VI presuppose a common direction of priest and people for the core of the Eucharistic liturgy. This is indicated by the instruction that, at the *Orate, fratres*, the *Pax Domini*, the *Ecce, Agnus Dei*, and the *Ritus conclusionis*, the priest should turn towards the people. [7] This would seem to imply that beforehand priest and people were facing the same direction, that is, towards the altar. At the priest's communion the rubrics say "*ad altare versus*", [8] which would be redundant if the celebrant stood behind the altar facing the people anyway. This reading is confirmed by the directives of the *General Instruction*, even if they are occasionally at variance with the *Ordo Missae*. [9] The third *Editio typica* of the renewed *Missale Romanum*, approved by Pope John Paul II on 10 April 2000 and published in spring 2002, retains these rubrics. [10]

This interpretation of the official documents has been endorsed by the Roman Congregation for Divine Worship. An editorial in its official publication, *Notitiae*, states that the arrangement of an altar that permits a celebration facing the people is not a question upon which the liturgy stands or falls ("*quaestio stantis vel cadentis liturgiae*"). Furthermore, the article suggests that, in this matter as in many others, Cardinal Lercaro's call for prudence was hardly heard in the post-conciliar euphoria. The editorial observes that changing the orientation of the altar and using the vernacular could become an easy substitute for entering into the theological and spiritual dimensions of the liturgy, for studying its history and for taking into account the pastoral consequences of the reform. [11]

The revised General Instruction of the Roman Missal, which was published for study purposes in the spring of 2000, has a paragraph bearing on the altar question:

Altare exstruatur a pariete seiunctum, ut facile circumiri et in eo celebratio versus populum peragi possit, quod expedit ubicumque possibile sit. [Let the main altar be constructed separate from the wall so that one can easily walk around the altar and celebrate facing the people - which is desirable wherever possible.] [12]

The subtle wording of this paragraph (*possit - possibile*) clearly indicates that the position of the celebrant priest facing the people is not made compulsory. The instruction merely allows for both forms of celebration. At any rate, the added phrase "which is desirable wherever (or whenever) possible (*quod expedit ubicumque possibile sit*)" refers to the provision for a freestanding altar and not to the desirability of celebration towards the people. [13]

Nonetheless various news reports about the revised *General Instruction* seemed to suggest that the position of the celebrant *versus orientem* - or *versus absidem* - was declared undesirable, if not prohibited.

This interpretation however has been rejected by the Congregation for Divine Worship in a response to a question submitted by Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, Archbishop of Vienna. The response is dated 25 September 2000 and signed by Cardinal Jorge Arturo Medina Estévez, then Prefect of the Congregation, and Archbishop Francesco Pio Tamburrino, its Secretary:

In the first place, it is to be borne in mind that the word *expedit* does not constitute an obligation, but a suggestion that refers to the construction of the altar a *pariete seiunctum* (detached from the wall) and to the celebration *versus populum* (towards the people). The clause *ubi possibile sit* (where it is 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 inasmuch as it makes

communication easier (cf. the editorial in *Notitiae* 29 [1993] 245-49), without excluding, however, the other possibility.

However, whatever may be the position of the celebrating priest, it is clear that the eucharistic sacrifice is offered to the one and triune God and that the principal, eternal, and high priest is Jesus Christ, who acts through the ministry of the priest who visibly presides as His instrument. The liturgical assembly participates in the celebration in virtue of the common priesthood of the faithful which requires the ministry of the ordained priest to be exercised in the eucharistic synaxis. 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 towards the community. If the priest celebrates *versus populum*, which is legitimate and often advisable, his spiritual attitude ought always to be *versus Deum per Iesum Christum* (towards God through Jesus Christ), as representative of the entire Church. The Church as well, which takes concrete form in the assembly which participates, is entirely turned *versus Deum* (towards God) as its first spiritual movement. [14]

Obviously, the relevant paragraph of the *General Instruction* must be read in light of this clarification. [15]

Already in the sixties, theologians of international renown criticized the sweeping triumph of the celebration *versus populum*. In addition to Jungmann and Bouyer, Joseph Ratzinger, then professor of theology at Tübingen and *peritus* at the Council, delivered a lecture at the *Katholikentag* of 1966 in Bamberg that was received with much attention. His observations have lost nothing of their relevance:

We can no longer deny that exaggerations and aberrations have crept in which are both annoying and unbecoming. Must every Mass, for instance, be celebrated facing the people? Is it so absolutely important to be able to look the priest in the face, or might it not be often very salutary to reflect that he also is a Christian and that he has every reason to turn to God with all his fellow-Christians of the congregation and to say together with them 'Our Father'? [16]

The German liturgist Balthasar Fischer concedes that the turning of the celebrant towards the people for the entire celebration of the Mass was never officially introduced or prescribed by the new liturgical legislation. In post-conciliar documents it was merely declared possible. In view of this, however, the fact that the celebration *versus populum* has become the dominant practice of the Latin Church shows the astounding extent to which "the active role of the people in the celebration of the Eucharist" has been realized; for Fischer this is indeed the fundamental issue of the liturgical reform after Vatican II. [17]

Two main arguments in favor of the celebrant's position facing the people during the Eucharist are usually presented. First, it is claimed that this was the practice of the early Church that should be the norm for our age. Second, it is maintained that the "active participation" of the faithful, a principle that was introduced by Pope Saint Pius X and is central to *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, demanded the celebration towards the people. [18]

The aim of this study will be to counter these arguments in a twofold way.

First, an examination of the historical evidence will show that the orientation of priest and people in the liturgy of the Eucharist is well-attested in the early Church and was, in fact, the general custom. It will be evident that the common direction of liturgical prayer has been a consistent tradition in both the East and the West.

Second, I should like to argue, relying on the thought of contemporary theologians, that the permanent face-

to-face position of priest and people is not beneficial for a real participation of the faithful in the liturgy, as envisaged by Vatican II. Recent critical reflection on *participatio actuosa* has revealed the need for a theological reappraisal and deepening of this important principle.

Cardinal Ratzinger draws a useful distinction between participation in the Liturgy of the Word, which includes external actions, especially reading and singing, and participation in the Liturgy of the Eucharist, where external actions are quite secondary. He writes:

Doing really must stop when we come to the heart of the matter: the *oratio*. It must be plainly evident that the *oratio* is the heart of the matter, but that it is important precisely because it provides a space for the *actio* of God. Anyone who grasps this will easily see that it is not now a matter of looking at or toward the priest, but of looking together toward the Lord and going out to meet Him. [19]

The statement of the Congregation for Divine Worship already quoted shows that speaking of "celebrating towards the people" indicates merely the position of the priest vis-à-vis the congregation at certain parts of the liturgy but does not refer to a theological concept. [20] The expression *versus (ad) populum* seems to have been used for the first time by the papal master of ceremonies, Johannes Burckard, in his *Ordo Missae* of 1502 [21] and was taken up in the *Ritus servandus in celebratione Missae* of the *Missale Romanum* that Pope Saint Pius V issued in 1570. The *Ritus servandus* deals with the case where the altar is directed to the east and, at the same time, towards the people (*altare sit ad orientem, versus populum*). This is indeed the state of affairs in the major Roman basilicas with the entrance facing east and the apse facing west. Here *versus populum* is to be looked upon merely as an explanatory apposition, namely in view of the immediately following directive that in this case at the *Pax Domini* the celebrant does not need to turn around (*non vertit humeros ad altare*), since he already stands *ad populum* anyway. [22] It is in this topographical sense that the similar passages in Amalarius (ca. 830) [23] and Durandus (towards the end of the thirteenth century) [24] are also to be understood.

When these texts use the phrase *versus populum*, they do not necessarily mean a visual connection between the people and the sacred action at the altar. It is by no means suggested here that nothing should limit, let alone block, the faithful's view of the ritual acts of the celebrant. Such an interpretation would have seemed alien to the understanding of the liturgy that was common from Christian antiquity until well into the Middle Ages and is still found in the Eastern Churches. Thus it is hardly surprising to find that even with altars *versus populum* the sight was significantly restricted, for example, by curtains that were closed during certain parts of the liturgy or already by the architectural layout of the church. [25]

The guiding points of the Congregation for Divine Worship make clear that the expression *versus populum* does not convey the theological dimension of the Eucharistic liturgy. Each Eucharist is offered for the praise and glory of God's name, for the benefit of us and of the holy Church as a whole ("*ad laudem et gloriam nominis Dei, ad utilitatem quoque nostram, totiusque Ecclesiae suae sanctae*").

Theologically, the Mass as a whole, the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, is directed at the same time towards God and towards the people. In the form of the celebration one must avoid a confusion of theology and topography, especially when the priest stands at the altar. The priest speaks to the people only during the dialogues at the altar. Everything else is prayer to the Father through Christ in the Holy Spirit. Evidently, it is most desirable that this theology should be expressed in the visible shape of the liturgy. [26]

Cardinal Ratzinger is equally emphatic that the celebration of the Eucharist, just as Christian prayer in general, has a trinitarian direction and discusses the question of how this can be communicated most fittingly in liturgical gesture. When we speak to someone, we obviously face that person. Accordingly, the

whole liturgical assembly, priest and people, should face the same way, turning towards God to whom prayers and offerings are addressed in this common act of trinitarian worship. Ratzinger rightly protests against the mistaken idea that in this case the celebrating priest is facing "towards the altar", "towards the tabernacle", or even "towards the wall". [27] The catchphrase often heard nowadays that the priest is "turning his back on the people" is a classic example of confounding theology and topography, for the crucial point is that the Mass is a common act of worship where priest and people together, representing the pilgrim Church, reach out for the transcendent God.

Reinhard Meßner notes that what is at issue is not the *celebratio versus populum*, but the direction of liturgical prayer that has been known in the Christian tradition as "facing east". [28]

My claim is that the intrinsic sense of facing east in the Eucharist is the common direction of priest and people oriented towards the triune God. The following chapters on the historical and theological dimensions of this traditional liturgical practice are meant to show that its recovery is indispensable for the welfare of the Church today.

ENDNOTES

[1] J. A. Jungmann, 'Der neue Altar', *Der Seelsorger* 37 (1967): 375.

[2] Sacra Congregatio Rituum, *Instructio ad executionem Constitutionis de sacra Liturgia recte ordinandam Inter Oecumenici*, AAS 56 (1964): 898, no. 91. This translation is more literal than the one found in *Documents on the Liturgy, 1963-1979: Conciliar, Papal, and Curial Texts* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1982), 108, no. 383.

[3] Translating Jungmann, 'Der neue Altar', 375.

[4] G. Lercaro, 'L'Heureux Développement', *Not* 2 (1966): 160; English translation: *Documents on the Liturgy*, 122, no. 428.

[5] Translating Jungmann, 'Der neue Altar', 380; see also C. Napier, 'The Altar in the Contemporary Church', *CleR* 57 (1972): 624. A. Lorenzer, "'[Sacrosanctum Concilium](#)': Der Anfang der "Buchhalterei": Betrachtungen aus psychoanalytisch-kulturkritischer Sicht', in *Gottesdienst-Kirche-Gesellschaft: Interdisziplinäre und ökumenische Standortbestimmungen nach 25 Jahren Liturgiereform*, ed. H. Becker, B. J. Hilberath, and U. Willers, PiLi 5 (St. Ottilien: EOSVerlag, 1991), 158, argues that there is a significant difference between the conciliar documents and what came out of them. Whereas the texts carefully present a number of options, their implementation became an exercise in "total deforestation".

[6] L. Bouyer, *Liturgy and Architecture* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967), 105-6.

[7] *Missale Romanum ex decreto Sacrosancti Oecumenici Concilii Vaticani II instauratum auctoritate Pauli PP. VI promulgatum*, editio typica (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1970), *Ordo Missae cum populo*, 391, no. 25 (*versus ad populum*), 473, no. 128 (*ad populum conversus*), 474, no. 133 (*ad populum versus*), and 475, no. 142 (*versus ad populum*).

[8] *Ibid.*, 474, no. 134.

[9] *Ibid.*, *Institutio Generalis*, nos. 107, 115, 116, 122, as well as 198 and 199 for concelebrated Masses. Cf. O. Nußbaum, 'Die Zelebration *versus populum* und der Opfercharakter der Messe', ZKTh 93 (1971): 149-50, who points out how little the liturgical reform wished to make *versus populum* celebration into the exclusive norm. This, he thinks, is clearly demonstrated by the fact that in the revision of the *Ritus servandus in celebratione Missae*, and subsequently also in the 1965 and 1967 versions of the *Ordo Missae*,

the celebrant was still explicitly instructed to turn towards the people when addressing them directly, as for example in the liturgical greeting. The *Novus Ordo Missae* also keeps to this practice within the eucharistic liturgy. Nußbaum was certainly an advocate of *versus populum* celebration, and yet he concedes that, in the reform of the liturgy, this was not the preferred option let alone the only legitimate way of celebrating Mass.

[10] *Missale Romanum ex decreto Sacrosancti Oecumenici Concilii Vaticani II instauratum auctoritate Pauli PP. VI promulgatum Ioannis Pauli PP. II cura recognitum, editio typica tertia* (Vatican City: Typis Vaticanis, 2002), *Ordo Missae*, 515, no. 28; 600, no. 127; 601, nos. 132-33; 603, no. 141.

[11] Congregatio de Cultu Divino, "Editoriale: Pregare 'ad orientem versus'", *Not* 29 (1993): 247.

[12] *Missale Romanum* (2002), *Institutio Generalis*, no. 299.

[13] The text is carefully scrutinized by C.M. Cullen and J.W. Koterski, "The New IGMR and Mass *versus Populum*", *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, June 2001, 51-54.

[14] Congregatio de Cultu Divino, 'Responsa ad quaestiones de nova *Institutione Generali Missalis Romani*', CCCIC 32 (2000): 171-72. Surprisingly, it has been published, not in *Notitiae*, but in *Communicationes*, the official publication of the Pontifical Council for the Interpretation of Legal Texts. The English translation is taken from *Adoremus Bulletin* Online Edition, vol. 6, no. 9 (December 2000-January 2001), (www.adoremus.org/12-0101cdw-adorient.html) - accessed 5 January 2004).

[15] Cf. The comments of J. Nebel, 'Die *editio typica tertia des Missale Romanum*: Eine Untersuchung über die Veränderungen', *Ecclesia Orans* 19 (2002): 278, n. 72.

[16] J. Ratzinger, 'Catholicism after the Council', trans. P. Russell, *The Furrow* 18 (1967) 11-12.

[17] B. Fischer, 'Die Grundaussagen der Liturgie-Konstitution und ihre Rezeption in fünfundzwanzig Jahren', in Becker, Hilberath, and Willers, *Gottesdienst-Kirche- Gesellschaft*, 422-23.

[18] See, for instance, O. Nußbaum, *Der Standort des Liturgen am christlichen Altar vor dem Jahre 1000: Eine archäologische und liturgiegeschichtliche Untersuchung*, *Theoph* 18 (Bonn: Hanstein, 1965), 1:22, and B. Neunheuser, 'Eucharistiefeier am Altare versus populum: Geschichte und Problematik', in *Florentissima proles Ecclesiae: Miscellanea hagiographica, historica et liturgica Reginaldo Grégoire O.S.B. XII lustra complenti oblata*, ed. D. Gobbi (Trento: Civis, 1996), 442-43.

[19] J. Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 174, cf. 171-77. See also the critical remarks of M. Kunzler, 'La liturgia all'inizio del Terzo Millennio', in *Il Concilio Vaticano II: Recezione e attualità alla luce del Giubileo*, ed. R. Fisichella (Milan: San Paolo, 2000), 217-24, and D. Torevell, *Losing the Sacred: Ritual, Modernity and Liturgical Reform* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 2000).

[20] Congregatio de Cultu Divino, 'Editoriale', 249.

[21] Johannes Burckard, *Ordo Missae Ioannis Burckardi*, ed. J.W. Legg, *Tracts on the Mass*, HBS 27 (London: Harrison, 1904), 142; cf. Nußbaum, 'Die Zelebration versus populum', 160-61.

[22] *Missale Romanum ex decreto Sacrosancti Concilii Tridentini restitutum Pii V Pont. Max. iussu editum, Ritus servandus in celebratione Missae*, V, 3. The 1570 *editio princeps* of this Missal is now accessible in a study edition: M. Sodi and A.M. Triacca, eds., *Missale Romanum: Editio Princeps* (1570), *Monumenta Liturgica Concilii Tridentini* 2 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1998).

[23] Amalarius uses the expressions *ad orientem* and *ad populum* for explaining that the celebrant stands in front of the altar facing east and turns around for the liturgical greeting: Liber *officialis* III, 9, ed. J.M. Hanssens, *Studi e Testi*, 139, 1:288-90. On Amalarius, see now W. Steck, *Der Liturgiker Amalarius: Eine quellenkritische Untersuchung zu Leben und Werk eines Theologen der Karolingerzeit*, MThS.H 35 (Munich: St. Ottilien: EOS-Verlag, 2000).

[24] 'In ecclesiis vero ostia ab oriente habentibus, ut Rome, nulla est in salutatione necessaria conversio, quia sacerdos in illis celebrans semper ad populum stat conversus' (Durandus, *Rationale divinarum officiorum* V, II, 57:CChr.CM 140A, 42-43).

[25] Nußbaum, *Der Standort des Liturgen*, 1:418-19, and J. A. Jungmann, review of O. Nußbaum, *Der Standort des Liturgen am christlichen Altar vor dem Jahre 1000*, ZKTh 88 (1966): 447.

[26] Congregatio de Cultu Divino, 'Editoriale', 249.

[27] J. Ratzinger, *The Feast of Faith: Approaches to a Theology of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 139-43.

[28] R. Meßner, 'Probleme des eucharistischen Hochgebets', in *Bewahren und Erneuern: Studien zur Meßliturgie: Festschrift für Hans Bernhard Meyer SJ zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. R. Meßner, E. Nagel, and R. Pacik, IThS 42 (Innsbruck and Vienna: Tyrolia, 1995), 201, n. 99; likewise M. Wallraff, *Christus versus sol: Sonnenverehrung und Christentum in der Spätantike*, JAC.E 32 (Münster: Aschendorff, 2001), 72, n. 53.

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Fr. Uwe Michael Lang, a native of Germany, is a priest of the Congregation of the Oratory of St. Philip Neri in London. He holds a Mag. Theol. in Catholic theology from the University of Vienna and a D.Phil.

in theology from the University of Oxford. Fr. Lang is a staff member of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, a Consultor to the Office for the Liturgical Celebrations of the Supreme Pontiff and Academic Coordinator of the Master program in "Architecture, Sacred Art and Liturgy" at the Universit  Europea di Roma. Turning towards the Lord has been published in several languages, including German, Italian, French, and Spanish. Recently, Fr. Lang has edited the volume *Die Anaphora von Addai und Mari: Studien zu Eucharistie und Einsetzungsworten* (2007).

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