



Second Annual Gregorian Chant Workshop (October 11 - 13), Clear Creek, Oklahoma

NARROWING THE FACTUAL BASES OF THE *AD ORIENTEM* POSITION

As one who follows the continuing and unraveling saga in Roman Catholic Liturgy revolving around the legal status of the *ad orientem* position of the Priest at the Altar during the celebration of the Mass of the current Roman Rite of Pope Paul VI, I wish to comment upon the following quote from the April 2000 edition of "The Catholic World Report" *Follow Up* article, pg. 29, that stated:

Regarding the *ad orientem* celebration [of the Mass], Cardinal Medina observed that the Roman Missal assumes that the priest is facing the people, "leaving open the possibility of his celebrating toward the apse."

Cardinal Medina, in spite of all of the good work he has done in his work to "clean-up" ICEL's act, so to speak, seems to have himself fallen victim to its unfortunate and inaccurate translation of the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal 2000* into English.

Through my own personal study of the matter, I came up with some interesting findings when I compared the Latin typical edition of the *GIRM 2000* with the "official" English translation on the points concerning the direction the Priest is assumed to be facing at certain times during the celebration of Mass. Perhaps the same kinds of errors are present in the Italian and/or Spanish versions of the *GIRM 2000*, as well. It only seems to me that, whatever edition of the *GIRM 2000* Cardinal Medina was basing his comment upon, it would not seem to have been derived from the official Latin source.

Through this article I wish in no way to show any kind of disrespect for Cardinal Medina, a Prelate of the Holy Catholic Church, nor for any other Catholic Bishop. This article must be seen as an honest attempt to get at the truth underlying the whole *ad orientem/versus populum* controversy which, if looked into more closely, may be able to be brought to a forthright resolution rooted in the *true facts* of the situation. If my research is faulty, or my observations faulty, then I certainly would welcome any kind of demonstration of the actual truth of the matter so that I can remain true to the Church and her disciplinary decrees concerning the celebration of the Sacraments.

After several thorough readings of the *GIRM 2000* in both the Latin and the English editions, in spite of how much anyone may wish it to be otherwise, I found absolutely no expressed directive or assumption that the Priest celebrating at the Altar (or even at the Chair) is facing the people (toward the nave) at all, except where he is directed to turn toward them and face them. The norms expressed in the *GIRM 2000* merely direct at certain times that the priest “*having turned around toward the people,*” or “*having then turned back around again and standing facing the people*” he carries out some action or dialogue with the people. The assumption would seem to be that the Priest would have been, prior to any instruction to *turn around toward the people*, celebrating in the *ad orientem* position at the Altar (i.e. toward the apse, “with his back to the people”), or standing at the Chair facing sideways along the side of the Sanctuary, until directed to turn around toward the people for some reason. At any rate, up until the Priest has been directed to *have turned around toward the people*, it would seem to be assumed that he had not been facing toward them up until that time. The following are quotes from the Latin typical edition *GIRM 2000, Chapter 4, I. MASS WITH A CONGREGATION, A. MASS WITHOUT A DEACON*. Beneath each Latin quote, I have included the “official” ICEL translation and my own “literal” translation of the same text. The comparisons are stunning and, as will be pointed out, revolve around the translation into English of the Latin phrases *versus ad populum* and *versus populum*. The italicized emphases in the quotes are my own.

The Opening Greeting at the INTRODUCTORY RITES (*GIRM 2000*):

124. (*Latin*) . . . Deinde, *versus a populum* et manus extendens, sacerdos eum salutatur, una adhibita e formulis propositis . . .

124. (*ICEL*) . . . Then, *facing the people* and extending his hands, the priest greets all present, using one of the formulas indicated . . .

124. (*Fr. Johnson*) . . . Then, *having turned around toward the people* and extending his hands, the priest greets the people by employing one of the proposed formulae . . .

Directly before the Prayer Over the Gifts (*GIRM 2000*):

146. (*Latin*) *Ad medium altaris deinde reversus, sacerdos, stans versus populum, extendens et iungens manus, populum ad orandum invitat, dicens: “Orate, fratres, etc. . .”*

146. (*ICEL*) The priest *returns to the middle of the altar* and, *facing the people* and first extending and then joining his hands, he invites the people to pray: “Pray, brothers and sisters.”

146. (*Fr. Johnson*) At the middle of the altar *having then turned back around*, the priest, *standing facing the people*, extending and joining his hands, invites the people to pray, saying: “Pray, brethren, etc.” . . .

Directly before giving the Sign of Peace (*GIRM 2000*):

154. (*Latin*) Deinde sacerdos, manibus extensis, clara voce dicit orationem “Domine Iesu Christe, qui dixisti;” eaque conclusa, extendens et iungens manus, pacem annuntiat, *versus ad populum*, dicens: “Pax Domini sit semper vobiscum . . .”

154. (*ICEL*) Then the priest, with his hands extended, says aloud: “Lord Jesus Christ, you said, . . .” After this prayer is concluded, extending and then joining his hands, he gives

the greeting of peace *while facing the people* and says: "The peace of the Lord be with you always . . ."

154. (*Fr. Johnson*) Then the priest, with his hands extended, says out loud the prayer "Lord Jesus Christ, who have said . . ." [A]nd having concluded the prayer, extending and joining his hands, announces the peace, *having turned around toward the people*, saying: "The peace of the Lord be always with you . . ."

At the Invitation of the People to Holy Communion (GIRM 2000):

157. (*Latin*) Oratione conclusa, sacerdos genuflectit, acceptit hostiam, eamque aliquantulum elevatam super patenam vel super calicem tenens, *versus ad populum*, dicit: "Ecce Agnus Dei, . . ."

157. (*ICEL*) At the conclusion of the prayer, the priest genuflects, takes the Eucharistic bread, and, holding it slightly above the paten or above the chalice, *while facing the people*, says: "This is the Lamb of God . . ."

157. (*Fr. Johnson*) Having concluded the prayer, the priest genuflects and takes up the host, and holding it elevated a little bit above the paten or above the chalice, *having turned around toward the people*, says: "Behold the Lamb of God . . ."

At the Communion of the Priest (GIRM 2000):

158. (*Latin*) Postea, *stans ad altare conversus*, sacerdos secreto dicit: "Corpus Christi custodiat me in vitam aeternam," et reverenter sumit Corpus Christi . . .

158. (*ICEL*) Next, *facing the altar*, the priest says inaudibly: "May the body of Christ bring me to everlasting life," and reverently consumes the body of Christ . . .

158. (*Fr. Johnson*) Next, *standing while having turned back around toward the altar*, the priest says silently: "May the Body of Christ preserve me for eternal life," and reverently consumes the Body of Christ . . .

At the Prayer after Communion (GIRM 2000):

165. (*Latin*) Deinde, *stans ad altare vel ad sedem*, sacerdos, *versus ad populum*, dicit, manibus junctis: "Oremus" et, *extensis manibus*, orationem post Communionem recitat . . .

165. (*ICEL*) Then, standing at the altar or the chair, and *facing the people*, the priest says: "Let us pray." . . . With hands outstretched, he recites the Prayer after Communion . . .

165. (*Fr. Johnson*) Then, standing at the altar or at the chair, the priest, *having turned around toward the people*, says, with hands joined: "Let us pray" and, with hands extended, recites the prayer after Communion . . ."

Two significant facts come to light by the comparison among one another of the Latin typical text of the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, and the ICEL translation, and my own more-or-less literal translation of the same document. The first is that ICEL never fails to translate the phrase *versus ad populum* as simply *facing the people*, as if it were the mere prepositional phrase *versus populum* without the "ad." The second is that there is no express direction given in the official documents of Vatican II, nor in the implementation of the post-Vatican II liturgical reform, that *absolutely requires* the priest to

celebrate Mass facing the people, toward the nave, for the entire duration of the prayers at the Altar. In fact, in a further comparative study of the actual implementation of Vatican II liturgical reforms, I have come across evidence that would seem to support the actual “thrust” in the implementation of the reforms towards the *ad orientem* celebration of the Mass without express provision for any kind of *versus populum* (facing the people) celebration at all. For this comparison, I turn to a brief review of a now obscure document called the *Ritus Servandus (Observing the Ritual)* that used to govern the rites and ceremonies used in the celebration of the Mass, and used to appear (only in Latin) among the introductory pages of the Roman Missal until replaced by the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* of the current Missal of Paul VI.

The *Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy* of Vatican II was promulgated in 1963, and its purpose was to lay down the principles that were to govern the subsequent reform of the Latin Rite liturgy in the years to follow. In 1964, an official Roman Missal was promulgated which continued to print the *Ritus Servandus* in Latin among its introductory pages, along with permission for the use of the vernacular, etc., put into force in a great amount of the text of the Mass Ordinary in its pages. The 1964 version of the *Ritus Servandus* had not been revised from its Pre-Vatican II, Tridentine form, and carried over in two places within its text, the following rubrics:

V. De Oratione, Par. 3:

Si altare sit ad orientem, versus populum, celebrans versa facie ad populum, non vertit humeros ad altare, cum dicturus est “Dominus vobiscum,” “Orate, fratres,” “Ite, missa est,” vel daturus benedictionem; sed osculato altari in medio, ibi expansis et junctis manibus, ut supra, salutatur populum, et dat benedictionem.

If the altar is oriented facing the people, the celebrant with his face toward the people, he does not turn his shoulders (his back) to the altar, when there is to be said “The Lord be with you,” “Pray brethren,” “Go, the mass is ended,” or when a blessing is to be given; but rather having kissed the altar at the center, there with his hands spread out and joined, as above, he greets the people, and gives the blessing.

XII. De Benedictione in fine Missae, Par. 2:

Si celebrans in altari vertit faciem ad populum, non vertit se, sed stans ut erat, benedicit populo, ut supra, in medio altaris . . .

If the celebrant at the altar turns his face toward the people, he does not turn himself around, but standing as he was, he blesses the people at the middle of the altar, as above . . .

By 1966, the Roman Rite Altar Missal (called for the first time in English the *Sacramentary*) printed in its introductory pages a revised version of the *Ritus Servandus* that had been compiled in 1965. The experts had spent a lot of time and effort carrying out very significant revisions of the *Ritus Servandus* that touched upon and implemented many ritual aspects of the liturgical reform called for by Vatican II. Of particular significance in the revised *Ritus Servandus* was the complete omission of any reference to, or any kind of express provision for celebrating Mass at an Altar facing the people, as had existed prior to Vatican II since at least the time of the Council of Trent.

The *Ritus Servandus* of the 1966 Roman Missal was never revised in accord with the *Ordo Missae of Pope Paul VI of 1969*, but was essentially abandoned and replaced by the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*. Nevertheless, the omission of any kind of express provision for celebrating Mass facing the people carried over into the *GIRM*, as well. In

fact the use of the phrase *versus ad populum* (having turned around toward the people) in the *GIRM* took over the phrase *conversus ad populum* (while having turned around toward the people) of the *Ritus Servandus*, 1965. Both phrases in their root form mean essentially the same thing, i.e. “having turned around as upon an axis,” stemming from the Latin verb: *verto, vertere, verti, versum*.

The Latin perfect participle *versus* is from the verb *verto, vertere* as its 4th principle part. I looked up the verb *vertere* in several very large, voluminous Latin dictionaries, among them, the *Oxford Dictionary of Latin*. The meanings given for *verto, vertere* are many; but among the examples given are: 1) to twirl or spin around, as in a dance, 2) to turn around, 3) to turn back around and change direction as at the end of a row when plowing a field. The participle form and meaning of *versus* seems to be demanded or necessitated by the use of the Latin preposition *ad*, as in the context of the phrase *versus ad populum* that means “having turned around toward the people” or “having turned around to face the people.” The use of the Latin word *versus* alone without the preposition *ad* makes *versus orientem* (facing east), *versus populum* (facing the people, as in *GIRM 2000*, par. 146), or *versus altare* (facing the altar).

Consequently, by a careful study of the actual original language used by the Church for expressing ritual actions, or rubrics of the Mass, both before and after Vatican II, we are brought full circle, back to the opening considerations of this article. Cardinal Medina and many others seem to have seriously flawed translations of the *GIRM 2000* upon which they are basing their observations concerning ritual actions in the celebration of the Mass, or they are relying upon experts who are not accurately conveying the actual literal meaning of the Latin typical edition. (I am assuming that the authors of the *GIRM 2000* have adequate knowledge of the Latin language to convey the meaning of what they actually intend the rubrics to direct.) No matter how much any of us might wish to preserve peace and the *status quo* of the post-Vatican II liturgical *fait accompli* of priests celebrating the Mass “facing the people,” we are forced to conclude that Mass celebrated facing the people for the entire duration of the prayers at the Altar is nothing more than a virtually universal concession and *innovation*, and that it is not in accord with the express rubrics and descriptions (at the historical and linguistic level, at least) for the celebration of the Mass found in force in the current Latin Typical Edition of the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM 2000)*.

Hence it would seem that, at the same historical and linguistic level, the facts of the matter demonstrate the antithesis of Cardinal Medina’s assumption that “the Roman Missal assumes that the priest is facing the people, leaving open the possibility of his celebrating toward the apse.” Namely, based upon the above-presented wording of the rubrics in the Latin Typical Edition and in the literal English translations of the same rubrics of the *GIRM 2000*, it would be more accurate perhaps to say: “the Roman Missal assumes that the priest is not always facing the people, leaving open the possibility of his celebrating toward the nave.” *This is to say, the current Roman Missal of Pope Paul VI assumes that the Priest at the Altar will not always be facing the people throughout the entire celebration of the Mass, except where directed to turn around toward them to face them; and this fact is so presumed that it is not even envisioned, addressed, or expressed that the Priest at the Altar would ever celebrate toward the nave, that is, while facing toward the people throughout the entire Mass.* Nevertheless, the astute observer might point to the new paragraph 299 of the *GIRM 2000* in order to demonstrate that there is, in fact, a new provision for the Priest to celebrate while facing toward the people throughout the entire Mass. Paragraph 299 is set forth below in Latin, ICEL, and literal English:

299. (*Latin*) Altare maius exstruatur a pariete seiunctum, ut facile circumiri et in eo celebratio *versus populum* peragi possit, quod expedit ubicumque possibile sit. Altare eum autem occupet locum, ut revera centrum sit ad quod totius congregationis fidelium attentio sponte convertatur. De more sit fixum et dedicatum.

299. (ICEL) In every church there should ordinarily be a fixed, dedicated altar, which should be freestanding to allow the ministers to walk around it easily and Mass to be celebrated facing the people, which is desirable whenever possible. The altar should occupy its place so that it is truly the center on which the attention of the whole congregation of the faithful naturally focuses. As a rule, the altar is fixed and dedicated.

299. (Fr. Johnson) The main altar is to be constructed disjoined and separate from any wall, which is desirable whenever it is possible, so that it can be walked around easily and celebration *facing the people* may be carried out at it. Moreover this altar shall occupy a place that it is in reality the center to which the attention of the whole congregation of the faithful will be turned toward unaided and on its own accord. By regular practice the altar is to be fixed and dedicated.

Central to the literal sense of the original language of paragraph 299 of the *GIRM 2000* is the fact that Latin is highly inflected and does not rely upon *syntax* (word order) as much as English does. The phrase ICEL puts great emphasis upon, and does not actually translate very accurately is *quod expedit ubicumque possibile sit*. They emphasize its syntactical position, coming right after the description of being able to walk around the altar and to have Mass celebrated at it facing the people, and they translate *ubicumque* as “whenever.” But this Latin subordinate clause begins with *quod*, which is a neuter singular demonstrative modifying *Altare*, the Latin noun for Altar, which is neuter singular. If the phrase were qualifying the actions of being able to walk around the Altar and being able to celebrate Mass at it facing the people (*ut facile circumiri et in eo celebratio versus populum peragi possit*), two things not one; then this same clause would begin with the Latin word *quae* (neuter plural), not *quod*, and this clause would end with the plural form of the verb, namely, *possint*. Moreover if the authors intended to convey the meaning “whenever,” then it seems that one of the usual Latin words for “whenever,” e.g. *quandocumque*, *utcumque*, or *quoriescumque*, ought to have been employed. As it is, the usual meaning in English of the Latin word *ubicumque* is “whenever.” In this situation the regular meaning “whenever” would certainly be an apt description qualifying the place and manner of construction of the Altar. Taking other senses of these words seems to be stretching their usual meanings and uses in the Latin language. The use of *quod* (neuter singular) for the same two things, would break the standard rules of grammar. Thus we approach ever nearer the issues at the heart of the *versus populum* habit of the post-Vatican II, contemporary Catholic Liturgy of the Eucharist.

The whole controversy draws my mind and imagination to the days of St. Athanasius where just *one-iota* (*i*) of the Greek Alphabet made the difference in the Theology that split the Church along doctrinal lines between the Arians and the Orthodox Catholics. Was the Incarnate Word of God Jesus Christ *homoousios* (of the same substance) of the Father, or was he merely *homo-i-ousios* (similar in substance) to the Father? Now we live in a day when the translation of the Latin word *ad*, or rather the ignoring of the word *ad*, as present in the description of the Sacred Rites and Ceremonies in the Roman Missal, is splitting the Liturgical Discipline of the Church into two camps. In popular Catholic worship at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is the Priest to celebrate at the Altar, facing in the same direction as the people, leading them in offering the transcendent Sacrifice of Jesus Christ to the Father, in the Holy Spirit; or is the Priest to be required at all cost, no matter what the history or circumstances involved, to lead all prayers at the Mass always and at all times facing toward the congregation? Where is our modern day St. Athanasius who will find himself waking up in a liturgically upside-down and backwards world?

I point out again that I believe Cardinal Medina has made great strides in his dealings with ICEL, calling the organization to higher standards of intellectual honesty and scholarly integrity. Anything he can do to straighten out ICEL will help in the controversy of

the *ad orientem* posture of the Priest at Mass, as both the problems of translation into the vernacular and the problems of its ritual celebration are interrelated. Most Bishops in the United States of America, such as Bishop Foley of Birmingham, Alabama continue to hold on to the idea that the celebration of the Mass *facing the people at the altar* is part-and-parcel of Vatican II. Bishop Foley, for example, has expressed his keen awareness that it is his “absolute duty to protect [the liturgy] from innovation or sacrilege;” yet he does not seem to realize that the Priest at the Altar celebrating Mass facing the people is the innovation. Furthermore, any implication that celebrating the Mass *ad orientem* could even suggest a case of “sacrilege” is beyond my ability to comprehend. The originators of division were those who “forced” priests to celebrate Mass facing the people under the pretext of “law” in the first place, allowing in real practice (though perhaps conceding in theoretical possibility) no toleration for any priest to dare celebrate the Mass at the altar in the *ad orientem* direction along with the people for any part of the Mass, at all. It certainly seems just, fair, and reasonable that the celebration of Mass ought to be freely allowed where both priest and people together face the same direction at the altar, experience as to how to celebrate the Mass at the altar *ad orientem* should have to fear sanctions and the repercussions of punishment by Ecclesiastical Authorities for simply following this immemorial custom of the Catholic Church, expressed by the language of the *GIRM 2000*.

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Corrections to:

"NARROWING THE FACTUAL BASES OF THE *AD ORIENTEM* POSITION"

by Fr. Timothy D. Johnson

This article appeared in Winter 2002, Volume 129 No.4 of SACRED MUSIC, pages 13 through 19. Corrections are given below by page number, by paragraph number, and by sentence number:

Pg. 18, Par. 2.

299. The main altar is to be constructed disjoined and separate from any wall which is desirable *wherever* it is possible, so that it can be **walked** around easily and celebration *facing the people* may be carried out at it. . .

Pg. 18, Par. 3, sentences 6, 7, & 9.

As it is, the usual meaning in English of the Latin word *ubicumque* is "wherever." In this situation the regular meaning "wherever" would certainly be an apt description qualifying the place and manner of construction of the Altar. . . The use of *quod* (neuter **singular**) to qualify **two** actions that may be carried out at the Altar (walking easily around it and celebrating facing the people), would break the standard rules of grammar.

Pg. 19, Final Paragraph, Final 2 Sentences.

It certainly seems just, fair, and reasonable that the celebration of Mass ought to be freely allowed where both priest and people together face the same direction toward the Altar. **Any priest with the knowledge and** experience as to how to celebrate the Mass at the Altar *ad orientem* should not have to fear sanctions and the repercussions of punishment by Ecclesiastical Authorities . .

CORRECTIONS



Cathedral and Campanile, Florence, Italy.

SACRED MUSIC

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