



# *The* FURROW

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## Facing the Lord's Table

*– Sacred Space  
and our Space*

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## – *Sacred Space and our Space*

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Last July Pope Francis told Cardinal Sarah that there would be no return to the practice of the presider facing away from the assembly (the so-called '*ad orientem*' position) at the Eucharist.<sup>1</sup> But does this high-profile debate hide some deeper misunderstandings?

Of all that happened in the liturgy in the aftermath of Vatican II, only two events were visible to most people. First, there was the disappearance of Latin (which had become a *de facto* badge of identity for many Catholics), and the second was the fact that now the president of the assembly 'faced the people.' This was visually different, obvious, and – as is the way with that which we see with our own eyes – imagined to be self-explanatory. 'He now faces us!' and 'We can now see him and see what's happening!' were the comments at the time, and the whole church-building re-ordering programme was expressed in 'turning round the altar so that the priest faces the people.' For the 'average person' unversed in liturgy, theology, and with a minimalist approach to 'getting Mass on Sundays and the days appointed' (if even then), this was what liturgical change was about: literally, a shifting of the furniture. It is probably for this reason that those who are unhappy with the reforms of the Council imagine that if they can change back the furniture, and make the language more Latinate as in the 2011 missal, then they will have broken the symbolic heart of the renewal.

Regrettably, when the changes were being made in the late '60s and early '70s most of the energy was expended on figuring out new rubrics rather than asking why the changes were being made in the first place. So why did the president turn around? The new shape of the liturgical arena, the president facing the rest of the congregation, was presented at the time *and is still most often presented today* in terms of communication and the theory of communication. The president could now be seen and heard (we forget that the Eucharistic Prayer was, until the reform, said

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1. <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/5825/0/pope-francis-issues-directive-contradicting-advice-of-cardinal-sarah>

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silently, while most of the rest of the prayers, such as the *Orate fratres*, were said in a voice that could be heard only a few feet away), and this was perceived as a welcome development because it fostered understanding and comprehension (which it does). This, in turn, was expected to lead to a deeper appreciation of the Eucharist (as it has to an extent that is not often acknowledged and in ways that were not expected).<sup>2</sup> Since everyone could now see, there was consequent emphasis on everyone being able to see: so clear sight-lines – again a valuable element in communication such as one would have in any other arena where the focus is on an individual and his words and actions (*et ceteris paribus*: a good thing) – were desired in every church building. This was often difficult when long, narrow buildings were being adapted to the reformed liturgy, or in buildings with transepts, ambulatories, or side aisles where pillars became the great blockages the re-orderers' aims. Solutions varied from moving the altar forward so as to be as free of such obstructions to vision, to roping off areas where there was no view of the president, to mirrors, or even CCTV screens. In every case, the rationale was presented by analogy with an auditorium or theatre. Lastly, it was often suggested at the time – though I cannot locate this in print – that being able to see what was happening would destroy the false mystique that equated the actions of the priest with 'hocus pocus,' 'priestcraft,' and pseudo-reverence. Again, the rationale for the change was presented in terms of interpersonal or group communication. And, I suspect, critics of the reform are now quietly rubbing their hands for appeals to such values as communications' theory is precisely the kind of 'utilitarian,' 'pragmatic,' 'anthropocentric,' and 'ethical' values they assert have corrupted the true values of the liturgy.<sup>3</sup> However, this emphasis on being able to see the priest made him and his role in the liturgy central to the whole event – and this dynamic (one actor with an audience) is actually a hangover from the eucharistic spirituality that Vatican II set out to challenge.

#### SELLING THE REFORM SHORT

But did those who implemented the reform in parishes sell it short? Was it simply a matter of communications? Perhaps it was something far more fundamental – indeed, was it such a fundamental aspect of the reform that neither they nor their congregations could take on-board the rationale of the shift in one move? Therefore, they 'explained it' by simplification – and in the process traduced it? I believe that this is exactly what happened:

2. See T. O'Loughlin, 'Eucharistic Celebrations: the Chasm between Idea and Reality,' *New Blackfriars* 91(2010)423-38.
3. See J. Leachman and D. McCarthy, 'The Maturing of the Classical Liturgical Movement in England and Wales (Part 2),' *Music and Liturgy* 38/1(2012), 22.

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in well-intentioned attempts to communicate ‘the changes’ in the liturgy they opted to use ‘communication’ as the rationale for the new physical arrangements, and once embarked on that road, then every arrangement had to be explained in a similar fashion: it must be seen by all, all the time.

The result is, primarily, a lack of awareness of the deeper demands of the reforms that lead to the change in orientation, and, accidentally, the creation of sanctuary areas that are scenes of clutter resembling ecclesiastical suppliers’ showrooms. We have the altar, the chair (and maybe a few of extras for others who want to be close to the action or an old *sedilia* for servers), a lectern in front of the chair (sometimes), an ambo (often squeezed up beside the altar, a baptismal font (usually of minimal proportions but still prominent and distracting), a Paschal Candle, a tabernacle, a cross, with often another one on the altar and yet another processional cross, and a couple of tables just to hold odds and ends. This does not include the extra jumble needed for children’s Masses, nor the Christmas arrangements when there is a crib in front of the altar with a little star-shaped electric light and a Christmas Tree. Nor does it mention the need to get musicians into a close-to-the-centre location, organ consoles, or additional points with microphones for music directors. And, we should not forget the various flags, banners, posters, and ‘symbols’ that are located there; nor, of course, the apparatus for taking up the collection that clutter around the table of the Lord. Some critics of the reforms of Vatican II suspect that the value of ‘noble simplicity’ in the liturgy to be a secular import: well, they need not worry! In most communities around the great feasts there is little simplicity, much less ‘noble simplicity’ in the liturgical arrangements, and one can but pray quietly that the president’s alb does not get caught on the various bits of kit and cause him to trip! Meanwhile, all this is still explained by the need ‘to communicate’ despite the fact that what we all see is a classic case of information overload!

### SO WHY DID THE PRESIDENT TURN AROUND?

So why did Vatican II want the president facing others in the assembly and every building to have the ancient basilican arrangement? The fundamental rationale of the reform was the renewed awareness of the early and patristic understanding of *the assembly as gathered around the table of the Lord*. The Eucharist is many things, but in its fundamental form is a meal of eating and drinking, a banquet, a *sacrum convivium*, and its visible focus is the visible focus of a meal: a table. We may interpret that table theologically as an altar – the table is ‘our altar’ as distinct from the altar in the Jerusalem temple or the many altars found in ordinary homes in antiquity

– but it is, in its own reality, first and last, a table. The Lord gathers us at his table: there we discover his presence, and bless the Father. The table is at once in unity with our own tables – for a table is a reality of the ordinary world – and in union with the table of the heavenly banquet. The table transcends the dichotomy, which is a false dichotomy for Christians, of the sacred and the profane: the domestic is the locus of the sacred. The Lord has come to our table, we gather as a priestly people at his. We can interpret the table in many ways, and interpreting it as ‘an altar’ has been the most common, but our eucharistic thinking must start with what it is. This use of the word ‘table’ did, of course, produce allergic reactions to Catholics of an older generation: Protestants had the ‘holy table’ or brought out a table for a ‘communion service’; we had ‘an altar’ – and the physical object in a church-building was never referred to by any other name: it was an altar, and altars were for sacrifice! But we still referred to ‘the *mensa*’ in many of the rubrics; the shape never took on that of either an Old Testament or a pagan altar; and it was expected that a vestigial four legs (just like the table I am writing upon) should appear as four columns or pilasters on the front of ‘the altar.’ There is only one problem with tables: you cannot just use them in any old way, they create their own space for us as dining animals!<sup>4</sup>

#### HUMAN DOMESTIC SPACE

Let us imagine the smallest possible table gathering: two people meeting for a cup of coffee in a café. Unless they are not focussed on their own meeting – i.e. they want to watch a TV screen rather than talk to one another – they will take up positions opposite one another across the table. The table creates a common space, a space of eating and talking, and of sharing a common reality in a way that cannot take place when people sit side-by-side at a bar. If you are alone it is as easy to sit at a bar and eat, drink, read the paper or play with your phone as at table (and you do not risk having a stranger sit opposite you); but if two people go to drink instant coffee or have a magnificent meal together, then they will face one another. We watch each other eating, and around the table we become a community – however transient – and not just two individuals.

Person A



**Table**

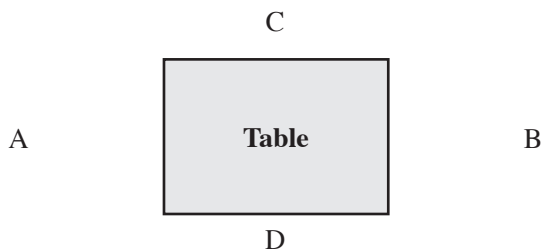
Person B

4. See M. Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities, and Meaning of Table Manners* (new ed., London 1996) for an overview of a large range of scholarship carried out with wit and insight.

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This is also a space of deep communication between us as people: we can share our thoughts with our food, we can pick up all the richness of facial expression, tone, body language – and really communicate. This is the communication we long for as human beings, not ‘the communications’ of the media or of communications’ theory that is better described as information transfer. The table is an intimate place – yet curiously it is also a public space, a place of respect for one another (hence ‘table manners’), and a place where our humanity and our relations with other humans are enhanced. The importance of the table is written as deep in our humanity as anything else: it is studied by behavioural scientists, anthropologists, and psychologists – but it suffices here to remind ourselves of the references to tables in the psalms,<sup>5</sup> the gospels,<sup>6</sup> or early Christian stories.<sup>7</sup> The table is at the heart of our humanity, and (consequently – I would argue) at the heart of our liturgy.

But what of a table with more than two people? The fundamental logic continues:



We arrange ourselves around the table and create roughly equal spaces between each other. This continues until we have used up all the space around the table – and then, traditionally, we extend the table into the longer form we find at banquets, in refectories and messes, and even in domestic dining rooms where the table ‘pulls out’ for those occasions when we have extra guests.

The Eucharist is our common table as Christians and our sacred table as guests of the Lord: it was to re-establish this fundamental table-logic that stood behind the changes of Vatican II. The move in the president’s direction was not that ‘he could face the people’

5. Ps 23:5; 79:19; or 123:3.

6. Mt 8:11; 9:10; 15:27; 26:7; 26:20 – and this is in just one gospel; see T. O’Loughlin, ‘The Meal of Memories,’ *Doctrine and Life* 60(2010)47-52; and idem, ‘Mark and the Eucharist,’ *The Pastoral Review* 8/3(2012)49-53.

7. See T. O’Loughlin, ‘Another post-resurrection meal, and its implications for the early understanding of the Eucharist’ in Z. Rodgers, M. Daly-Denton, and A. Fitzpatrick-McKinley eds, *A Wandering Galilean: Essays in Honour of Seán Freyne* (Leiden 2009), 485-503.

in serried ranks of pews, nor be visible as a science teacher's bench must be visible to her class, nor as a lecturer on a podium – but so that if he stood at the Lord's table, everyone else could arrange themselves around that table *as human beings do*.

But is this not simply impossible? How does one put hundreds of people at a packed Sunday Mass around a table? People need to be in pews: which means that only the president can be at the table! Well, first, the shift in the position of the table has been done in most buildings in minimal way. It was just 'pulled out from the wall' rather than made the centre of a space for the assembled banqueting community. Contrast the way the Underground Basilica in Lourdes was re-ordered with the way most parish churches in Ireland have been. Second, in many places it has been found possible to create a long table in an otherwise uncluttered space and arrange well over a hundred people to stand around it such that all could see they were gathered around the Lord's table. The late Sean Swayne created a memorably long table in the centre of the Liturgy Centre when it was in Carlow. And third, the Eucharist is a human sized event – and gathering of over a hundred should be considered very exceptional – as, indeed, they were for most of Christian history.<sup>8</sup>

However, it is important to note just how deeply set this reality of 'being around the table' is within our tradition. First of all, in the directions for gathering at meals that come from Jewish sources that are contemporaneous with the earliest Christian meals we find that when the guests assembled they had a cup of wine ('the first cup') and each said the blessing individually; then they went to the table and there was another cup ('the second cup') and now one person blessed for all. The reason for the shift is explicitly spelled out: only when they were at table were they a community, and so only then could one bless for all.<sup>9</sup> Now think again about the Last Supper, the other meals of Jesus, the blessing of the cup in 1 Corinthians, or the ritual instructions for the community meals in the Didache.

Second, consider the words of the traditional Roman eucharistic prayer ('the Roman Canon' = Eucharistic Prayer I in the reformed rite): *Memento, Domine, famulorum famularumque tuarum et omnium circumstantium, ...*. A literal rendering (still too daring for the text of 2011) supposes the arrangement of people that existed when the text was created: 'Remember, O Lord, you male servants and your female servants, indeed all who are standing

8. See T. O'Loughlin, 'How many priests do we need?' *New Blackfriars* 86(2005)642-657; and idem, 'The Eucharist as "The Meal that should be",' *Worship* 80(2006)30-44.

9. See G.H. Bahr, 'The Seder of Passover and the Eucharistic Words,' *Novum Testamentum* 12(1970)189, 193, and 198.

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around ...'.<sup>10</sup> Could it be that the venerable Roman Canon assumes that the community, both men and women, are standing around the table of the Lord?

And third, we have from the late patristic and early medieval periods directions for how the broken parts of the loaf are to be arranged on the paten, and these often assume that the arrangement around the paten's rim reflect the people around the table.<sup>11</sup> So, once again, table gathering is not a new 'secular' or imported idea, but a return to the depths of our own tradition.

If we start thinking about the new orientation not as 'priest facing people' or 'people looking at priest', but as *the whole community gathered around an actual table* we not only have a more authentic expression of the Eucharist, a deeper appreciation of the many prayers of the liturgy that suppose this physical arrangement, but we also see how shallow has been our taking up of the reforms of Vatican II over the last half-century. A fuller renewal, with a deeper appreciation of its inherent logic, is going to mean more shifting around in buildings, a gradual exposure of the ideas so that people feel comfortable with them and see why we are abandoning the 'theatre-and-stage' arrangements, and it will run into cultural problems in that many modern households do not eat together at a table at home<sup>12</sup> and so lack a basic human experience upon which grace might build the community of the Lord's table. But both the present arrangements of the expert being visible at his bench, and pre-reformed notion of only one person at the table – in effect not facing the same way as the people, but turning his back on them and keeping them away from the table behind him and railings – are fundamentally flawed as being neither true to Christian tradition nor human nature.

The theological bottom line is this: if the Logos has come to dwell among us (Jn 1:14), then every table of Christians is a place where one could rub up against him at one's elbow.

### FURTHER READING

Thomas O'Loughlin, *The Eucharist: Origins and Contemporary Understandings* (London 2015).

10. On the setting of this prayer and its development within the tradition, see T. O'Loughlin, 'The *Commemoratio pro vivis* of the Roman Canon: a textual witness to the evolution of western eucharistic theologies?' in J. Day ed., *The Development of the Roman Rite*, Oxford, forthcoming

11. See T. O'Loughlin, 'The Praxis and Explanations of Eucharistic Fraction in the Ninth Century: the Insular Evidence,' *Archiv für Liturgiewissenschaft* 45(2003)1-20.

12. A recent UK survey found that one in four households now have no dining table / kitchen table at which they take meals as a household – the human consequences for society are frightening!