

THE TABLET

The International Catholic News Weekly

Which way does God face?

14 July 2016 | by Mark Francis | Comments: [0](#)



The Vatican's most senior liturgist recommends that the priest celebrating Mass should face east. But there are powerful theological and pastoral reasons why he should not

Cardinal Robert Sarah, the current Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments (CDW), has made an impassioned plea for bishops and priests to start celebrating Mass this coming Advent *versus orientem* (towards the east), that is with the celebrant's back to the people, as was the customary usage in the Tridentine Rite.

Speaking to a receptive group of liturgical traditionalists in London he said: "I believe that it is very important that we return as soon as possible to a common orientation, of priests and faithful turned in the same direction – eastwards or at least towards the apse – [towards] the Lord who comes, in those parts of the liturgical rites when we are addressing God ... I think it is a very important step in ensuring that in our celebrations the Lord is truly at the centre."

The cardinal explained that this change requires no special legislation since current liturgical law does not

forbid versus orientem celebrations. He contends that celebrating facing the people went beyond the mandate of the Vatican II document *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (“Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy”) and needed to be rethought along with other practices that seem to “desacralise” the celebration of the Eucharist such as the reception of Communion while standing.

His final argument for turning towards the liturgical east draws on the Scriptures. “Dear fathers,” he said, “we should listen again to the lament of God proclaimed by the prophet Jeremiah: ‘They have turned their back to me. Let us turn again toward the Lord!’”

It is important to examine what is behind this call to change more than 40 years of normative liturgical practice and the current liturgical legislation that clearly prefers celebrations facing the people. The 1993 publication of *Tournés vers le Seigneur!* (“Turned toward the Lord”) by the liturgical historian Klaus Gamber with a preface by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger marked the beginning of the “reform of the reform” movement that sought to restore what Gamber characterised as a more organic relationship with preconciliar worship. Gamber considers the Vatican II Rite of Mass inferior in every way to its Tridentine predecessor.

According to Gamber, the liturgical reform of Vatican II rendered a transcendent experience of Christ’s sacrifice into a meeting of a human community assembled for a commemorative meal. He also claimed that the reforms of the liturgy went far beyond what the bishops of the council really intended. Gamber’s general arguments and those advanced by other writers such as U.M. Lang seem to underlie Cardinal Sarah’s comments.

These critiques of the Vatican II liturgy are largely based on a selective reading of both the history of the liturgy and the theology of worship. Despite claims by Gamber and others that there is universal precedent for the presider to face the same direction as the faithful during the Eucharistic Prayer, the historical record is far more mixed than they care to admit. Western European architectural evidence and artistic renderings of the celebration of the Mass indicate versus populum as well as versus orientem arrangements long into the Carolingian period (ninth and tenth centuries). What, then, are the theological and pastoral bases for the current practice of celebrating Mass facing the people?

One of the main goals of the preconciliar liturgical movement was its emphasis on restoring liturgical participation by the laity at Mass. For this reason it promoted “dialogue masses” prior to Vatican II (just as there is no absolute requirement that the Vatican II Mass be celebrated versus populum, there was no absolute requirement that the Tridentine Mass had to be celebrated ad orientem). Many bishops at the council already had experience of this manner of celebrating – and during the years of the council the bishops were regularly exposed to Masses celebrated facing the people. This approach was emphasised by Pope Francis when he met Cardinal Sarah on Saturday to discuss the prefect’s remarks made in London.

Leaving the specific implementation for subsequent working groups, the Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy speaks of “worthy and well-planned construction of places of worship, the design and construction of altars ...” (SC128) all in the context of the overarching concern to “facilitate the active participation of the faithful” (SC124). It is highly unlikely that the bishops at Vatican II were calling here for more altars on the back wall of the church.

This background allows us to better understand the preference expressed by the 1964 instruction *Inter Oecumenici*. “The main altar should preferably be freestanding, to permit walking around it and celebration facing the people. Its location in the place of worship should be truly central so that the attention of the whole congregation naturally focuses there”(IE 91). It is this text that forms the basis for the current General Instruction of the Roman Missal that clearly states a preference for an altar that is visible to all, central, and one that allows for celebrations facing the people (GIRM299). This preference flows from the emphasis of the council fathers on all the faithful’s “full, conscious, and active participation called for by the very nature of the liturgy” (SC14).

Cardinal Sarah implied that much of the liturgical reform went beyond what the bishops of Vatican II had approved. In the case of celebrations facing the people this assertion would be difficult to substantiate. On

the contrary, the testimony of Archbishop Emeritus James Hayes of Halifax-Yarmouth, who was himself a participant at Vatican II, connects celebrations facing the people to the ecclesiology of the council and a renewed theology of the priesthood. The priest, in celebrating Mass, is not only an alter Christus, but also an altera ecclesia – a member of the Church who belongs to the same world as the rest of the assembly.

The Church is in the world. This means that the private, spiritual sense of church and priestly activity is past. The “secret and special” priestly functions are now seen in a different light. When we stopped muttering Latin over infants, and over couples on their wedding day, and over corpses, we did more than make the prayers intelligible. We said that we belong to the same world as the rest of you. We did that, too, when we turned around to celebrate the Eucharist facing the people. With these changes, much of the reason for our special status melted away.

Given Pope Francis’ frequent denunciation of clericalism, it is unfortunate that an initiative that is being promoted by the Prefect seems to unnecessarily reinforce clericalism. While Cardinal Sarah is certainly free to state his preferences, his suggestion that we all face “east” (and it can only be a suggestion) must be evaluated in light of our own experience of worship and how we see this spatial arrangement reflective of our faith in God’s presence in our place and time.

We need to ask if our notion of God is inspired by looking outside of our world and mediated through the priest who stands between God and us. That was certainly an important part of the Tridentine theology of worship expressed by the spatial arrangement the cardinal is promoting.

For the Cardinal Prefect to make such a strong suggestion to revert to a Tridentine “spatial theology” of God’s presence, I would have thought he would base his appeal on the Prophet Jeremiah and unsubstantiated claims of over-reach by the architects of the Vatican II liturgy. While it is true that Pope Benedict expressed his preference for celebrating the Mass ad orientem, he also stated that it was impractical to impose this on the Church due to the confusion it would cause.

Cardinal Sarah may say that it is Pope Francis who is encouraging his particular interpretation of the “reform of the reform”. I very much doubt, however, that the Holy Father will start celebrating ad orientem at his daily Mass in the chapel of Santa Marta at the beginning of Advent. Given the shaky reasons voiced by the cardinal calling for this change, neither should most of the Church.

Fr Mark R. Francis, CSV is professor of liturgy and president of the Catholic Theological Union, Chicago.

16 JULY 2016 £3
www.thetablet.co.uk | E-n. 3049

THE TABLET

Summer reading
What to take to the
beach or the mountains

One direction?

Cardinal Sarah says the priest at Mass should face east like the people. Liturgist Mark Francis explains the pastoral and theological reasons why he shouldn't



Mrs May's creed

Why the new Prime Minister's Christianity is her sure foundation



Eleventh hour

The Jesuits' Weythrop College is on the brink of closure again. Can it yet be saved?

No end of a lesson

Jonathan Shaw and Carmody Grey on Iraq and the Chilcot Report

PLUS: Bowing out - Farewell interview with Nigel Baker, the UK's man at the Holy See