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Are We Talking  
to God or to  
Ourselves?  
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Orientation

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# Are We Talking to God or to Ourselves? A Test Case in Liturgical Orientation

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Cardinal Ratzinger, before he became pope, argued in his book *The Spirit of the Liturgy* for the appropriateness of an ‘Eastern’ orientation of both priest and people in the celebration of Mass, the orientation which, with few exceptions, obtained in celebrations of the Tridentine Mass. The argument was more recently taken up by Cardinal Sarah, who argued for a return to this orientation. According to this way of thinking, when the priest celebrates facing the people, the danger is that the community becomes focussed in on itself instead of on God; and when all face the same direction, the community is united in its orientation beyond itself, in a gaze *towards* God.

I think there is indeed a question to be raised about where the focus is in our liturgies. In any true relationship there is a dialogue, a balance, a dancing between two opposite poles. It takes two to tango! The community is important; it is, after all, a sacramental sign of salvation, as Vatican II pointed out (*Sacrosanctum concilium*, 5). The presence of the community must be real: we must bring ourselves to the liturgy, and the liturgy should speak in such a way that our voices are heard. We have to be able, at least to some extent, to recognize ourselves in what is sung, said and done. On the other hand, we are in dialogue with God, who loved us first; otherwise we are just talking to ourselves. As with any loving relationship, we bring who we are but, in some way, let go of who we are (or who we think we are) in the face of the mystery of the Other. The liturgy should speak of God, and not just with words. The celebration should be a space that opens us up to moments of *epiphany*, moments of disclosure where God is encountered

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in Christ, through the action of the Holy Spirit. The dialogue is all the more mysterious because it has a Trinitarian shape. It is a Trinitarian dialogue, a manifestation of the ‘whole Christ’ (*totus Christus*), head and members, where the Holy Spirit has been poured into each of us so that, through, with and in Christ, we address the Father as sons and daughters of God. *How* might this best be realised when it comes to liturgical layout and orientation? There are, clearly, different views.

When it comes to prayer, I find something attractive about the tradition of facing East, something which, in Christianity, goes back as least as far as Origen (c. 184-253). The East is the place of the rising sun, a wonderful symbol of the resurrection found, for example, in the Book of Revelation (Rev 7:2). In the first book of the Bible, the East is the place of the Garden of Eden, the place where human beings walked with God and conversed with him. Looking to the East in prayer can be a vivid bodily expression of our hope in the resurrection and our desire to be with God and speak with God. I am also old enough to have happy childhood memories of Mass celebrated with the ‘Eastern’ orientation as the norm; and when I see pictures of this kind of celebration I do experience a nostalgia for something that did capture me as a child.

Recently I had the experience of attending daily Mass at a side chapel in the Basilica of St Mary Major in Rome. Mass was celebrated in the beautiful chapel containing the icon of the Blessed Virgin known as *Salus Populi Romani*, a shrine which Pope Francis visits when he can after trips abroad. The interweaving of art and architecture in this chapel is done with such skill that one can appreciate why a new altar facing the people was never installed. It simply could never hold its own in an environment where architectural lines, sculpture, stone plaster and gold leaf all conspire to lift one’s gaze to the actual wall of the chapel, and the altar beneath it. I attended Mass each day for nine days (by chance, a kind of novena!), and given the various factors mentioned above, was well disposed to discover that a celebration *ad orientem* would open me up to a deeper experience of the liturgy as an encounter with God, and not just a meeting of the community. But it *didn’t* happen. Perhaps it might have done so, if I had been very close to the altar, as altar server, concelebrant, or myself as presiding celebrant. As a ‘person in the pew’, I felt relatively cut off from what was happening.

There was a genuine warmth and gentle reverence about the priest who celebrated Mass each day. His manner welcomed and included us. He gave a brief introduction to the Mass and also a daily homily. When he prayed out loud he said the words clearly, and it seemed to me that he meant them. When we moved from

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the Liturgy of the Word to the Liturgy of the Eucharist, he prayed facing 'East' at the altar. I know enough about liturgical theology to know that he prayed not just for us but also in our name. And yet, the visual message that I picked up was that, really, what happened at the altar was mostly between God and him. I really did feel like something of a spectator and had to work harder to connect with what he was doing, even though his words were clearly amplified. It was as if he were doing something for our benefit (which he clearly was) but the notion that what was happening was really an act of the whole assembly (as taught in the Catechism CCC 1136-1144) was less clearly conveyed.

Clearly what I am describing is a personal experience, coloured by my own individual subjectivity, and therefore of only very limited validity in a more general discussion. And of course we can have 'off days' in the liturgy and in prayer, when nothing speaks to us and when we are, in some way lacking in sensitivity. Such periods are frequent enough for me, but I don't think they characterised those nine days.

### A SACRIFICE IN THE FORM OF A MEAL

As I reflect on this experience, I remember a lecture given by renowned liturgical scholar Fr Ansgar Chupungco, OSB in Rome, some thirty or so years ago, where the question of liturgical orientation came up. My memory is that he appreciated fully the meaning of turning East for prayer and was all for it, but another consideration was *more* important when the liturgy in question was the Eucharist: the actual form in which the Eucharist was instituted.

Without attempting a huge exposition on the nature of the Eucharist, which would take many pages, I think it is safe to say that it is a celebration through which we participate in the sacrifice which is Christ's life, death, resurrection and sending of the Spirit. It is a memorial of his paschal mystery such that what is celebrated is present for us now in sacrament. But our participation in this sacrifice takes place in the form of a *meal*: 'When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim your death, O Lord, until you come again.' The dynamics of a meal both in human life generally and in biblical tradition more specifically (especially the earthly life of Jesus himself), are such that this dimension cannot be quietly passed over as relatively insignificant compared with the sacrifice in which we participate. The whole point is that it is through the sacramental sign that we enter into the theological reality. The sign of the meal cannot be by-passed, and the degree to which we fail to honour the sign may well be the degree to which we fail to enter into the theological reality it conveys: the sacrifice of Christ.

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If, given the accounts of the Eucharist and Eucharistic allusions in the New Testament, we must truly honour the form of the Eucharistic celebration as a meal, then the dynamics of human meal sharing suggest that we gather *around* the altar. I can't think of any life-giving human meal sharing where relative positioning of host, food and participants translates into something like the arrangement of a celebration of the Eucharist *ad orientem*, allowing even for the fact that this food operates on the level of symbol and is not about having a full meal in the ordinary sense. People simply don't share meals in this kind of layout, still less meals that are hugely significant. I hope that these lines don't come across as a denigrating of the sacrificial character of the Mass. My point here is that the fundamental ritual participation in the sacrifice is by way of the meal (cf. *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* art. 85), and that this has a significant bearing on liturgical orientation.

## THE TRANSCENDENT GOD IN OUR MIDST

Getting back to my own personal experiences, I have to say that, in fact, I experience the Eucharistic Liturgy as encounter with *God* more vividly in the orientation that has become the norm *after* Vatican II. When the liturgy is celebrated well we don't have to find ourselves in an 'either/or' situation vis a vis God and the community: we discover in the Eucharist that God has come among us, that Christ is present and that we are members of his body, that 'heaven is wedded to earth'. The Holy, Other, Transcendent, is in our midst, and wonderfully so. God is among us, and yet beyond us at the same time. It's not just about whether the priest happens to have his back to the rest of us or not. At Glenstal Abbey, where I am a monk, the layout of nave and monastic choir is such that there is a very clear sense that the congregation, monks and others, is gathered *around* the altar. This usually necessitates that the presiding celebrant will have his back to at least some of the monks. When I am one of those at his back I don't feel any less part of what is happening, because we are all gathered around the altar. We are not spectators.

It is true that some priests experience some kind of pressure to 'perform' for people because they are facing them, something which did not obtain when they faced the other way and when their prayers were inaudible and in a foreign language. I think that in the orientation towards the people, there are problems where you find attempts on the part of priests to somehow 'dramatize' the prayers, or read them like newsreaders instead of praying to God, or intersperse them with commentary. In this kind of situation, for all his best efforts, and meant for the best of pastoral reasons, the

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priest may actually become a barrier rather than a facilitator of encounter with God. But we *don't* have to change the orientation in order to restore celebrative balance in these situations. Often it is simply a matter of helping a priest to be able to distinguish between those moments when he is talking to God and those when he is talking to the people (both of which are very important in the liturgy!).

### A FOCAL POINT OF TRANSCENDENCE

In his book *The Spirit of the Liturgy* Cardinal Ratzinger wondered about some way of restoring a focal point of the transcendent in liturgies where priest faces people across an altar, and the solution he proposed was to have the cross on the altar, between priest and people. In response to this suggestion, Masses are celebrated in some places with the cross and six candles on the altar, between the priest and the people. I have experienced this myself, both in the nave of the aforementioned basilica and elsewhere. My experience from the nave in such buildings is that this arrangement simply puts a barrier, albeit gilded, between priest and people. Facing the cross may help the presiding priest have a greater sense of devotion in his prayers, but I'm less sure of the degree to which it helps the rest of us in this arrangement.

Having a focal point of transcendence in the midst of the liturgical assembly sounds to me like a very good idea, and I think we *already* have one, though perhaps it is often overlooked. To say it better than I can say it myself, here are some quotations from the rites of dedication of church and altar:

By instituting in the form of a sacrificial meal the memorial of the sacrifice he was about to offer the Father on the altar of the cross, Christ made holy the table where the community would come to celebrate their Passover. Therefore the altar is the table for a sacrifice and for a banquet. At this table the priest, representing Christ the Lord, accomplishes what the Lord himself did and what he handed on to his disciples to do in his memory. The Apostle clearly intimates this: 'The blessing cup that we bless is a communion with the blood of Christ and the bread that we break is a communion with the body of Christ. The fact that there is only one loaf means that though there are many of us, we form a single Body because we can have a share in this one loaf. (*Introduction to the Rite of Dedication of an Altar*, 3)

At the altar the memorial of the Lord is celebrated and his body and blood given to the people. Therefore the Church's writers

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have seen in the altar a sign of Christ himself. This is the basis for the saying: 'The altar is Christ.' (*Introduction to the Rite of Dedication of an Altar*, 4)

This altar is an object of wonder: by nature it is stone, but it is made holy when it receives the Body of Christ (*Rite of Dedication of a Church*, no. 17, quoting St John Chrysostom)

In many older churches, the Blessed Sacrament is reserved in a tabernacle centrally located behind the altar, at a greater or lesser distance. For this reason, when people enter the church building they tend to genuflect. I have been living at Glenstal Abbey for seventeen years, where the tabernacle is not thus located. As a novice I found myself, for the first time, bowing several times a day to the altar itself as I passed in front of it. Eventually the body language taught me that something awesome takes place at this location (I may have known that already to some extent, but this was a different way of knowing). The *altar itself* can be experienced as a truly holy place, a place of revelation, a focus of the transcendent One who is 'God-with us'. Perhaps a good response to the intuitions of Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, is to look again at the design of our altars, and also the degree of reverence which they evoke in us. Do we design and act as if this table were truly '*an object of wonder*'?

**Sunday Literature.** The Sunday liturgy should be the primary source of catechises for sacramental preparation. It is the right place for hands-on formation. Here we actually do what we talk about. A picture is worth a thousand words. On the other hand, in the classroom, we instruct in a vacuum, in a void. We have greatly underrated the weekly celebration of the Sunday liturgy as the forum for formation in discipleship

– SEÁN SMITH, *Jesus: Answer to Evangelising the Irish Church*, Knock, 2022, p.200