

## FOREWORD

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 post-conciliar 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 'pre-conciliar', '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

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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  
Rome, Laetare Sunday 2003

acter' of the liturgy.<sup>5</sup> Reinhard Meßner refers to the 'eminently eschatological meaning' of orientation at prayer; it directs Christian existence towards Christ coming in glory. Meßner adds that the almost total loss of this liturgical tradition in the Roman Catholic Church of today indicates an eschatological deficit.<sup>6</sup> A similar note is struck by Andreas Heinz:

The direction of prayer should point towards the transcendent addressee of prayer. Hence the question of the focal point of the presidential prayer needs to be considered seriously. . . . If the common direction of presider and congregation, in turning at prayer towards Christ, who has been exalted and is to come again, disappeared completely, it would be a regrettable spiritual loss.<sup>7</sup>

In two review articles, Albert Gerhards provides a fair and useful summary of recent contributions to the contentious discussion about *versus orientem* and *versus populum*.<sup>8</sup> He states, frankly:

<sup>5</sup> Cf. J. Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. J. Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 12–23.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. R. Meßner, *Einführung in die Liturgiewissenschaft*, UTB 2173 (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2001), 198; see now also R. Meßner, 'Gebetsrichtung, Altar und die exzentrische Mitte der Gemeinde', in *Communio-Räume: Auf der Suche nach der angemessenen Raumgestalt katholischer Liturgie*, ed. A. Gerhards, T. Sternberg, and W. Zahner, *Bild—Raum—Feier: Studien zu Kirche und Kunst* 2 (Regensburg: Schnell und Steiner, 2003), 27: 'Die "Mitte" der zum Gottesdienst versammelten Gemeinde ist exzentrisch, d.h. sie ist nicht einfach durch kirchenbauliche Gegebenheiten darstellbar.'

<sup>7</sup> Translating A. Heinz, 'Ars celebrandi: Überlegungen zur Kunst, die Liturgie der Kirche zu feiern', *Questions Liturgiques* 83 (2002): 125.

<sup>8</sup> A. Gerhards, "'Blickt nach Osten!'" Die Ausrichtung von Priester und Gemeinde bei der Eucharistie—eine kritische Reflexion nachkonziliarer Liturgiereform vor dem Hintergrund der Geschichte des Kirchenbaus', in *Liturgia et Unitas: Liturgiewissenschaftliche und ökumenische Studien zur Eucharistie und zum gottesdienstlichen Leben in der Schweiz: Études liturgiques et oecuméniques sur l'Eucharistie et la vie liturgique en Suisse: In honorem Bruno Bürki*, ed. M. Klöckener

The Liturgical Movement certainly had a Trinitarian deficit in its Christocentrism, and this may have had an effect on the liturgy of the Second Vatican Council. Both Ratzinger and Lang rightly reclaim this dimension.<sup>9</sup>

It would seem questionable, to say the least, whether the present shape of Catholic worship can simply be identified as the 'liturgy of the Second Vatican Council'. Be that as it may, Gerhards concedes that there are deficiencies in contemporary liturgical practice:

Authors like Ratzinger and Lang have shown the problems inherent in the constant face-to-face position [of priest and people at Mass], which is also called into question by the experience of community practice.<sup>10</sup>

Gerhards also observes that present liturgical scholarship is quite favourable to recovering the category of sacrifice. As he rightly stresses, the sacrificial understanding of the Eucharist should not be played off against its character as a sa-

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and A. Join-Lambert (Fribourg: Univ.-Verl., and Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2001), 197–217; and 'Versus orientem—versus populum: Zum gegenwärtigen Diskussionsstand einer alten Streitfrage', *ThRv* 98 (2002): 15–22.

<sup>9</sup>Translating Gerhards, 'Versus orientem', 20; about the current discussion on liturgy and Church architecture, see also A. Gerhards, 'Wort und Sakrament—Zur Bipolarität von Liturgie und Kirchenraum', in *Communio-Räume: Auf der Suche nach der angemessenen Raumgestalt katholischer Liturgie*, ed. A. Gerhards, T. Sternberg, and W. Zahner, *Bild—Raum—Feier: Studien zu Kirche und Kunst* 2 (Regensburg: Schnell und Steiner, 2003), 10–26.

<sup>10</sup>Translating Gerhards, "'Blickt nach Osten!'", 208. For a similar criticism, see L. van Tongeren, 'Vers une utilisation dynamique et flexible de l'espace: Une réflexion renouvelée sur le réaménagement d'églises', *Questions Liturgiques* 83 (2002): 165: 'Cela favorise une consommation passive plutôt qu'une participation active. . . . Le chœur adresse la louange de Dieu à l'assemblée, et . . . le président n'adresse pas sa prière à Dieu mais à l'assemblée; il ne précède pas l'assemblée dans la prière mais adresse une prière en présence de la communauté.'

## I

### The Reform of the Liturgy and the Position of the Celebrant at the Altar

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.<sup>1</sup> The instruction *Inter Oecumenici*, prepared by the *Consilium* for the carrying out of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy and issued on 26 September 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.]<sup>2</sup>

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 emphasised. 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.<sup>3</sup>

In a letter addressed to the heads of bishops' conferences, dated 25 January 1966, Cardinal Giacomo Lercaro, the pres-

<sup>1</sup> J. A. Jungmann, 'Der neue Altar', *Der Seelsorger* 37 (1967): 375.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Translating Jungmann, 'Der neue Altar', 375.

ident 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.<sup>4</sup>

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’.<sup>5</sup>

*Inter Oecumenici* permits the Mass facing the people, but it does not prescribe it. As Louis Bouyer emphasised in 1967, that document does not at all suggest that Mass facing the people is always the preferable form of eucharistic celebration.<sup>6</sup> The rubrics of the renewed *Missale Romanum* of Pope Paul VI presuppose a common direction of priest and

<sup>4</sup> G. Lercaro, ‘L’Heureux Développement’, *Not* 2 (1966): 160; English translation: *Documents on the Liturgy*, 122, no. 428.

<sup>5</sup> 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-kulturrkritischer 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: EOS-Verlag, 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’.

<sup>6</sup> L. Bouyer, *Liturgy and Architecture* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967), 105–6.

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.<sup>7</sup> 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*',<sup>8</sup> 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*.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *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*).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 474, no. 134.

<sup>9</sup> *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.

<sup>10</sup> *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.

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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.<sup>11</sup>

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 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.]<sup>12</sup>

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

<sup>11</sup> Congregatio de Cultu Divino et Disciplina Sacramentorum, 'Editoriale: Pregare "ad orientem versus"', *Not* 29 (1993): 247.

<sup>12</sup> *Missale Romanum* (2002), *Institutio Generalis*, no. 299.

(*quod expedit ubicumque possibile sit*)' refers to the provision for a freestanding altar and not to the desirability of celebration towards the people.<sup>13</sup> 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 [sic] 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

<sup>13</sup> The text is carefully scrutinised by C. M. Cullen and J. W. Koterski, 'The New IGMR and Mass *versus Populum*', *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, June 2001, 51–54.

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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.<sup>14</sup>

Obviously, the relevant paragraph of the *General Instruction* must be read in light of this clarification.<sup>15</sup>

Already in the sixties, theologians of international renown criticised 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:

<sup>14</sup> Congregatio de Cultu Divino et Disciplina Sacramentorum, '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), (<http://www.adoremus.org/12-0101cdw-adorient.html>) (accessed 5 January 2004).

<sup>15</sup> 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.

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'?<sup>16</sup>

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 realised; for Fischer this is indeed the fundamental issue of the liturgical reform after Vatican II.<sup>17</sup>

Two main arguments in favour 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.<sup>18</sup> The aim of this study will be to counter these

<sup>16</sup>J. Ratzinger, 'Catholicism after the Council', trans. P. Russell, *The Furrow* 18 (1967): 11–12.

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

<sup>18</sup>See, for instance, O. Nußbaum, *Der Standort des Liturgen am christlichen Altar vor dem Jahre 1000: Eine archäologische und liturgiegeschichtliche Untersuchung*,

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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.<sup>19</sup>

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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.

<sup>19</sup>J. Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. J. Saward (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).

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.<sup>20</sup> 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<sup>21</sup> 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 appositive, 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.<sup>22</sup> It is in this topographical sense that the similar passages in Amalarius (ca. 830)<sup>23</sup> and Durandus

<sup>20</sup> Congregatio de Cultu Divino et Disciplina Sacramentorum, 'Editoriale', 249.

<sup>21</sup> 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.

<sup>22</sup> *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).

<sup>23</sup> 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*

(towards the end of the thirteenth century)<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup>

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

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*quellenkritische Untersuchung zu Leben und Werk eines Theologen der Karolingerzeit*, MThS.H 35 (Munich: St. Ottilien: EOS-Verlag, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> '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).

<sup>25</sup> 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.

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.<sup>26</sup>

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'.<sup>27</sup> 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

<sup>26</sup> Congregatio de Cultu Divino et Disciplina Sacramentorum, 'Editoriale', 249.

<sup>27</sup> J. Ratzinger, *The Feast of Faith: Approaches to a Theology of the Liturgy*, trans. G. Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 139-43.

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east'.<sup>28</sup> 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.

<sup>28</sup>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, and especially R. Meßner, 'Gebetsrichtung, Altar und die exzentrische Mitte der Gemeinde', in *Communio-Räume: Auf der Suche nach der angemessenen Raumgestalt katholischer Liturgie*, ed. A. Gerhards, T. Sternberg, and W. Zahner, Bild—Raum—Feier: Studien zu Kirche und Kunst 2 (Regensburg: Schnell und Steiner, 2003), 27–30; likewise M. Wallraff, *Christus versus sol: Sonnenverehrung und Christentum in der Spätantike*, JAC.E 32 (Münster: Aschendorff, 2001), 72, n. 53.