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### *PRAYING facing eastward*

The Eucharistic celebration is, by definition, linked to the eschatological dimension of the Christian faith, and such is it in its most profound identity. Is this not, perhaps, the meaning of the “admirable conversion” of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of the Lord of Glory who, living always by the side of the Father, perpetuate the paschal mystery?

The moderate description in the Acts of the Apostles in the first summary of (the Christian) community life speaks of “gladness” (agalliasis) with which those gathered in assembly (epí to autó) broke the bread at home. Now ‘agalliasis’ is the same term that Luke uses to indicate the eschatological joy.

In the Eucharist there is a logic of the Ascension: “This Jesus whom you have seen ascending into heaven, will return...” In the Eucharist the Lord “returns”, He anticipates sacramentally His return in glory. Transforming the deep reality of the elements, He leaves them in the condition as signs of His presence and of mediation of communion with His Person. Because of this, the various liturgical families have underlined in various ways something that is common between them: with the Eucharistic prayer the Church penetrates the heavenly sphere. This is the meaning of the conclusion of the Roman prefaces, of the song Sanctus and of the Oriental Cherubicon.

In our analyses of the origins of the Eucharistic Prayer, the typically Christian modification introduced in the initial dialogue is striking. The greeting “the Lord be with you” (“Dominus vobiscum”) and the invitation “let us give thanks” (“Gratias agamus...”) are common to the Jewish berakha. Only beginning from the first complete redaction of the Apostolic Tradition which is in our possession, was the Christian modification “Lift up your hearts. We lift them up to the Lord” (“Sursum corda. Habemus ad Dominum”) interpolated.

In fact, for the Church, the celebration of the Eucharist is putting into action something not earthly, but rather heavenly, because she has the awareness that the main celebrant is the Lord of Glory. The Church celebrates the Eucharist necessarily oriented towards the Lord; in communion with Him and through Him, she directs herself to the Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit. The witness of the authenticity of the celebration and, at the same time, the sign of the glorious Lord who presides over it, is the priest ordained in the catholic and apostolic communion. As the bread and the wine are the elements which Christ undertakes to “be given”, the priest is the person whom Christ has consecrated and sent to “give”.

The arrangement of the priest and the faithful as related to the “mystical meal” (*mistica mensa*), has found in history various forms, some of which can be considered typical in some places and periods. The symbolism has developed in these cases – as it is logical when this is in the liturgical context – an outstanding role, but it would be difficult to prove that the architectural interpretation of this symbolism could have been considered in some of the forms chosen, an almost integral and basic part of the Christian faith or of the deep attitudes of the Church celebrant.

The setting up of the altar in such a way that the priest and the faithful have to face the orient – which is something of great tradition, even if not accepted by all - is a splendid application of the “parousial” character of the Eucharist. The mystery of Christ is celebrated “until He comes from heaven” (“*donec veniat de caelis*”). The sun that illumines the altar during the Eucharist is a faint reference to “the sun that comes from above and like a strong man runs its course with joy” (“*exultans ut gigas ad currendam viam*”) (Ps. 18:6) in order to celebrate with His Church the paschal victory.

The influence of the symbol of light, and concretely of the sun, is frequently present in the Christian liturgy. The Oriental baptismal liturgy still keeps this symbolism. Perhaps the Christians of the West did not welcome it, since, consequently, it came to be considered as a “gloomy place”. However, even in the West, we know that a certain fascination for the rising sun had remained among the common people. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century, wasn't St. Leo the Great still reminding his faithful, in one of his Christmas homilies, that “when the first rays of the rising sun appeared, some people were so senseless as to worship in the high places”? And he would add: “There are also Christians who still share this religiosity by continuing this practice, and before entering the Apostle Peter's Basilica, dedicated to the only living and true God, after ascending the steps leading to the upper level, they turn to the rising sun, bow their heads and honour the radiant disc.” (Homily 27, 4). In fact, the faithful, on entering the basilica for the Eucharist, in order to focus on the altar, had to turn their backs to the sun. In order to pray “facing eastward”, as it is said, they would have to turn their backs to the altar, something which does not seem likely.

The fact that the application of this symbolism in the West, from very early times, progressively diminished, shows that it was not an intangible element. Thus, it cannot be considered a fundamental tradition in the Christian liturgy. From here, it derives also that, consequently, other symbolisms might have influenced the construction of the altars and the arrangement of the churches.

In the Encyclical “*Mediator Dei*”, Pius XII considered “archeologists” those who pretended to speak of the altar as a simple table. Would it not be an equally archaic idea to consider that the position of the altar towards the Orient should be the final answer for a correct Eucharistic celebration? Actually, the validity of the liturgical reform is not only and exclusively based on the return to its original forms. There could be elements that are totally new and, in fact, there are, and which have been perfectly acceptable.

The liturgical reform of the Vatican Council II did not invent the position of the altar facing the people. Here, we can think of the witness given by the Roman Basilicas, at least as a pre-existent fact. It has not been an historic fact which has directed the clear choice for a position of the altar which would allow the celebrant to face the people. The Reform's authorized interpreters – Cardinal Lercaro as the president of the Council – have repeated since the beginning (see letters of the year 1965) that it was not “a question of the success or failure of the liturgy” (“quaestio stantis vel cadentis liturgiae”). That the remarks of Cardinal Lercaro were not given much consideration at that time of great excitement, is not the only case. It turned out that to change the position of the altar and to use the vernacular language was far easier than to enter into the theological and spiritual sense of the liturgy, to be imbued with its spirit, to study the history and the meaning of the rituals, and to analyze the reasons for the new changes and their pastoral consequences.

The option for the celebration “facing the people” (“versus populum”) is in line with the fundamental theological idea rediscovered and verified by the liturgical movement: “Liturgical services are ... celebrations of the Church, ... namely, a holy people united and organized under their bishops” (“Actiones liturgicae sunt celebrationes Ecclesia... que est plebs sancta sub Episcopis adunata et ordinata”) (SC 26). The theology of the common priesthood and that of the ministerial priesthood, are essentially distinct (“essentia, non gradu”) and yet related to each other (LG 10). This is surely better expressed through the positioning of the altar “facing the people” (“versus populum”). Did not the monks, since early times, pray facing one another in order to search for the presence of God among them? One figurative reason is worth mentioning. The symbolic form of the Eucharist is that of a meal, a repetition of the Lord's Supper. There is no doubt that this meal is sacrificial, memorial of the death and resurrection of Christ, which, however, in its figurative sense, has the meal as its point of reference.

In addition, we must not forget that one of the most powerful arguments which supports the keeping of the uninterrupted tradition of the exclusive ordination of men, is in the fact that the priest, as president in virtue of his ordination, is at the altar as a member of the assembly, but also, because of his sacramental character, is like Christ as Head of the Church, when he stands there facing the assembly (gegenüber).

If from these motivations we move to its application, we will encounter many issues for reflection. The Congregation, considering the rise of a series of questions in regard to this, now proposes the following orientations:

1. The Eucharistic celebration “facing the people” (“versus populum”) requires from the priest a greater and more sincere awareness of his ministerial role: his gestures, his prayer, his gaze have to show clearly to the assembly that he is a representative of the main celebrant: the Lord Jesus Himself. These cannot be improvised, neither can it be acquired with some technique. Only a profound sense of his priestly identity “in spirit and in truth” (“in spiritu et veritate”) is possible to achieve it.

2. The positioning of the altar “facing the people” (“versus populum”) demands, with greater vigour, a correct use of the various places of the presbytery: the seat, the pulpit and the altar, to express the correct allocation of the persons who preside and those who serve in it. If the altar is converted into a pedestal for all that is needed to celebrate the Eucharist, or into a substitute for the celebrant’s seat in the first part of the Mass, or into the place from which the priest directs – even in an almost technical sense - the whole celebration, the altar will lose symbolically its identity as a central place of the Eucharist, the table of the mystery, the point of encounter between God and men for the sacrifice of the new and eternal covenant.

3. The positioning of the altar “facing the people” (“versus populum”) is surely something desired by the liturgical legislation. Yet it is not an absolute value above all others. One has to consider the cases in which the presbytery does not allow a setting of the altar facing the people, or when it is not possible to keep the original altar with its ornaments in some other place which would allow the main altar facing the people to take the central position. In these cases, it is more faithful to the liturgical sense to celebrate at the existing altar with the back to the people, rather than maintaining two altars in the same presbytery. The principle of “only one altar” is theologically more important than the practice of celebrating facing the people.

4. It is necessary to explain clearly that the expression “to celebrate facing the people” does not have a theological sense but the sense of a physical positioning of the sanctuary. Every celebration of the Eucharist is “to the glory and praise of God’s name, for our good, and solely for the good of all His holy Church” (“ad laudem et gloriam nominis Dei, ad utilitatem quoque nostram, totiusque Ecclesiae suae sanctae”). Therefore, theologically the Holy Mass is always turned towards God and towards the people. In the manner of celebration, it is necessary to guard against converting theology into topography, especially when the priest is at the altar. It is only in the dialogue from the altar that the priest speaks to the people. All the rest is prayer to the Father through Christ, in the Holy Spirit. This theology must be rendered visible.

5. Finally, there is a circumstantial consideration which should not be ignored. Thirty years have elapsed from the time of the Constitution *Sacrosantum Concilium*. The “temporary provisions” can no longer be justified. In reorganizing the presbytery, an arrangement that is badly made and maintained, is an element that distorts the catechesis and the theology itself of the celebration. Some criticisms which have been brought against certain celebrations are well founded and should be taken seriously. The effort to improve the celebration, in so far as it depends on us, is one of the basic elements to assure a fruitful and active participation.

—Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments,  
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