

**Foreword to U.M. Lang's [\*Turning Towards the Lord: Orientation in Liturgical Prayer\*](#) (2nd edition) |  
By Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger**

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To the ordinary churchgoer, the two most obvious effects of the liturgical reform of the Second Vatican Council seem to be the disappearance of Latin and the turning of the altars towards the people. Those who read the relevant texts will be astonished to learn that neither is in fact found in the decrees of the Council. The use of the vernacular is certainly permitted, especially for the Liturgy of the Word, but the preceding general rule of the Council text says, 'Particular law remaining in force, the use of the Latin language is to be preserved in the Latin rites' (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 36.1).

There is nothing in the Council text about turning altars towards the people; that point is raised only in postconciliar instructions. The most important directive is found in paragraph 262 of the *Institutio Generalis Missalis Romani*, the General Instruction of the new Roman Missal, issued in 1969. That says, '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 (*versus populum*).' The General Instruction of the Missal issued in 2002 retained this text unaltered except for the addition of the subordinate clause, 'which is desirable wherever possible'. This was taken in many quarters as hardening the 1969 text to mean that there was now a general obligation to set up altars facing the people 'wherever possible'.

This interpretation, however, was rejected by the Congregation for Divine Worship on 25 September 2000, when it declared that the word 'expedit' ('is desirable') did not imply an obligation but only made a suggestion. The physical orientation, the Congregation says, must be distinguished from the spiritual. Even if a priest celebrates *versus populum*, he should always be oriented *versus Deum per Iesum Christum* (towards God through Jesus Christ). Rites, signs, symbols, and words can never exhaust the inner reality of the mystery of salvation. For this reason the Congregation warns against one-sided and rigid positions in this debate.

This is an important clarification. It sheds light on what is relative in the external symbolic forms of the liturgy and resists the fanaticisms that, unfortunately, have not been uncommon in the controversies of the last forty years. At the same time it highlights the internal direction of liturgical action, which can never be expressed in its totality by external forms. This internal direction is the same for priest and people, towards the Lord-towards the Father through Christ in the Holy Spirit. The Congregation's response should thus make for a new, more relaxed discussion, in which we can search for the best ways of putting into practice the mystery of salvation. The quest is to be achieved, not by condemning one another, but by carefully listening to each other and, even more importantly, listening to the internal guidance of the liturgy itself. The labelling of positions as 'preconciliar', 'reactionary', and 'conservative', or as 'progressive' and 'alien to the faith' achieves nothing; what is needed is a new mutual openness in the search for the best realisation of the memorial of Christ.

[This small book](#) by Uwe Michael Lang, a member of the London Oratory, studies the direction of liturgical prayer from a historical, theological, and pastoral point of view. At a propitious moment, as it seems to me, this book resumes a debate that, despite appearances to the contrary, has never really gone away, not even after the Second Vatican Council.

The Innsbruck liturgist Josef Andreas Jungmann, one of the architects of the Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, was from the very beginning resolutely opposed to the polemical catchphrase that previously the priest celebrated 'with his back to the people'; he emphasised that what was at issue was not the priest turning away from the people, but, on the contrary, his facing the same direction as the people.

The Liturgy of the Word has the character of proclamation and dialogue, to which address and response can rightly belong. But in the Liturgy of the Eucharist the priest leads the people in prayer and is turned, together with the people, towards the Lord. For this reason, Jungmann argued, the common direction of priest and people is intrinsically fitting and proper to the liturgical action. Louis Bouyer (like Jungmann, one of the Council's leading liturgists) and Klaus Gamber have each in his own way taken up the same question. Despite their great reputations, they were unable to make their voices heard at first, so strong was the tendency to stress the communality of the liturgical celebration and to regard therefore the face-to-face position of priest and people as absolutely necessary.

More recently the atmosphere has become more relaxed so that it is possible to raise the kind of questions asked by Jungmann, Bouyer, and Gamber without at once being suspected of anti-conciliar sentiments. Historical research has made the controversy less partisan, and among the faithful there is an increasing sense of the problems inherent in an arrangement that hardly shows the liturgy to be open to the things that are above and to the world to come.

In this situation, Lang's delightfully objective and wholly unpolemical book is a valuable guide. Without claiming to offer major new insights, he carefully presents the results of recent research and provides the material necessary for making an informed judgment. The book is especially valuable in showing the contribution made by the Church of England to this question and in giving, also, due consideration to the part played by the Oxford Movement in the nineteenth century (in which the conversion of John Henry Newman matured). It is from such historical evidence that the author elicits the theological answers that he proposes, and I hope that the book, the work of a young scholar, will help the struggle-necessary in every generation—for the right understanding and worthy celebration of the sacred liturgy.

I wish the book a wide and attentive readership.

**Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger**

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