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LITURGICAL ORIENTATION

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From the General Introduction

These papers, commissioned by the International Federation *Una Voce*, are offered to stimulate and inform debate about the 1962 Missal among Catholics ‘attached to the ancient Latin liturgical tradition’, and others interested in the liturgical renewal of the Church. They are not to be taken to imply personal or moral criticism of those today or in the past who have adopted practices or advocated reforms which are subjected to criticism. In composing these papers we adopt the working assumption that our fellow Catholics act in good will, but that nevertheless a vigorous and well-informed debate is absolutely necessary if those who act in good will are to do so in light of a proper understanding of the issues.

The authors of the papers are not named, as the papers are not the product of any one person, and also because we prefer them to be judged on the basis of their content, not their authorship.

The International Federation *Una Voce* humbly submits the opinions contained in these papers to the judgement of the Church.

Liturgical Orientation: Abstract

The celebration of Mass *ad orientem* (towards the East, away from the people) is a very visible difference between the Extraordinary Form and most celebrations of the Ordinary Form of the Roman Rite. Celebration *versus populum* was known in the early centuries, and in certain churches later (notably, St Peter’s Basilica in Rome), but celebration *ad orientem* was more common, and in any case the value of the practice cannot be determined solely by ancient practice. Rather, as Pope Benedict has argued, celebration *ad orientem* emphasises both the eschatological nature of the liturgy, and the common orientation of priest and people towards the Lord, as opposed to an excessive focus by the Faithful on the celebrating priest (and vice versa). It also emphasises the sacrificial nature of the Mass. In all these ways it is central to the character and value of the Extraordinary Form as a whole.

Comments can be sent to

positio@fiuv.org

FIUV Position Paper 4: Liturgical Orientation

1. For the casual observer, one of the most striking differences between the Extraordinary Form and the Ordinary Form is the celebration of the latter, in almost all cases, with the priest ‘facing the people’ (*versus populum*), whereas the former is celebrated with the priest facing the same direction as the people (*ad orientem, versus apsidem*). It surprises many to learn that the celebration of the Ordinary Form can legitimately take place *ad orientem*, and, further, that this change, which has had such a profound effect on Catholic church buildings and architecture, is not mentioned in the Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctam Concilium*. The purpose of this paper is to give an account of the value of the traditional practice.
2. It is worth noting, briefly, the current position in the Church’s law on this topic, with regard to the Ordinary Form. Successive editions of the reformed Roman Missal presuppose *ad orientem* celebration, instructing the priest to turn to face the people when necessary, but also say that an altar separate from the wall ‘is desirable whenever possible’.¹ Where it is not possible, because of the need to preserve existing altars of historic or artistic value, or constraints of space, celebration *ad orientem* is unavoidable; where it is possible, celebration in either direction would be possible. There is thus no justification for the destruction of historic altars, for the creation of secondary altars,² or for making celebration *ad orientem* impossible.³

The Historical Question

3. The question of liturgical orientation needs to be considered both from a historical and a theological point of view.

¹ *Missale Romanum* (2002), *Institutio Generalis* no 299: ‘Altare exstruatur a pariete seiunctum, ut facile circumiri et in eo celebration versus populum peragi possit, quod expedit ubicumque possibile sit.’ (‘Let the main 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.’ ‘Quod’ (‘which is’) naturally refers to the first clause of the sentence, not the second, which is subordinate to it. See C.M. Cullen and J.W. Koterski ‘The New IGMR and Mass *versus populum*’ *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* June 2001 pp51-54. Cf. Instruction *Inter Oecumenici* (1964) ‘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.’ (Praestat ut altare maius exstruatur a pariete seiunctum, ut facile circumiri et in eo celebration versus populum peragi possit.) AAS 56 (1967): 375. By contrast, see the Decree of the Sacred Congregation of Rites *Sanctissimam Eucharistiam* (1957) 4: ‘In churches, where there is only one altar, this cannot be built in such a way that the priest should celebrate facing the people’ (‘In ecclesiis, ubi unicum extat altare, hoc nequit ita aedificari, ut sacerdos celebret populum versus’). The decree is concerned with the position of the tabernacle in relation to the altar.

² ‘Cases must be considered in which the sanctuary does not allow for the placing of an altar facing the people or in which it would not be possible to maintain the existing altar with its ornamentation intact and at the same time install a forward-facing altar that could be seen as the principal altar. In such cases it is more faithful to the nature of the liturgy to celebrate at the existing altar, back to the people, than to maintain two altars at the same sanctuary. The principle of there being only one altar is theologically more important than the practice of celebrating facing the people.’ *Notitiae* 29 (1993) 249 (Editorial)

³ It is not uncommon for celebrations of the Extraordinary Form to require specially made platforms to make celebration *ad orientem* possible.

4. Otto Nussbaum's influential study, which claimed to show that *versus populum* celebration was the norm in the first four Christian centuries, in practice set the burden of proof in favour of *versus populum* celebrations where archaeology did not rule it out, on the grounds that celebration *ad orientem* emphasises the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist, and that this emphasis is a later development.⁴ Against this, it can be observed not only that the sacrificial aspect of the Eucharist is emphasised by some very early witnesses,⁵ but also that thinking of the Eucharist as a shared meal would not, in fact, have suggested to Christians in the early centuries the picture of people sitting on opposite sides of a table, but rather of people reclining on the same side,⁶ as shown in early Christian art.⁷
5. Certainly, some churches were built, in the first four Christian centuries, in such a way that the celebrant had to face the nave across the altar, and others were oriented with the main doors at the East end and the apse at the West. It is less clear how this worked in practice. Bearing in mind the powerful tradition of prayer towards the East, one possibility is that the Faithful turned to face East, away from the altar, for the anaphora.⁸ Another is that they did not occupy the central nave, but principally the side naves, from which they could easily turn from the direction of the altar to the East.⁹ A third is that, in churches with doors facing the East, the celebrant could still in many cases have celebrated *ad apsidem*, towards a 'liturgical East', indicated by the splendid mosaics of the apse.¹⁰ Archaeology is little guide here.
6. Again, the example of St Peter's in Rome is clearly at work in the way many other churches were designed,¹¹ but the design of St Peter's was itself determined, at each stage of its development, by the relationship between the altar and the Confessio, the tomb of St Peter. This very particular design problem was solved by the orientation of the basilica with the doors to the East, and celebration towards the nave. A similar situation existed with other important shrine churches, notably the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.¹² This being so, these venerable examples of church design cannot be expected to tell us anything about earlier Christian practice, or about contemporary attitudes to liturgical participation.
7. Finally, it should be remembered that celebration *versus populum* in the setting of the great Roman basilicas of the early centuries does not have the pastoral or liturgical implications sometimes desired by proponents of *versus populum* celebration. The

⁴ Otto Nussbaum *Der Standort des Liturgen* (Bonn: Hanstein, 1965), discussed by Fr Uwe Lang *Turning Towards the Lord: Orientation in Liturgical Prayer* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004) pp56-64

⁵ Notably in the Didache and the First Letter of Clement.

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI (Joseph, Cardinal Ratzinger) *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000) p78

⁷ Lang *op cit* p61

⁸ This hypothesis is put forward by Louis Bouyer: *Liturgy and Architecture* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967) pp55-56

⁹ The hypothesis of Klaus Gamber: *Liturgie und Kirchenbau* (Regensburg: Pustet, 1976) pp23-25

¹⁰ The hypothesis of Fr Uwe Lang *op cit*. pp84-85

¹¹ Particularly the stationary churches in Rome: Pope Benedict *op cit*. p77.

¹² See Aidan Nichols *Looking at the Liturgy: a critical view of its contemporary form* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996) p94

distance between the altar and most of the assisting Faithful, and the ancient practice of praying looking upwards, precludes a feeling of domestic intimacy, eye contact, or a clear view of the ceremonies. Indeed, there were no ceremonies at the altar, during the anaphora, in the early centuries.¹³

8. Celebration *versus populum* in early times, while real, was a minority practice, and there is no reason to regard it as normative.¹⁴ As quoted in Positio 3, Pope Pius XII puts us on our guard against privileging ancient practice against later development.¹⁵ The theological rationale for the developed traditional practice is the key to the question.

The Theological Question

9. Worship towards the East is worship towards the Lord, for according to ancient tradition the Lord departed towards the East, and will return again from the East.¹⁶ The rising sun is for this reason a profound symbol. Orientation, therefore, brings into the liturgy an important eschatological element—the expectation of the return of the Lord—and also expresses the direction of the journey the people are themselves undertaking, towards the Lord.¹⁷ As Christoph, Cardinal Schönborn has expressed it, celebration *ad orientem* manifests the attitude of worshipping ‘*obviam Sponso*’, ‘facing the Bridegroom’, and thus ‘a meeting with the Bridegroom, and an anticipation of Christ’s final coming’.¹⁸
10. In addition to the symbolism of the East is the question of the priest and faithful praying in the same direction: of their unity in prayer. Putting the two ideas together, the Holy Father writes:

On the other hand, a common turning to the East during the Eucharistic Prayer remains essential. This is not a case of accidentals, but of essentials. Looking at

¹³ Bouyer *op cit.* pp60-70

¹⁴ For a survey of the evidence see M. J. Moreton “*Eis anatholas blepsete*: Orientation as a Liturgical Principle” in *Studia Patristica* 18, ed. E. A. Livingstone (Oxford, 1982), pp575-590

¹⁵ Encyclical *Mediator Dei* (1947) 61: ‘The liturgy of the early ages is most certainly worthy of all veneration. But ancient usage must not be esteemed more suitable and proper, either in its own right or in its significance for later times and new situations, on the simple ground that it carries the savour and aroma of antiquity. The more recent liturgical rites likewise deserve reverence and respect. They, too, owe their inspiration to the Holy Spirit, who assists the Church in every age even to the consummation of the world. They are equally the resources used by the majestic Spouse of Jesus Christ to promote and procure the sanctity of man.’ (Haec eadem iudicandi ratio tenenda est, cum de conatibus agitur, quibus nonnulli enituntur quoslibet antiquos ritus ac caerimonias in usum revocare. Utique vetustae aetatis Liturgia veneratione procul dubio digna est; verumtamen vetus usus, non idcirco dumtaxat quod antiquitatem sapit ac redolet, aptior ac melior existimandus est vel in semet ipso, vel ad consequentia tempora novasque rerum condiciones quod attinet. Recentiores etiam liturgici ritus reverentia observantiaque digni sunt, quoniam Spiritus Sancti afflatu, qui quovis tempore Ecclesiae adest ad consummationem usque saeculorum (cfr. *Matth.* 28, 20), orti sunt; suntque iidem pariter opes, quibus inclita Iesu Christi; Sponsa utitur ad hominum sanctitatem excitandam procurandamque.)

¹⁶ Matthew 24:27: ‘For as lightning cometh out of the east, and appeareth even into the west: so shall the coming of the Son of man be.’ See Germanus of Constantinople *Historia ecclesiastica et mystica contemplatio* PG 98, 384 B. Cf. Lang *op cit.* p37

¹⁷ Lang *op cit.* p97

¹⁸ Christoph, Cardinal Schönborn *Loving the Church: Spiritual exercises preached in the presence of Pope John Paul II* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996) p205

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 towards 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.¹⁹

11. Another consideration is the symbolism of sacrifice: the gathered community which is not a closed circle opens out to offer sacrifice to God.²⁰ As is particularly emphasised in the Extraordinary Form, the priest offers the Sacrifice of the Mass to the Father, while the faithful unite themselves to that Sacrifice. As Klaus Gamber has observed:

The person who is doing the offering is facing the One who is receiving the offering; thus he stands *before* the altar, positioned *ad Dominum*, facing the Lord.²¹

The rejection of celebration *ad orientem* by the more 'Low Church' Protestant Reformers, and its recovery by 'Catholicising' movements within Anglicanism, serves to underline its symbolic importance.²²

12. In this regard it is essential to distinguish the priest's offering this Sacrifice to God, while facing East, from the priest's showing the Consecrated Host to the Faithful (when he proclaims 'Ecce Agnus Dei'), and the priestly prayers to God, while facing East, from his periodically addressing the faithful ('Dominus vobiscum'). In the latter cases the priest very visibly turns to face the people, a gesture which is possible only if he is otherwise facing *ad apsidem*. This contrast is emphasised by Max Thurian, in an article published in *Notitiae*:

Regardless of the church's architectural structure, these two complementary attitudes of the liturgy must be respected... The whole celebration is often conducted as if it were a conversation and dialogue in which there is no longer room for adoration, contemplation and silence. The fact that the celebrants and faithful constantly face each other closes the liturgy in on itself.²³

13. The danger of *versus populum* celebration being a 'conversation', of an excessive engagement and eye-contact between the celebrant and the Faithful, is also emphasised by Pope Benedict.²⁴ Celebration *ad orientem* avoids emphasising the personality of the priest, maintaining an essential characteristic of the Extraordinary Form.

¹⁹ Pope Benedict XVI *op cit.* p81. The Holy Father cites J.A. Jungmann, 'one of the fathers of Vatican II's Constitution on the Liturgy', on the importance of a common direction of prayer: *op. cit.* p80.

²⁰ Cf. Aidan Nichols *op cit.* p97

²¹ Klaus Gamber *The Reform of the Roman Liturgy* (San Juan Capistrano: Una Voce Press, 1993) p178

²² Lang *op cit.* p110; cf J. A. Jungmann, 'Review of Nussbaum 'Der Standort des Liturgen'' ZKTh 88 (1966) pp445-50, 448

²³ Max Thurian 'La Liturgie, contemplation du mystere' *Notitiae* 32 (1996) p692 (reprinted in English in *L'Osservatore Romano* 24th June 1996 p2)

²⁴ 'In reality what happened was that an unprecedented clericalization came on the scene. Now the priest—the "presider", as they now prefer to call him—becomes the real point of reference for the whole liturgy. Everything depends on him. We have to see him, to respond to him, to be involved in what he is doing. His creativity sustains the whole thing. ... Less and less is God in the picture. More and more important is what is done by the human beings who meet here and do not like to subject themselves to a "pre-determined pattern".' Pope Benedict XVI *op. cit.* pp80-81

Conclusion

14. The use in the Extraordinary Form of celebration *ad orientem* is a precious preservation of a venerable practice with great symbolic resonance. As the Instruction *Il Padre, incomprendibile* emphasises, with the Eastern tradition in view:

It is not a question, as is often claimed, of presiding the celebration with the back turned towards the people, but rather of guiding the people in pilgrimage toward the Kingdom, invoked in prayer until the return of the Lord.

Such practice... is thus of profound value and should be safeguarded...²⁵

15. We may leave the last word to Cardinal Schönborn:

Yet how important such signs are for “incarnating” the faith. The common prayer of priest and faithful *ad orientem* connected this cosmic “orientation” with faith in the Resurrection of Christ, the *sol invictus*, and with His *Parousia* in glory.²⁶

²⁵ Instruction *Il Padre, incomprendibile* (1996) 107

²⁶ Cardinal Schönborn *op. cit.* p205