

Liturgical Orientation: the Position of the President at the Eucharist

Neil Xavier O'Donoghue

*Priest of the Roman Catholic Church, Vice Rector of Redemptoris Mater
Archdiocesan Missionary Seminary, Dundalk, Co. Louth, Ireland*

Subscriptions

(for two copies): individual rate £15; international (includes airmail) £22.
Single copies cost £7.99

Cheques should be made payable to Hymns Ancient & Modern Ltd , and sent
to: JLS Subscriptions, Subscription Manager, 13a Hellesdon Park Road,
Norwich NR6 5DR.

Tel: 01603 785 910 Fax: 01603 624483.
JLS@hymnsam.co.uk

Direct Debit forms available from the same address or visit
www.jointliturgicalstudies.hymnsam.co.uk

The cover image shows Fr Franz Wasner celebrating the mass for the Von Trapp family,
used by permission of Johannes Von Trapp.

© Neil Xavier O'Donoghue 2017
ISSN: 0951-2667
ISBN: 978-1-84825-960-7

Contents

	Introduction	4
1	Historical Background: the Early Church	7
2	Early Evidence of Liturgical Orientation	11
3	Historical Background: the Middle Ages	17
4	The Reformation and Trent to Vatican II	22
5	20th Century Adoption of <i>versus populum</i> Orientation	31
6	Vatican II	35
7	Criticisms of the New Practice	42
8	Recent Magisterial Statements on Liturgical Orientation	45
9	The Particular Case of Joseph Ratzinger	51
10	Suggestions for the Best Pastoral Practice Today	56

Introduction

When future histories of Christianity will deal with the twentieth century, they will undoubtedly pay a lot of attention to the changes in worship and liturgical practice that occurred across denominational lines in the decades following the second Vatican Council. Even if this Council was strictly a Roman Catholic affair, in particular, the effects of the liturgical renewal it promoted in the Church of Rome were to overflow into most areas of world Christianity in a type of liturgical cross-fertilization.¹

As the twentieth century Orthodox liturgical experience shows us, it would be a mistake strictly to equate liturgical change and renewal with limited changes in ritual books. White's history of Roman Catholic liturgy dealing with the period when there was an almost monolithic collection of ritual texts has disproven the 'myth ... that very little happened between the end of the Council of Trent on December 4, 1563, and Vatican II'.² Although the Roman Catholic church has published new ritual editions for all of her liturgies over the course of the last few decades, it could also be said that perhaps these were not the most profound liturgical changes within twentieth century Roman Catholicism.

Today most liturgical scholars would agree with Cardinal Ratzinger when he lists the turning of the altars and the introduction of *versus populum* ('facing the people') celebration of the mass as being one of the most obvious and universal effects of liturgical renewal in the

¹Even those churches of eastern liturgical heritage, which did not renew their liturgical rites *per se*, were also strongly influenced by the liturgical movement. See Nicholas Denysenko, *Liturgical Reform After Vatican II: the Impact on Eastern Orthodoxy* (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2015)

²James White, *Roman Catholic Worship: Trent to Today* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 2003), xiii.

wake of Vatican II.³ In the last fifty years *versus populum* celebrations of the eucharist have become virtually universal in the Roman Catholic Church. The practice has also become an example of liturgical cross-fertilization and has passed over into the worship practices of most protestant churches that regularly celebrate the eucharist.

However, half a century after the widespread adoption of *versus populum* celebration of the eucharist, there continues to be some debate as to its advisability. In recent years some scholars and other opinion-makers have been calling on worshipping communities to reject *versus populum* celebration and exclusively celebrate mass *ad orientem* (facing east, which usually means that the priest celebrates the eucharist with his back to the assembly). Certain blogs celebrate whenever news is broadcast of some bishop or priest adopting *ad orientem* worship in any corner of the globe, seeing it as a ‘brick by brick’ rolling back of a liturgical dumbing down that they perceive in the wake of the second Vatican Council that was foisted on the people of God under false pretences and labelled as reform of the liturgy. Some view this change as having contributed to a loss of the sense of the sacred in liturgy. This has led to an unfortunately polemical view on this matter and the direction the celebrant faces during the eucharistic prayer has become a rallying call on both sides of the liturgical divide.

This liturgical debate became particularly heated in the summer of 2016 when Cardinal Robert Sarah, the prefect of the Congregation for

³Joseph Ratzinger, *Theology of the Liturgy: The Sacramental Foundation of Christian Existence*. Volume 11 of his (Michael J. Miller, ed) *Collected Works* (Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2014), 393. The widespread adoption of the vernacular in the liturgy is the other major post-conciliar renewal within Roman catholicism. See my ‘Words of Salvation: the Vernacular in Contemporary Catholic Liturgy’ in Thomas R. Whelan and Liam M. Tracey (eds), *Serving Liturgical Renewal: Pastoral and Theological Questions. Essays in Honour of Patrick Jones* (Veritas, Dublin, 2015), 55-69. Frequent communion is the third game-changing liturgical innovation of twentieth century catholicism, even though this renewal took place under St Pius X at the start of the twentieth century and predated the second Vatican Council by more than half a century. See Joseph Dougherty, *From Altar-Throne to Table: The Campaign for Frequent Holy Communion in the Catholic Church* (Scarecrow Press, Lanham, MD, 2010).

Divine Worship, publicly called on Roman Catholic priests to adopt the *ad orientem* posture as their normal orientation when praying the eucharistic prayer. The cardinal proposed the first Sunday of Advent of 2016 as a date to adopt this practice. As will be seen below, this proposal was not widely adopted. However, while *versus populum* has remained as the default orientation for Roman Catholics, it has been noted during the recent controversy that surprisingly little has been written on this important aspect of contemporary liturgy. Therefore this study aims at providing a brief historical background to the practice. While the treatment of liturgical orientation is from an explicitly Roman Catholic perspective, it is hoped that the history can help the shared reflection of the different churches and liturgical assemblies. This is a particular duty of those who play any part in leading the worship in every Christian liturgical assembly, as they are morally obliged to reflect pastorally on what is the best liturgical practice for their own assembly and how best to help their assembly draw nearer to Christ. This study can only provide some rather broad brushstrokes on the issues involved and hopefully these will help inspire more rigorous reflection on these issues.⁴

⁴In this treatment the eastern rites and various practices of the Orthodox Churches are not considered, as these churches have not seen any widespread promotion of the *versus populum* orientation. However, while not as pressing an issue, this debate is not unknown in contemporary Orthodoxy; see Robert Taft, 'Between Progress and Nostalgia: Liturgical Reform and the Western Romance with the Christian East; Strategies and Realities' in Christian McConnell (ed), *A Living Tradition: On the Intersection of Liturgical History and Pastoral Practice* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 2012), 20-21.