

Facing East

According to the rule laid down in the Apostolic Constitutions (written in Syria about AD 380), churches were to have the sanctuary at the east end, the reason being that by this means the Christians in church were able to pray as they were used to pray in private, *i.e.* facing the east.

“After this, let all rise up with one consent, and looking towards the east, after the catechumens and penitents are gone out, pray to God eastward, who ascended up to the heaven of heavens to the east; remembering also the ancient situation of paradise in the east, from whence the first man, when he had yielded to the persuasion of the serpent, and disobeyed the command of God, was expelled” (*Apostolic Constitutions*, Book II, §LVII.).

Joseph Jungmann’s book on the *Early Liturgy* informs us that the early Christians all faced east for prayer! Why east? Because east symbolized the return of Christ in glory. St John of Damascus describes the practice of the Church in these words:

When ascending into heaven, He rose towards the East, and that is how the Apostles adored Him, and He will return just as they saw Him ascend into heaven, as the Lord has said: “Just as the flash of lightning rises from above and then descends downward, so will be the arrival of the Lord.” Waiting for Him, we adore Him facing East. This is an unrecorded tradition passed down to us from the Apostles.

Just as Moslems today turn toward Mecca for prayer, and just as the ancient Jews turned toward Jerusalem, so the early Christians turned toward the east. In the early Egyptian liturgies, we find the instruction “Look towards the East!” included at the beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer. St Augustine would conclude his homilies with the

their overall behavior, all serve to subjectively attract attention to their person. Some draw attention to themselves by making repetitive observations, issuing instructions, and lately, by delivering personalized addresses of welcome and farewell ... To them, the level of success in their performance is a measure of their personal power and thus the indicator of their feeling of personal security and self-assurance.” (pp. 86-87)

Aidan Nichols, *Looking at the Liturgy* (1996):

“Today the question [of orientation] should be determined, in my judgment, in relation to the threat of what we can call ‘cultic immanentism’: the danger, namely, of a congregation’s covert self-reference in a horizontal, humanistic world. In contemporary ‘Catholic communalism,’ it has been said: ‘Liturgical *Gemutlichkeit*, communal warmth, friendliness, welcoming hospitality, can easily be mistaken for the source and summit of the faith.’ Not unconnected with this is the possibility that the personality of the priest (inevitably, as president, the principal facilitator of such a therapeutic support-group) will become the main ingredient of the whole ritual. Unfortunately, the ‘liveliest church in town’ has little to do with the life the Gospel speaks of.” (p. 97)

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Pamphlet 143

“A common turning to the east during the Eucharistic Prayer remains essential. This is not a case of something accidental, but of what is essential. Looking at the priest has no importance. What matters is looking together at the Lord. It is not now a question of dialogue but of common worship, of setting off toward the One who is to come. What corresponds with the reality of what is happening is not the closed circle but the common movement forward, expressed in a common direction for prayer.” (p. 81)

(An excerpt from the chapter on eastward orientation can be found at the Adoremus site: <http://www.adoremus.org/0500-Ratzinger.html>)

Klaus Gamber, *The Reform of the Roman Liturgy* (1993):

“The custom of facing East in prayer is as old as the Church; it is a tradition that cannot be changed. It symbolizes a continuous ‘looking out in the direction of the Lord’ (J. Kunstmann), or, as Origen says in his tract about praying (c. 32), it is ‘an allegory of the soul looking towards the beginning of the true light, “looking forward to the happy fulfillment of our hope when the splendor of our great God and Saviour Christ Jesus will appear”’ (Tit. 2:13).” (pp. 172-173)

K. G. Rey, “Signs of Puberty in the Catholic Church,” cited in Gamber, *Reform of the Roman Liturgy*:

“While in the past, the priest functioned as the anonymous go-between, the first among the faithful, facing God and not the people, representative of all and together with them offering the Sacrifice, while reciting prayers that have been prescribed for him—today he is a distinct person, with personal characteristics, his personal life-style, his face turned towards the people. For many priests this change is a temptation they cannot handle, the prostitution of their person. Some priests are quite adept—some less so—at taking personal advantage of a situation. Their gestures, their facial expressions, their movements,

command *Conversi ad dominum* “Turn to face the Lord.” And St Basil the Great confirms the Damascene’s claim that the practice of facing the east to pray is an unwritten custom passed down from the Apostles.

In the churches of the patristic Church, the Holy Table was typically located in the east end of the building, with the building built on an east-west axis. The altar was free-standing (though we know that in at least one Syrian ante-Nicene church it was actually attached to the east wall). The celebrant would stand on the west side of the altar and together celebrant and congregation would face the Lord for praise and worship.

However, this rule was by no means universally observed. The ancient churches in Rome, including St. John Lateran, are arranged with the entrance at the east and the sanctuary at the west. This allowed the early morning sun to flow into the building through the open doors. So do we not have here a counter-example with the priest facing the congregation? Not so! The apostolic rule was to face the east for prayer, and so the bishop faced the east and only incidentally therefore did he face the congregation. The big question is, Which direction did the congregation face? I’m not sure if anyone knows the answer to this question for certain, but I can tell you that Joseph Jungmann, Louis Bouyer, and Klaus Gamber (all very respectable liturgists) believe that in these churches the congregation too would have turned to face the east! Western Churches built after the 4th century conformed to the eastern practice and sited the altar in the east end.

The practice of priest and congregation facing the Lord in praise, worship, and prayer belongs to the fundamental grammar of Christian liturgy.

The *versus orientem* promotes a sense of God’s transcendence. We stand together facing the mystery of the holy Father, offering to him the body and blood of his Son through the ministry of our great high priest. We participate in the heavenly liturgy of the Triune God, sharing in the

eternal self-oblation of the Son to his heavenly Father.

The priest is an instrument of the risen Christ. As St John Chrysostom states, the priest but lends Christ his voice and hands.

St Augustine:

“When we rise to pray, we turn East, where heaven begins. And we do this not because God is there, as if He had moved away from the other directions on earth ..., but rather to help us remember to turn our mind towards a higher order, that is, to God” (Quoted in Klaus Gamber, *The Reform of the Roman Liturgy* [1993], p. 80)

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, (now Pope Benedict XVI) *Feast of Faith* (1986):

“The original meaning of what nowadays is called ‘the priest turning his back on the people’ is, in fact—as J. A. Jungmann has consistently shown—the priest and people together facing the same way in a common act of trinitarian worship, such as Augustine introduced, following the sermon, by the prayer ‘*Conversi ad Dominum.*’ Priest and people were united in facing eastward; that is, a cosmic symbolism was drawn into the community celebration—a factor of considerable importance. For the true location and the true context of the eucharistic celebration is the whole cosmos. ‘Facing east’ makes this cosmic dimension of the Eucharist present through liturgical gesture. Because of the rising sun, the east—*oriens*—was naturally both a symbol of the Resurrection (and to that extent it was not merely a christological statement but also a reminder of the Father’s power and the influence of the Holy Spirit) and a presentation of the hope of the parousia. Where priest and people face the same way, what we have is a cosmic orientation and also an interpretation of the Eucharist in terms of resurrection and trinitarian theology. Hence it is also an interpretation in terms of parousia, a theology of hope, in which every Mass is an approach to the return of Christ.” (pp. 140-141)

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, (now Pope Benedict XVI) *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (2000):

“The Eucharist that Christians celebrate really cannot be adequately be described by the term ‘meal.’ True, the Lord established the new reality of Christian worship within the framework of a Jewish (Passover) meal, but it was precisely this new reality, not the meal as such, that he commanded us to repeat. Very soon the new reality was separated from its ancient context and found its proper and suitable form, a form already predetermined by the fact that the Eucharist refers back to the Cross and thus to the transformation of Temple sacrifice into worship of God that is in harmony with *logos*. Thus it came to pass that the synagogue liturgy of the Word, renewed and deepened in a Christian way, merged with the remembrance of Christ’s death and Resurrection to become the ‘Eucharist,’ and precisely thus was fidelity to the command ‘Do this’ fulfilled. This new and all-encompassing form of worship could not be derived simply from the meal but had to be defined through the intercommunion of Temple and synagogue, Word and sacrament, cosmos and history.” (pp. 78-79)

“The turning of the priest toward the people has turned the community into a self-enclosed circle. In its outward form, it no longer opens out on what lies ahead and above, but is closed in on itself. The common turning toward the east was not a ‘celebration toward the wall’; it did not mean that the priest ‘had his back to the people’: the priest himself was not regard as so important. For just as the congregation in the synagogue looked toward Jerusalem, so in the Christian liturgy the congregation looked together ‘toward the Lord.’... It was much more a question of priest and people facing in the same direction, knowing that together they were in a procession toward the Lord. They did not close themselves into a circle; they did not gaze at one another; but as the pilgrim People of God they set off for the *Oriens*, for the Christ who comes to meet us.” (p. 80)