

Fr. Z's Blog

Once named: *What Does The Prayer Really Say?* – Commentary on Catholic issues & slavishly accurate liturgical translations – by Fr. John Zuhlsdorf of[:~)

QUAERITUR: Justify ad orientem worship in light of GIRM 299

Posted on 22 April 2009 by Fr. John Zuhlsdorf

From a reader:

I'm a student at ____, studying Psychology and Theology. First off, IMy name's ____, and I'd like to thank you for your blog. I've learned a lot that I've been able to share with my friends about the Sacred Liturgy.

The topic of ad orientem worship seems to come up a lot on your blog. Personally, I would prefer that Holy Mass be celebrated that way, but while studying the **GIRM** (I was in the seminary for a 3 semesters) I ran across **paragraph 299**:

“The altar should be built apart from the wall, in such a way that it is possible to walk around it easily and that Mass can be celebrated at it facing the people, which is desirable wherever possible...”

You speak a lot about following the rubrics and the GIRM, saying mass the way Holy Mother Church commands us to. You've cited the GIRM to encourage things like chalice veils. **How can you reconcile your endorsement of ad orientem worship in the Ordinary Form with your insistence on “Say the Black, Do the Red”?** Not attacking you of course, Father, just wondering what your rationale is?

I have written about GIRM 299 several times. Here is a good link to one entry: [What Does GIRM 299 Really Say?](#)

The short answer is that **you have been duped**, probably on purpose.

The English translation you reference, even though it might be on an official site or in a document, is *wrong*. It does not accurately translate the Latin of the GIRM, which is a serious problem. As you will see... it caused you confusion.

It is sad when we cannot trust entirely the translations of important paragraphs in important documents. But the folks who put that together didn't like what the Latin expressed.

Briefly, here is the skinny.

This is what GIRM 299 really says:

Altare maius exstruatur a pariete seiunctum, ut facile circumiri et in eo celebratio versus populum peragi possit, quod expedit ubicumque possibile sit.

The main altar should be built separated from the wall, which is useful wherever it is possible, so that it can be easily walked around and a celebration toward the people can be carried out.

Before the USCCB put out their document *Built of Living Stones*, with the incorrect translation you cited, the Congregation for Divine Worship responded to a question about this very paragraph and actually *explained the Latin grammar*. I unfold that in the entry I linked.

Here is the meat of the CDWDS's response about that which, I repeat, was made *before* the USCCB issued *Built of Living Stones*.

The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments has been asked whether the expression in n. 299 of the *Institutio Generalis Missalis Romani* constitutes a norm according to which the position of the priest versus absidem [facing the apse] is to be excluded. The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, after mature reflection and in light of liturgical precedents, responds:

Negatively, and in accordance with the following explanation.

The explanation includes different elements which must be taken into account. First, **the word expedit does not constitute a strict obligation but a suggestion** that refers to the construction of the altar a pariete seiunctum (detached from the wall). It does not require, for example, that existing altars be pulled away from the wall. The phrase ubi possibile sit (where it is possible) refers to, for example, the topography of the place, the availability of space, the artistic value of the existing altar, the sensibility of the people participating in the celebrations in a particular church, etc.

I hope that clear up your question!

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About Fr. John Zuhlsdorf

Fr. Z is the guy who runs this blog. o{[]:-)

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76 Responses to *QUAERITUR: Justify ad orientem worship in light of GIRM 299*

cathguy says:

22 April 2009 at 1:34 pm

Thoughtful question! Thoughtful answer! No name calling, or rank pulling.

Nice!!

Fr. Wade says:

22 April 2009 at 1:35 pm

This is why I love your site.

May our Lord Bless you for all you do for Him and His Church.

Thank you.

Clement says:

22 April 2009 at 1:44 pm

Interesting, Even the correct Latin translation of 299 sounds very ambiguous.

stigmatized says:

22 April 2009 at 1:59 pm

i am trying to take consolation in this correct translation. but yesterday at mass we were all kneeling and the priest was standing five steps above us, facing us. it felt so stupid. i did not feel like i was praying with the priest but that i was just watching him pray. it always feels like that there. when they look up to the ceiling while facing us it looks like they alone have contact with the divine and we are made to kneel because we should be impressed by this...by the graces bestowed exclusively on THEM. surely there was never a moment in the history of the church when clericalism was as strong as april 2009.

Dennis says:

22 April 2009 at 2:01 pm

A frustration I have had since I converted to the Church is the ambiguity on a variety of topics. I find myself thinking, "For Pete's sake...just say it!"

Dennis

Andrew, UK and sometimes Canada says:

22 April 2009 at 2:09 pm

Interesting thing came up in the pew missal at OF parish. For Good Friday, the rubrics for Communion say something along the lines of: "The priest, facing the people, says leads the Our Father"

And again: "The priest, facing the people and showing them the consecrated Hosts says..."

Does this, perhaps, presume that the priest was not otherwise facing the people. Funny how this made it into even the standard (Canada) pew missal. Can't remember if it used the word "turning".

JBS says:

22 April 2009 at 2:23 pm

I wonder if it will be possible to turn the people towards the East at Saint Peter's, and other such churches, as seems to have been the practise in the past? I do not see how else a pope can make the point.

JayneK says:

22 April 2009 at 2:27 pm

I have been studying Latin so, as an exercise, I attempted my own translation to see what I would come up with. I looked up "expedit" in my Latin dictionary which gave the meaning "it is expedient". Then I looked up "expedient" in my English dictionary (New Oxford) which gave as its first definition "convenient and practical although possibly improper or immoral."

So (if I have figured this out correctly) it is not merely that "expedit" does not convey obligation, it even allows the possibility that the referred action is improper or immoral.

Jayne

CDN Canonist says:

22 April 2009 at 2:35 pm

The full response of the CDWDS, which is not posted above, reads as follows (in English translation):

Above all one must recall that the word expedient does not constitute an obligatory norm, but a suggestion which refers either to the construction of the altar separate from the wall, or to celebration facing the people. The phrase where possible refers to different elements, such as, for example, the layout of the place, the availability of space, the existence of a previous altar of artistic value, the sensibility of the community which participates in the celebrations in the Church in question, etc. One confirms that the position facing the assembly seems more appropriate in as much as it renders communication easier (cf. Editorial in *Notitiae* 29 [1993], 245-249), but without excluding the alternative possibility.

The last sentence is very important. Also important is the Rite of Dedication of a Church and an Altar, 29 May 1977. This remains a source of liturgical law outside the Code of Canon Law. Chapter 4, n. 8 states: "The altar should be freestanding so that the priest can easily walk around it and celebrate Mass facing the people (Altare exstruatur a pariete seiunctum, ut sacerdos facile id circumire et Missam versus populum celebrare possit)."

All things being equal, Mass facing the people is preferred.

JBS says:

22 April 2009 at 2:55 pm

Microphones make communication even easier than reverse altars.

JayneK says:

22 April 2009 at 3:01 pm

CDN Canonist,

I disagree with the conclusion you draw from these quotes. It does not look to me like that CDWDS is making a general claim that Mass facing the people is preferable. Rather, it is the more modest claim that, in terms of practical considerations, celebration versus populum is preferable.

As for the quote from the Rite of Dedication, it gives no hint of preference. It only says that celebration versus populum should be possible.

Jayne

stigmatized says:

22 April 2009 at 3:02 pm

those who are unable to see how having the priest face you from an elevated position while you kneel somehow replicates the experience of the house church should be allowed the opportunity for ad orientem worship in all parishes. the liturgy, as we continue to have it, was meant to replicate aspects of the temple worship and the altar of sacrifice in the temple. if it is now meant to replicate only the meal aspect then it should only be held in a house.

TJM says:

22 April 2009 at 3:06 pm

What is interesting is the seeming conflict between the GIRM and the rubrics of the Mass itself which refers to the priest turning towards the people. I assume Father Z or some other knowledgeable person here can shed some light on these contrasting provisions. Tom

Michelle Marie Romani says:

22 April 2009 at 3:11 pm

I am just blessed to have a friend, who is my parochial vicar, celebrate Mass ad orientem twice a week at our local hospital chapel. He even does this occasionally at our parish.

As someone else noted, the fact that the GIRM makes mention when the priest should face the people means to me that the rubrics assume that the celebrant will be in the ad orientem posture. In fact, that is the same opinion that my PV has.

Richard says:

22 April 2009 at 3:22 pm

Methinks the confusion in the English translation could have been avoided if the phrase “quod expedit ubicumque possibile sit” immediately followed “Altare maius exstruatur a pariete eiunctum” instead of “ut facile circumiri et in eo celebratio versus populum peragi possit”. I don't know about Latin, **[That is sort of a problem... when determining the meaning of the Latin. We don't work backward from the English.]** but it is fundamental in the English language that a modifying phrase modifies that which immediately precedes it, not two phrases later. The Latin structure here is the source of the confusion.

Papabile says:

22 April 2009 at 3:41 pm

It is amazing to me that certain people who are canon lawyers are so reductionist to apply an American positivistic approach to Canon Law.

By trying to claim that Mass facing the people is “preferable” on the basis of a clarification that was sent to an individual (Prot. No. 2036/00/L)

by the CDWDS, while excluding that custom is the best interpreter of law is laughable.

Fr. Wade says:

22 April 2009 at 3:47 pm

In his book, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, our Holy Father in chapter 3 writes that *ad orientem* worship is from the very beginning and that it is essential. He also says it was a mistake and that it should be corrected as soon as possible. If it is physically impossible to celebrate *ad orientem* then at the very least a crucifix should be placed on the Altar for the priest and the people to focus on instead of the priest's face. *Conversi ad dominum*. If it was good enough for the Apostles and 2000 years worth of Saints and Martyrs it's good enough for me.

JayneK says:

22 April 2009 at 3:53 pm

Richard,

Because Latin is an inflected language, word order is far less significant than it is in English. It is normal for Latin to have long sentences with lots of phrases and clauses, not necessarily modifying the immediately preceding words.

But if "expedit" had been translated better there would have been less confusion caused by the ambiguity of the structure. When I translate this word as "useful" or "expedient" rather than "desirable" it makes more sense to apply it to position of the altar.

The sentence would be saying that it is useful to have the altar away from the wall so that Mass can be celebrated both ways. That makes more sense to me than saying it is useful to celebrate *versus populum*.

Dominic says:

22 April 2009 at 4:09 pm

Richard's remark makes a lot of sense to me. There is just no way to tell what the antecedent of "quod" is in this sentence. Sometimes in Latin you can tell by matching up gender or number, but not in this case. The default presumption would be that a subordinate clause modifies what's closest to it. What grammatical arguments can you put forward to say that "quod" refers to the previous and not to the latter clause?

Origen Adamantius says:

22 April 2009 at 4:10 pm

There seem to be two separate issues being dealt with in GIRM 299, one is architecture and one is liturgy. The GIRM seem to express a preference for facing the people without mandating that preference. The reason it is not mandated in the text of the GIRM (there may be others that are not expressed, like continuity and tradition) is respect for existing Church Architecture—that is, this preference does not necessitate the destruction of pre-existing sanctuaries that will not readily accommodate the preference.

Mark G. says:

22 April 2009 at 4:16 pm

What I cannot fathom is when a free-standing altar is set up in front of the main altar. Should a church have 2 main altars? In this case, sadly, the typically beautiful altar in the apse simply becomes a decoration. Worse, I suppose, is when it's ripped out completely.

Not that I know anything, but I can't see how these things were coaxed out of these texts, or given approval by the Ordinary. At least there seems to be a movement back towards beauty & reverence.

Thanks for your good work, Father.

Henry Edwards *says:*

22 April 2009 at 4:30 pm

\”One confirms that the position facing the assembly seems more appropriate in as much as **it renders communication easier** (cf. Editorial in Notitiae 29 [1993], 245-249), but without excluding the alternative possibility.\”

One wonders whether the CDW author of this sentence thought that communication in the Canon is between the celebrant and the people. Or did he think that facing the people makes the celebrant’s communication with God easier.

Is this the kind of logic that an alleged preference for versus populum celebration is based on?

Larry *says:*

22 April 2009 at 4:58 pm

Maybe the CDW will see fit to simply issue a correction if the real meaning is as Fr. Z proposes. **[Ehem... I did not propose it. The CDW already issued the clarification! Read the post.]** If Pope Benedict wants to have a real option to celebrate facing “East” then he can certainly do that as well. I suspect however that neither action will be taken.

Henry Edwards *says:*

22 April 2009 at 5:07 pm

Larry: **Maybe the CDW will see fit to simply issue a correction if the real meaning is as Fr. Z proposes.**

Perhaps you need to re-read Father Z’s original post. He’s not “suggesting” a correction regarding the “real meaning”. Instead, he’s quoting the correction that the CDW has **already** issued.

And no papal action is required to “have” an option that already exists. Indeed, the CDW has stated that a bishop does not have the authority to prohibit ad orientem celebration in his diocese.

And, of course, Pope Benedict has already made his position clear not only in his writings, but by publicly celebrating the Mass ad orientem as Pope.

So, really, no questions about any of these matters remain to be answered.

JayneK *says:*

22 April 2009 at 5:17 pm

Dominic,

I agree that matching up gender and number is not involved here. I think that it is the meaning of “expedit” that indicates it applies to architecture more than to liturgy. One would consider both meaning and grammar before applying the default assumption.

Patricius *says:*

22 April 2009 at 5:20 pm

An incorrect translation of a passage in the General Instruction on the Roman Missal from Latin into English appears to be suggested as the origin of the now widespread practice of Mass “facing the people”.

Have French, German, Italian, Spanish and Polish speakers experienced the same problem? I ask because versus populum appears to have swept the whole world- not just the anglophone fragment, however big and influential we consider ourselves to be.



Jeff says:

22 April 2009 at 5:28 pm

Actually gender can be used to determine what “quod” is referring to. “Quod” is neuter, “altar” in Latin is neuter, “celebration” is feminine, therefore on the basis of gender agreement, “quod” cannot refer to the celebration, it must refer to the altar. **[No. Quod does not refer to altare, here. It refers to the whole idea of the first clause.]**

Fr. Marie-Paul says:

22 April 2009 at 6:27 pm

Erroneous translations like that cited, as well as misuse of Church documents to mislead people, may be called an “anti-brick by anti-brick” process.



Jeff says:

22 April 2009 at 7:01 pm

Thanks Father, I humbly stand corrected.

Joe says:

22 April 2009 at 7:02 pm

in any case microphones are, in my experience, never an improvement, except for the homily, and even then not always.

Luiz says:

22 April 2009 at 7:37 pm

In Portuguese: “Onde for possível, o altar principal deve ser construído afastado da parede, de modo a permitir andar em volta dele e celebrar a Missa de frente para o povo.”

“Where it is possible, the main altar should be built separated from the wall, so that it can be easily walked around and the mass can be celebrated facing the people.”

Danny Mary-Joseph says:

22 April 2009 at 8:04 pm

How could mass be said ad orientem when the altar(the table-like altar) is too high to reach from the front? most I have seen are raised and have steps, so you could walk around them but could never reach the altar from the front. I think this was done on purpose.

and shouldnt it be called ad tabernacula (presuming its still central)? because not many churches face east.

Dr. Lee Fratantuono says:

22 April 2009 at 9:06 pm

Fr. Z deserves thanks for highlighting this important issue.

That said, one reason the issue needs highlighting is the Latin rubric, which (at least in the opinion of this Latinist) is not a particularly well-

written sentence. Word order is indeed more flexible in Latin than in English, but the word order here does not lend clarity to the sentence, and “expedit” is hardly a good verb for conveying what the Latin wants to convey. Unfortunately, the original text more or less invited this sort of ambiguity.

ustalumnus says:

22 April 2009 at 9:22 pm

“I have written about GIRM 299 several times.”

Some of Father Z's translations in past posts have been a stretch, at best, to promote a particular position. **[When you don't have a clue as to what that Latin says, and you yourself are working only from translations, I can see why you might say that. But you are simply WRONG. Produce your own translation or shut up.]**

Hey reader, Trust the Wisdom of the Church. The Church is being built, “brick by brick” alright, but it is in God’s way and time.

stigmatized says:

22 April 2009 at 9:24 pm

i have yet to see a single parish where there is a crucifix in front of the priest for him to look at while saying mass versus populum. you will see a cross standing near the altar but it can NEVER be placed in front of it so as to block the people’s view of the priest (as though that were the reason they had come to church) what is even worse is that some priests are now starting to continually look up to the ceiling or to the west in an obvious way during the eucharistic prayer. these priests do not allow the cross to be placed in front of the altar so what the people end up seeing is not him facing them as at a meal table but him as a glorified superhero who would not condescend to look upon them. this latest practice is the final step in their selfdeification.

TJM says:

22 April 2009 at 9:27 pm

Unless you can back up your assertion about Father Z's translations, I'd said by by ustalumnus! Tom

TJM says:

22 April 2009 at 9:28 pm

stigmatized, then you need to look at the New Liturgical Movement website. They show pictures of that all the time. Tom

RBrown says:

22 April 2009 at 9:39 pm

Some of Father Z's translations in past posts have been a stretch, at best, to promote a particular position.

It is irresponsible for you to make a general accusation without a specific example.

Hey reader, Trust the Wisdom of the Church. The Church is being built, “brick by brick” alright, but it is in God’s way and time.

Comment by ustalumnus

Do you know Latin?

Martin T. *says:*

22 April 2009 at 10:04 pm

Ok, i'll go read the article but, meanwhile I wonder why the remark about moving altars is there at all if the point isn't to allow verses populum.

If "I" am building a new church doesn't this oblige me to build a free tanding altar as this is "more useful" or are you saying this is a useless sugestion

cordelia *says:*

22 April 2009 at 10:07 pm

here's a really dumb question: what about a church that is built in such a way that when the priest faces the people he is also facing east? if he offers Mass "with his back" to the people he would be facing west. does this matter?

TJM *says:*

22 April 2009 at 10:52 pm

cordelia, there is a concept of the liturgical east where priest and congregation face the Lord together. You should read Pope Benedict's book on the matter. Tom



Athanasius *says:*

22 April 2009 at 11:05 pm

I just don't understand the rationale behind saying the altar ought to be separate from the wall. In the Roman rite it has little tradition past the age of persecution, and in the patriarchal basilicas the altar, though not in the wall, is not such that one can walk around it. Frankly there is no tradition in the Roman Rite of walking around the altar, this is more proper to the Eastern and Oriental rites.

stigmatized *says:*

22 April 2009 at 11:50 pm

dear tom, i am simply speaking of the parishes i can walk to here in the city where i live. i have visited the nlm site. several months ago a piece was posted about holocaust denial. i am not sure why this topic was being discussed on a site exclusively devoted to the liturgy. i posted a comment which said that not mentioning that polish people also died in the holocaust was a form of holocaust denial. for this reason i was banned from posting on the site. i have considered my visits to the site and the pain that being banned for saying that polish people died in the holocaust has caused me and i have decided that i shouldn't visit that site. i do not feel that i am a bad person who should be banned from posting just because i said that polish people also died in the holocaust. by saying that i was not trivializing the jewish deaths at all. i feel that the nlm censors people and that it believes it has the last word about truth and beauty...m

Pope Evaristus, Martyr *says:*

22 April 2009 at 11:54 pm

This is a very good post.

stigmatized *says:*

23 April 2009 at 12:01 am

dear tom, i am simply speaking of the parishes i can walk to here in the city where i live. i have visited the nlm site. several months ago a piece was posted there about holocaust denial. i am not sure why this topic was being discussed on a site exclusively devoted to the liturgy. i posted a

comment which said that not mentioning that polish people also died in the holocaust is a form of holocaust denial. for this reason i was banned from posting on the site. my being banned for stating a fact that i know to be true (that very many polish people died in the holocaust) has caused me great pain. i do not feel welcome visiting the nlm site. banning a person from posting is their form of excommunication, and as a person who prefers the old rite of mass i am already unwelcome in the mainstream church and people regularly make that clear to me. so it is too much for me psychologically at this point to visit the nlm.

Aussie Paul says:

23 April 2009 at 12:02 am

Fr Z said in a follow up post, in April 2006, to the one he refers us to now:

“I had some mail and comments about my entry on the Latin of GIRM 299 and the English translation.

“In one case I was asked by Paul B: “Just to play the devil’s advocate, ... (c)ouldn’t the ‘quod’ be taken, not as a neuter relative pronoun, ‘which’..., but as the conjunction ‘because’.... This would lend weight to the bishop’ BLS translation and give it more force for their ‘facing the people’ agenda.”

“While I was pretty sure I had rendered it correctly (namely, that the quod referred to the whole thing that went before) I consulted Fr. Reginald Foster, OCD (Latin secretary to His Holiness in the Secretariat of State) about 299. As I supposed, the quod refers to what goes before. It is not “because”. Look at the Latin again.”

I posted a comment in response to this:

“I am the Paul B who asked you this question.... Please have no doubt that I favour your translation, from a liturgical perspective and in its whole context. Also, I would not like to gainsay the famous Fr Reggie Foster. However, my interest continues mainly from a Latin language perspective.

You do not give your reasons, or Fr Foster’s, as to why my query is incorrect and why the “quod” must refer to what goes before about the position of the altar. You simply state “It is not “because”. Look at the Latin again”.

I’ve looked at the Latin again and can’t see, in light of my previous post, why it cannot equally be the conjunction “because”.

Can you help me with this?

It seems to me that if “quod” is the relative pronoun “which” then it is separated from its antecedent in such a way that the Latin becomes ambiguous and the alternative translation of “because” is permissible.

Hence, my previous comment that we not only have difficulties today with errors in translation from the Latin but also ambiguous Latin in documents which should be more carefully constructed in matters of liturgical law.”

Fr Z did not ever reply to this further query. Perhaps he might have the time to do so now? Thanks in anticipation.

Daniel Canaris says:

23 April 2009 at 4:09 am

Even if the ‘quod’ of the relative clause refers to the ‘whole’ idea of the two clauses that precede it, I still cannot see how you can interpret this to water down the rubric’s suggestion that that mass be celebrated facing the people. After all, ‘so that mass be celebrated towards the people’ is put into a purpose clause... A purpose clause describes, obviously, the INTENT behind the action. **[No no no, it isn't. You misread the ut. It merely describes the extent to which the altar ought to be separated from the wall. This does not proposed that Mass ought to be celebrated facing the people. It merely says that the altar, when suitable, should be far enough from the wall that it could be used the other way. That's is.]** Versus populum is one of the INTENTS of having the altar separated from the wall. This

is the plain and straightforward meaning of the Latin.

In light of what our Holy Father has said and the immemorial tradition of the Catholic Church, this rubric must be revised. It should have never entered into the GIRM. Nevertheless, it is clear that to celebrate ad orientem is in no way a violation of this rubric and in fact is more in line with the tradition of the church. Next Missal, hopefully, we might see this rubric removed. :-)

Also Father, the way in which you translated the text with the relative clause wedged between the main clause and the purpose clause is in fact a little bit confusing and does suggest that you were taking 'altare' as the antecedent of 'quod', though it is clear from your comments that you were not. **[I disagree. Let's have your own polished version!]**



Maureen says:

23 April 2009 at 6:38 am

Ask yourself, folks — do Masses often occur at which the altar is incensed in a complete circle? That's one big reason why they wanted priests to be able to walk around the altar, if possible, and yet it's not exactly something being done on a regular basis. In fact, I don't think I ever saw it done growing up, beyond maybe once or twice a year.

"If possible" looks to be meant to give people considerable wiggle room to ignore this suggestion, while still making the suggestion very clear in terms of new churches being built. (And of course a lot of new churches were being built in the sixties and seventies with all the money raised in the fifties and early sixties.)

Re: ambiguity — The Church isn't supposed to have to hold priests' hands and walk them to the bathroom. Adult pastors who live in the freedom of Christ and have gone to seminary to learn this stuff are supposed to be able to figure this stuff out as best it applies to their parish.

Unfortunately, many priests didn't learn from teachers who knew what they were doing, or they learned from teachers with political agendas who wanted to push a non-standard interpretation as the only one. But wiggle room is supposed to be a feature allowing people to think with the Church, instead of a bug allowing people to do crazy stuff. I think it would be a big mistake to eliminate this feature; it's not the feature that's done the harm but the people who abuse it.

Danny Mary-Joseph says:

23 April 2009 at 7:17 am

But ad orientem is impossible in most churches in my diocese because the altar is built so that you could not possibly reach it from the front. you have to face the people. the GIRM seems to support this.

shouldnt it be called ad tabernacula anyway? that helps people understand why the priest would face that way and reinforces the fact of the real presence of Christ.

Geoffrey says:

23 April 2009 at 7:19 am

Even if one shares Fr. Z's preference for masses celebrates ad orientem, as I do, one has to concede that the Latin wording of IGMR 299 is (at least) ambiguous. Fr. Z's translation would be the only possible, if the Latin text read: "Altare maius exstruatur a pariete seiunctum, quod expedit ubicumque possibile sit, ut facile circumiri et in eo celebratio versus populum peragi possit." In this case, "quod" ("which") could only refer to the first part of the sentence (exstruatur a pariete seiunctum); and "ut" ("so that") would give the reason for this placement of the altar. However, the text reads: "Altare maius exstruatur a pariete seiunctum, ut facile circumiri et in eo celebratio versus populum peragi possit, quod expedit ubicumque possibile sit." As far as I see, there is no way to decide, from a grammatical point of view, whether "quod" refers to the first or to the second part of the sentence. There is no general rule that "quod" can only qualify the main clause of a sentence and not a subordinate clause which precedes the "quod"-clause. From a linguistic point of view, the translation should be as ambiguous as the original text. "The main altar should be built separated from the wall, so that it can be easily walked around and a celebration toward the people can be carried out; this is useful wherever it is possible."

Ernie *says:*

23 April 2009 at 7:58 am

“do Masses often occur at which the altar is incensed in a complete circle? That’s one big reason why they wanted priests to be able to walk around the altar, if possible, and yet it’s not exactly something being done on a regular basis. In fact, I don’t think I ever saw it done growing up, beyond maybe once or twice a year.”

I’m not sure where you grew up, but incensation of the freestanding altar (done in a complete circle) happened fairly frequently in my parish...in many cases weekly:

- Principal feasts (Midnight and Christmas Day, Jan 1, Palm Sunday, Holy Thursday, Easter Vigil and Easter Sunday, Corpus Christi, etc.
- 40 hours devotion each October (opening and closing Masses)
- Confirmation each October
- Funeral masses...which occurred with great frequency (>2x per week)

Certainly not a rare, or even infrequent, occurrence.

That being said, I will leave the translation from the Latin to those more capable than I. My two years with Fr. Callahan, SJ left me with little concrete memories other than “Gallia est divisa in tres partes...”!



Father George David Byers *says:*

23 April 2009 at 8:05 am

I remember laying out the syntax of this a couple years back on this blog, I think in a helpful way. I went googling for it, but it didn’t come up.

So, Fr Z, when do we get to have a search box on wdtprs?

Shane O’Neill *says:*

23 April 2009 at 8:13 am

Father Byers, just type the following into google. It will let you search all the archives of the site.

“site:wdtprs.com insertsearchwordhere”

Dr. Lee Fratantuono *says:*

23 April 2009 at 8:49 am

I’d take points off a prose composition paper if someone wanted to have the quod clause refer to the first part of the sentence and chose to craft the word order in this way. **[And you would be wrong to do so in this case.]** If the “mens” were indeed such, the execution could have had greater clarity.

Mitchell NY *says:*

23 April 2009 at 8:52 am

Is it possible that the whole idea behind building new Altars separated from the wall was a way to move the whole “set up closer to the people”

so that all would be in better view? Sometimes the High Altars are set so far back that you can barely see it and the actions of the Priest..Perhaps the idea was to bring these elements and movements (as they were ad orientem) in a better focus, and that was their objective. Anyone else thought about this? Maybe it was a way to more clearly define the actions of the Priest.

[TJM](#) says:

23 April 2009 at 9:22 am

Mitchell,

I have a thought. Perhaps the idea of the free-standing altar was to make the typical parish more like a Roman basilica which from ancient times generally had free-standing altars, which allowed the priest to incense the entire altar (all 4 faces) by moving around it. It is my recollection that the priest also celebrated ad orientem, expect of course, depending which basilica you are in means sometimes the priest is facing the majority of the congregation, sometimes not.

Tom

Dr. Lee Fratantuono says:

23 April 2009 at 9:24 am

If I am “wrong” in “this case”, it means the author of the rubric intended the quod clause to refer to the independent subjunctive clause (“exstruatur”), which isn’t what the dubium response says. The dubium addresses the specific point of how binding “expedit” is (not very).

I remember reading this sentence when it first appeared:

“Altare maius exstruatur a pariete seiunctum, ut facile circumiri et in eo celebratio versus populum peragi possit, quod expedit ubicumque possibile sit.”

I certainly took the quod clause to refer back to the ut clause, not the preceding independent subjunctive (which is also ambiguous in its own way, but I digress). If you place the quod clause right after seiunctum, there’s no problem.

Grammatically, the quod clause can refer to either thing that precedes, and it’s more natural (though not necessary) to take it with what immediately precedes. Since clarity is the goal, **[It is sometimes the goal! o{:~)]** I don’t see why the clauses were ordered this way.

[Tina in Ashburn](#) says:

23 April 2009 at 9:49 am

Great post Reverend Father. This clarification, and some of the subsequent comments, is a great comfort to me.

How I wish all priests knew and understood this.

A parish priest here regularly glares at individuals throughout the daily Mass for various infractions: arriving late, a noisy kid, not standing at the right moment, even causing him to stop Mass and stare at a late-comer or order someone to stand during the Our Father, etc. It is terribly distracting watching this angry priest watch us. Every day I wish sorrowfully that he could face the Tabernacle instead. Obviously the congregation is a distraction to him.

[Tina in Ashburn](#) says:

23 April 2009 at 10:11 am

As we know from our Eastern Brethren, the detached altar is nothing new. What is ‘new’ is the separation of the altar of the Tabernacle and the

altar of Sacrifice, and facing the people. If the Tabernacle is left as it should be on the same altar as that for the Sacrifice, the priest could not say Mass behind the Tabernacle!

Cardinal Ottaviani [Ottaviani Intervention] wrote that the splitting into two dealt a blow to the Faith:

“3. THE ROLE OF THE MAIN ALTAR. The altar is nearly always called the table: [19] “...the altar or the Lord’s table, which is the center of the whole eucharistic liturgy...” [20] The altar must now be detached from the back wall so that the priest can walk around it and celebrate Mass facing the people. [21] The Instruction states that the altar should be at the center of the assembled faithful, so that their attention is spontaneously drawn to it. Comparing this Article with another, however, seems to exclude outright the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament on the altar where Mass is celebrated. [22] This will signal an irreparable dichotomy between the presence of Christ the High Priest in the priest celebrating the Mass and Christ’s sacramental Presence. Before, they were one and the same Presence. [23] The Instruction recommends that the Blessed Sacrament now be kept in a place apart for private devotion—as though It were some sort of relic. Thus, on entering a church, one’s attention will be drawn not to a tabernacle, but to a table stripped bare. Once again, private piety is set up against liturgical piety, and altar is set up against altar. The Instruction urges that hosts distributed for Communion be ones consecrated at the same Mass. It also recommends consecrating a large wafer, [24] so that the priest can share a part of it with the faithful. It is always the same disparaging attitude towards both the tabernacle and every form of Eucharistic piety outside of Mass. This constitutes a new and violent blow to faith that the Real Presence continues as long as the consecrated Species remain. [25] “

Ioannes Andreades says:

23 April 2009 at 10:30 am

Pace Fr. Z, Dr. Fratantuono is correct, and I would do the same thing. Only the clarification offered by CDW points to the intended meaning, not the ordering of clauses. Moreover, Daniel Canaris is also correct; taking the ut-clause as consecutive rather than final would lead us to think that the space behind the altar is only coincidentally sufficient to celebrate mass there and not intentionally sufficient. That seems totally unlikely.

[But that is still the way it goes! o{;-)]

Sam Schmitt says:

23 April 2009 at 10:48 am

“By trying to claim that Mass facing the people is “preferable” on the basis of a clarification that was sent to an individual (Prot. No. 2036/00/L) by the CDWDS, while excluding that custom is the best interpreter of law is laughable.”

Are you perhaps referring to the immemorial custom of ad orientem worship?

The fact that people have misunderstood the law for the past 40 years, based in part on a mistranslation, should not be determinative.

ssoldie says:

23 April 2009 at 11:22 am

The confusion still goes on, and opinions are still rampant. Please every one read “Turning Towards The Lord” by U.M.Lang: Orientation in Liturgical Prayer, it is very good.....” I hope this book, the work of a young scholar, will help the struggle- which is necessary in every generation- for the right understanding and worth celebration of the Sacred Liturgy. I wish the book a wide and attentive readership” --- Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger

IvoDeNorthfield says:

23 April 2009 at 12:26 pm

from the CDW clarification:

“the word expedit...refers to the construction of the altar a pariete sejunctum (detached from the wall).”

If “expedit” refers to the location of the altar, then “quod expedit ubicumque possibile sit” must also refer to location of the altar and cannot refer to the orientation of the priest. Therefore, (A) Fr. Z's translation must be correct, even if the original wording was ambiguous; and (B) the USCCB translation is incorrect.

Chironomo says:

23 April 2009 at 1:15 pm

“A frustration I have had since I converted to the Church is the ambiguity on a variety of topics. I find myself thinking, “For Pete’s sake...just say it!” – Dennis

Dennis...

ambiguity can be either intentional or unintentional. I used to be of the opinion that many of these ambiguities in the GIRM and other translated documents were unintentional, the result of trying to translate Latin into a very different language (English) which does not have as strict a grammatical structure. However... I have in more recent years come to the conclusion that much of the ambiguity was intentional, meant to obscure parts of official documents that some individuals didn’t want to see the light of day. And so nothing is ever mandatory...only suggested (or possible)...except of course those parts of documents that they agreed with!

My favorite, of course, is the translation of *alius cantus aptus* as “another appropriate song” instead of “other suitable chant” ... where is the precedent in a document on liturgical music to translate “cantus” as “song”? Why would there be three options – The chant from the *Graduale Romanum*, the chant from the *Graduale Simplex*, and then “some other song”? And yet this little change opens up the possibility for an option that was probably never intended, an option that has now become the norm. But I digress...

Larry says:

23 April 2009 at 3:23 pm

Pardon me Fr. Z. Of course the Congregation answered the *dubium*. However, I thought the response was not very direct. Your solution works but I am no Latin scholar. Why would *clause* be used to explain a clause that preceded with another clause in between? If you can patiently respond please do so. If not forget it.

ustalumnus says:

23 April 2009 at 7:00 pm

Father Z stated: “When you don’t have a clue as to what that Latin says, and you yourself are working only from translations, I can see why you might say that. But you are simply WRONG. Produce your own translation or shut up.]”

So much for a debate, eh? For the record, I completed 8 years of Latin (aced all the classes) a very long time ago (it does come back quickly though).

Hey Father Z, please answer this for me... you stated above “Before the USCCB put out their document *Built of Living Stones* (in 2000), with the incorrect translation you cited...” Well, take a look at the Sacred Congregation of Rites, *Instruction Inter Oecumenici*, on the orderly carrying

out of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 26 September 1964, in particular, paragraph #91

. It states: “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.” *Inter Oecumenici* came out 36 years before *Built of Living Stones*. Is this document wrong as well?

BTW... Paragraph #3 states: “3. That these documents should immediately be properly carried out everywhere and any possible doubts on

interpretation removed are matters of the utmost importance.”

Rbrown stated: “It is irresponsible for you to make a general accusation without a specific example.”

Fair enough. Here is one. Go back and read “QUAERITUR: Good Friday – plain Cross or Crucifix”

Trust the Wisdom of the Church.

Daniel Canaris *says:*

23 April 2009 at 8:24 pm

Joannes Andreades wrote: “Pace Fr. Z, Dr. Fratantuono is correct, and I would do the same thing. Only the clarification offered by CDW points to the intended meaning, not the ordering of clauses. Moreover, Daniel Canaris is also correct; taking the ut-clause as consecutive rather than final would lead us to think that the space behind the altar is only coincidentally sufficient to celebrate mass there and not intentionally sufficient. That seems totally unlikely.”

Allow me to play devil’s advocate for a moment...

While I’m still of the conviction that the ut-clause is a purpose clause, you have introduced a reading, which I hadn’t even thought of, that is, as you say, unlikely. If the ut-clause is a consecutive clause, the ‘possit’ here would be a potential subjunctive. This would mean that the ut-clause would have the meaning equivalent to “with the result that there is a possibility...” Consecutive clauses can be used without adverbs like tam/adeo etc. but they are unusual. However, we must note that the verb used in the ut-clause is ‘possit’, which naturally lends itself to a consecutive clause because of the very verb itself is concerned with potentiality.

But this reading still seems very forced. If this was the correct reading, the Latin is even more ambiguous than we realise and I’m sure the Congregation would have commented upon this aspect of the grammar. In any case, why would one insist on the altar being separated from the wall and describe the natural results of such an action if the natural result is not the intention? If we consider it to be a result clause, as we reason through its inclusion, it becomes more obvious that it is actually a purpose clause!

If only the GIRM was written in ancient Greek then there would be no ambiguity!

We have to come to terms with the fact that the person/persons who wrote this rubric, did intend for Mass to be said versus populum (without it being a strict order).

Daniel Canaris *says:*

23 April 2009 at 8:39 pm

What I have written might be confusing to people who do not realise that there are many terms used to describe singular grammatical concepts (inadvertently I’ve interchanged them.) Result clauses are the same as consecutive clauses (i.e. the subjunctive has a potential meaning) and purpose clauses are the same thing as final clauses (i.e. the subjunctive has a jussive meaning)

Lizzie the Latinist *says:*

23 April 2009 at 8:48 pm

Dear Father Z.,

I am quite surprised to see that your note in response to Daniel Canaris’ comment suggests that you maintain the ‘ut’ clause is a consecutive clause rather than a purpose clause. Surely this is impossible given the absence of a demonstrative adverb (adeo, eo, ita, tam or sic) in the main clause? A consecutive clause usually follows this pattern: ‘non sum ita hebes, ut istud dicam’ – ‘I am not so stupid that I would say this’. At least, this is what I regularly teach my senior Latin students!

Kennedy's Revised Latin Primer does indeed note that on some occasions no demonstrative precedes the consecutive clause. But of course, as anyone who regularly reads Latin texts or teaches Latin consecutive clauses would know, this would be a quite rare and very poetic use of the consecutive clause. Surely you are not accusing the authors of the GIRM of being poetic rather than ambiguous? The only possible reading of the 'ut' clause is that it expresses purpose, as Daniel says. Of course I stand open to correction, but it would contradict what I learned in my First Class Honours degree in Latin (I think you Americans call this summa cum laude), my experience reading and teaching Latin, and my Kennedy's Revised Latin Primer.

Ioannes Andreades *says:*

23 April 2009 at 10:13 pm

It should be kept in mind that the Latin for the Pope Paul VI missal is written by people who don't know how to say, "Offer each other peace." Regardless of the issues above, the botched apo koinou in the ut-clause is unendurable. Correct wording would be, "...ut facile circumiri possit (scil. altare) utque in eo celebratio versus populum peragi possit."

RBrown *says:*

23 April 2009 at 10:16 pm

RBrown stated: "It is irresponsible for you to make a general accusation without a specific example."

Fair enough. Here is one. Go back and read "QUAERITUR: Good Friday – plain Cross or Crucifix"

Trust the Wisdom of the Church.

Comment by ustalumnus

I did read it.

You laid down a good principle, then misapplied it. It is true that we worship only Christ, and we venerate symbols of Him—but that includes venerating a crucifix. The cross only has status because it represents the Perfect Sacrifice of Christ the Priest and Victim. And so Fr Z is correct when he says that crux refers to a crucifix. NB: The Offertory from the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, "per signum sanctae Crucis" and the Secret "per quem Crucis est sanctificatum vexillum".

The use of LIGNUM crucis is symmetrical with Genesis.

Ioannes Andreades *says:*

23 April 2009 at 10:27 pm

Daniel,

If one is really eager to show that an ut-clause is final, an "idcirco" can be thrown in the superordinate clause. Perhaps easier than switching to Greek. ;^)

The lack of clarity of the wording really does make me think that someone anti-ad-orientem was throwing a theological earmark into the legislation.

RBrown *says:*

23 April 2009 at 10:29 pm

BTW, I think Fr Z is quite correct when he refers to an intended lack of clarity in no. 299.

Greg Smisek *says:*

24 April 2009 at 6:34 am

I apologize in advance for the long post, but I hope fellow readers might find it useful.

ustalumnus thinks that the wording of a 1964 Consilium norm proves that Fr. Z is playing fast and loose with translations. I think the gentleman is mistaken.

[Inter Oecumenici \(1964\)](#), n. 91:

Praestat ut **altare maius exstruatur a pariete seiunctum, ut facile circumiri et in eo celebratio versus populum peragi possit.**

IGMR (1969-1983), n. 262:

Altare maius exstruatur a pariete seiunctum, ut facile circumiri et in eo celebratio versus populum peragi possit.

[IGMR \(2002\)](#), n. 299 [N.B. While *maius* was in the standalone version of the IGMR published in 2000, it was omitted in the final text published in the 2002 Roman Missal]:

Altare exstruatur a pariete seiunctum, ut facile circumiri et in eo celebratio versus populum peragi possit, quod expedit ubicumque possibile sit.

The bold portion is identical in all three versions (the omission of *maius* is inconsequential to our discussion).

Praestat ut preceded this construction in the 1964 instruction. According to [Lewis and Short](#), *praestat* means “it is preferable or better.” Thus, “It is preferable / better that the main altar should be built separated from the wall”.

The earlier GIRM norm omits *Praestat ut*. And then the 2002 GIRM norm adds *quod expedit ubicumque possibile sit*. *Expedit* means “it is serviceable, profitable, advantageous, useful, expedient” ([Lewis and Short](#)).

Is it purely coincidental that *praestat ut* and *quod expedit* have a similar meaning and function? It looks an awful lot to me like the 2002 norm reimported the sense of *praestat ut*, perhaps even downgrading it somewhat, in *quod expedit*. Both words qualify the norm as a recommendation rather than an obligation.

Praestat ut cannot possibly refer merely to the second part of the norm (*ut facile...*). But what if, for kicks and giggles, we were to take *quod expedit* exclusively with this second part, *ut facile circumiri et in eo celebratio versus populum peragi possit*? This would give us: “it is serviceable, profitable, advantageous, useful, expedient” that the altar “can be easily walked around and celebration toward the people can be carried out at it,” which is, of course, not the same as saying that “it is expedient” that “celebration toward the people be carried out.”

What if *quod expedit* somehow has pulled off this amazing linguistic feat of jumping (ignoring) *possit* (“[that] it be able”) and refers directly to celebrating *versus populum*? Then, in fairness, it must be held to refer equally to the conjoined verb *circumiri* ([the altar] being walked around). But as Maureen alluded, nobody’s been jumping up and down saying, “The new GIRM expresses the explicit desire that we walk around the altar,” and certainly you don’t see people replacing their morning jog with laps around the altar because of this supposed desire of the GIRM. In fact, it would be incorrect to say that walking around the altar wherever this is possible is merely “expedient” (a good thing to do), since n. 277 actually *requires* the priest to walk around a freestanding altar when he incenses it.

The great liturgical historian Fr. Josef Andreas Jungmann, S.J. (d. 1975) explained the 1964 norm as follows (“Der neue Altar,” *Der Seelsorger* 37 (1967), p. 375, translated by [Fr. U.M. Lang, C.O.](#)):

It is only the possibility that is emphasized. And this [separation of the altar from the wall] is not even prescribed, but is only recommended, as one will see if one looks at the Latin text of the directive.... In the new instruction the general permission of such an altar layout is stressed only with regard to possible obstacles or local restrictions.

H.E. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger explained the 2002 norm as follows (*Turning Towards the Lord*, [forward \(dated Laetare Sunday 2003\)](#), 2003; I’ve replaced the garbled English renderings of the GIRM norm and name of the Congregation with closer renderings from his [original German text](#)):

There is nothing in the Council text about turning altars towards the people; that point is raised only in postconciliar instructions. The most important directive is found in paragraph 262 of the *Institutio Generalis Missalis Romani*, the General Instruction of the new Roman Missal, issued in 1969. That says, "The main altar is to be built separate from the wall, so that it can be easily walked around and at it the celebration versus populum (toward the people) can be carried out..." The General Instruction of the Missal issued in 2002 retained this text unaltered except for the addition of the subordinate clause, 'this should be the case, wherever it is possible'. This was taken in many quarters as hardening the 1969 text to mean that there was now a general obligation to set up altars facing the people 'wherever possible'. This interpretation, however, was rejected by the competent congregation for the divine liturgy on 25 September 2000, when it declared that the word 'expedit' ('should be the case') did not imply an obligation but only made a suggestion.

ustalumnus says:

24 April 2009 at 8:51 pm

RBrown stated: "You laid down a good principle, then misapplied it. It is true that we worship only Christ, and we venerate symbols of Him—but that includes venerating a crucifix...The use of LIGNUM crucis is symmetrical with Genesis."

Please elaborate on that. I do not see your point. After all, Lignum means lignum. Crucis is a Cross, not Crucifix.

Greg Smisek stated: "ustalumnus thinks that the wording of a 1964 Consilium norm proves that Fr. Z is playing fast and loose with translations. I think the gentleman is mistaken."

And to Greg Smisek. I am very impressed with your points and will research them further, thank you.

However, I am not playing "fast and loose" with the translation (I do not have an agenda here). **[Then ... why are you posting?]** Remember, (note- this is a very important point) the documents are written for the Universal Church and some leeway is given on purpose. I do have a very big problem with the agenda(s) pushed on this site. **[Have we seen your own translation yet?]**

ustalumnus says:

25 April 2009 at 9:26 pm

"[Then ... why are you posting?]" Because I cannot read some of your posts and let you get away thinking everyone agrees with you. Anybody can set themselves up on the Internet as an "expert". Why do you feel the need to comment on reader comments and even delete some of them? **[Because it's my blog.]** Why do you post 'anonymous' emails on some 'abuse' in the Liturgy, with absolutely no citation or proof, if not to just rile people up? "Brick by Brick"? Come on Father, you are the one with the agenda here, not me. **[You have an agenda too. No question.]** You were ordained and your hands were anointed for the Sacraments and for Service to the People of God, not blogging! **[You are sinking to the ad hominem. Sad. And out of line.]**

"[Have we seen your own translation yet?]" I do not need to create my own translation. **[I think that is a dodge.]** As I mentioned above, I had 8 years of Latin and forgot most of it before you converted. **[Then you really are not in a position to judge anything in this conversation, are you? You are dependent on someone's translation. The text of the GIRM is demonstrably faulty. You don't like the conclusions and that is what drives you to post. My agenda is getting at what the Latin really says. Yours is to defend celebration versus populum.]** Here is translation of the GIRM I use...

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20030317_ordinamento-messale_en.html

... if this translation is good enough for the Vatican, it is good enough for me. I am not going to second guess the Wisdom of the Church. Trust your Pastors and Bishops. Trust the Church. **[It wasn't good enough, apparently, since the Holy See's Congregation issued a response to a doubt about this. And we have seen time and time again that translations from the Holy See are inaccurate. No... you just don't like these conclusions because of your own agenda. Own up.]**