



High Altar of St. Matthew Cathedral (Washington D.C.)

VERSUS APSIDEM CELEBRATION IN THE NOVUS ORDO—THE VATICAN RESPONSE

The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments has been asked whether the expression in n. 299 of the *Instituto Generalis Missalis Romani* constitutes a norm according to which the position of the priest *versus apsidem* (facing the apse) 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.

The explanation includes different elements that must be taken into account.

It is in the first place 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 sejunctum* (detached from the wall) and to the celebration *versus populum*. The clause *ubi possibile sit* refers to different elements as, for example, the topography of the place, the availability of the 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) pp. 245-246], 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 that 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 principle 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 Jesus Christum*, as representative of the entire Church. The Church as well, which takes concrete form in the assembly that participates, is entirely turned *versus Deum* as its first spiritual movement.



It appears that the ancient tradition, though not without exception, was that the celebrant and the praying community were turned *versus orientem*, the direction from which the light that is Christ comes. It is not unusual for ancient churches to be “oriented” so that the priest and the people were turned *versus orientem* during public prayer. It may be 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.

In the ancient architecture of churches, the place of the Bishop or the celebrating priest was in the center of the apse where, seated and turned towards the community, his proclamation of the readings was listened to by the congregation. Now this presidential place was ascribed neither to the human person of the bishop or priest, nor to his intellectual gifts and not even to his personal holiness, but to his role as an instrument of the invisible Pontiff who is the Lord Jesus.

When it is a question of ancient churches of great artistic value it is appropriate, moreover, to keep in mind civil legislation regarding changes or renovations. Adding another altar may not always be a worthy solution.

There is no need to give excessive importance to elements that have changed throughout the centuries. What always remains is the event celebrated in the liturgy: this is manifested through the rites, signs, symbols and words which express various aspects of the mystery without, however, exhausting it, because it transcends them. Taking a rigid position and absolutizing it could become a rejection of some aspect of the truth that merits respect and acceptance.

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(CONGREGATION FOR DIVINE WORSHIP
AND
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FROM THE EDITORS

On Seeing The Emperor Naked

Although not directly related to *musica sacra*, the issue of “*versus apsidem*” (or “*versus Deum*”) celebration is of great interest to most of the readers of this journal. I think most of us favor this form of celebration as more appropriate for a sacral celebration directed toward God, and thus were disheartened upon hearing that the new General Instruction seemed to say that Mass should be celebrated facing the people “wherever possible.” This has been cleared up by the recent *dubium*, which is reprinted in this issue. (pp. 22-23) In short, it clarifies what the General Instruction really says, that “the position towards the assembly seems more convenient inasmuch as it makes communication easier . . . without excluding however, the other possibility (priest facing the altar).” In making such a decision the priest must take into account the “topography of the place, the availability of the space, the artistic value of the existing altar, the sensibility of the people participating in the celebrations in a particular church, etc.”

What is most interesting to me is that the *dubium* goes on to distinguish between the “physical position” and the “interior spiritual orientation.” It says that in *versus populum* (facing the people) celebration “[i]t would be a grave error to imagine that the principle orientation of the sacrificial action is towards the community.” True. But Catholicism is a sacramental, incarnational religion, not a purely “spiritual” religion. “Interior spiritual orientations” tend to be represented by external signs and symbols. If the spiritual orientation of the sacrificial portion of the Mass is not towards the people, why would anyone want to introduce the custom of celebrating the Mass facing the people? Is it possible that liturgists introduced this custom in the 1960’s due to a massive loss of faith on their part?

I think so and believe there is considerable evidence. The problem is, we have gotten stuck with this absurd position because many good Catholics were conned into believing—shortly after the Council—that this was “what Vatican II wanted.” In short, the position facing the people was given a quasi-legal status in the minds of many. And many conservative Catholics have an exaggerated reverence for positive law (or what they think is positive law). For this reason many good conservative priests and bishops of the conciliar generation correctly believe that a) the Mass is a propitiatory sacrifice directed toward God, but that b) it should be celebrated in such a way (facing the people) as to help undermine that belief because “the law says so.” Of course they do not consciously think of it that way, but nonetheless hold both propositions.

It makes me think of the story of the emperor’s new clothes. Everyone remarks on the naked emperor’s beautiful clothes because the authorities say he is wearing beautiful clothes. Finally, a little boy sees him for what he is—a naked old man. What we need is that little boy—i.e. a new generation of laity, priests, and, ultimately, bishops who can truly *see* the obvious. If our “interior spiritual orientation” at Mass should be to offer the Eucharistic sacrifice *versus Deum*, should not then the “physical position” of all of us be—*versus Deum*?