



Committee on Divine Worship

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July 12, 2016

Your Eminence / Your Excellency:

As you are no doubt aware, some comments made at a London talk on July 7 by His Eminence Cardinal Robert Sarah, the Prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, quickly became the source of much speculation and debate concerning the proper orientation of the priest celebrant in relation to the assembly during the celebration of the Eucharist in the Ordinary Form. In the whirlwind of media attention which has followed, there has been no small amount of confusion as to whether his remarks, in which he encouraged bishops and priests to celebrate Mass *ad orientem* when feasible beginning on the first Sunday of Advent of this year, constitute an actual change to the rubrics of the liturgy.

In a statement released on Monday, July 11, Fr. Federico Lombardi, the outgoing Director of the Holy See Press Office, has clarified on behalf of the Holy See that no liturgical directives concerning the orientation of the priest in respect to the assembly at Mass were to be anticipated before Advent of this year. **As a result, no changes to the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* are expected at this time, nor is there a new mandate for the celebrant to face away from the assembly.**

As a final comment, n. 299 of the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* does show a preference for the celebrant's facing the people "whenever possible" in the placement and orientation of the altar. That configuration will most likely continue to be the norm at most parishes, as it has been for decades now. However, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments has clarified on earlier occasions that this does not *prohibit* the celebration of the Eucharist in the Ordinary Form *ad orientem*. In fact, there are rubrics in the *Order of Mass* which reflect the real possibility that the celebrant might be facing away from the assembly (see for example n. 29 before the Prayer over the Offerings: "Standing in the middle of the altar, facing the people, extending then joining his hands, he says ..."). Although permitted, the decision whether or not to preside *ad orientem* should take into consideration the physical configuration of the altar and sanctuary space, and, most especially, the pastoral welfare of the faith community being served. Such an important decision should always be made with the supervision and guidance of the local bishop.

Fraternally yours in Christ,

Most Rev. Arthur J. Serratelli
Chairman