

## Fr. Z's Blog

Once named: What Does The Prayer  
Really Say? – Commentary on Catholic  
issues & slavishly accurate liturgical  
translations – by Fr. John Zuhlsdorf  
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### GIRM 299 and the old, uncorrected translation

Posted on 7 November 2011, by Fr. John Zuhlsdorf

From a reader:

I've seen your posts in the past regarding the mistranslation of the Institutio Generalis 299, from which many argue that Holy Mass facing the people is desirable. **[GIRM 299 actually says that what is desirable, when possible, is that the altar be separated from the wall, not that Mass be versus populum.]** I was looking forward to the new translation of the Institutio with the New Missal clarifying this. However, to my great surprise, the New Missal with its newly-translated Institutio retains the mistranslation of #299. Awful! Any insight into why ICEL got this wrong again or if any battles were faced in the process of the translation in regard to this text? Kyrie, eleison!!



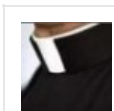
Yes, indeed. The new, corrected translation and all that goes with it (such as the GIRM) are a great improvement over what we have had. Just because it is an improvement doesn't mean that everything is perfect or even good.

The continual mistranslation of GIRM 299 is troubling because, even after an explanation from the Congregation for Divine Worship and a certain passage of time guaranteeing the dissemination of information, the powers-that-be in the Anglophone world haven't made a change. I can only surmise that they are doing this because they are pushing their own agenda instead of what GIRM 299 really says. They don't like *ad orientem* worship and are publishing a flawed translation in order to defend *versus populum* celebration of Holy Mass.

I have written about the issue a few times here. You might check [this](#) for a bit more on the topic and translation.

Technorati Tags: [ad orientem](#), [General Institution of the Roman Missal](#), [GIRM 299](#), [versus populum](#)

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#### About Fr. John Zuhlsdorf

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

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## 26 Responses to *GIRM 299 and the old, uncorrected translation*

**reflector** says:

7 November 2011 at 10:12 am

Sorry, but I think the grammar is not as clear as you think. “Quod” could relate either to the (subordinate) clause “ut facile circumiri et in eo celebratio versus populum peragi possit” or to the (main) clause “Altare extruatur a pariete seiunctum”. **[Perhaps, but not likely. The best reading is as I rendered it.]** In both cases, one would use “quod” (neutrum). So the English translation is just as vague as the original text – and maybe this was intended. **[Which is dreadful.]**

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[danso622](#) says:

7 November 2011 at 10:40 am

I am far from a Latin expert. All I can tell is that the English translation follows the Latin in regard to word order. So, I find myself agreeing with “reflector” above—the original is rather vague. It would seem appropriate, then, to put in a footnote or something that refers to the Sept. 25, 2000, clarification from the CDWDS, which stated that “the word expedit ... constitute(s) ... a suggestion that refers to the construction of the altar a pariete seiunctum.”

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**reflector** says:

7 November 2011 at 11:00 am

Father, I fully agree that the text should say what you identify as its “best” reading; but, with all due respect, I don’t think it really does, at least from a grammatical point of view. As danso622 points out, the (Latin) word order rather suggests that reference is made to the subordinate clause. It is a pity that the question was not made clear in the Latin text.

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[Henry Edwards](#) says:

7 November 2011 at 11:22 am

reflector,

Surely this is not merely a grammatical question of “best reading”, but a question of best liturgical practice. Fortunately the dicastery in whose purview the interpretation lies, has answered the question. On 25 September 2000 the Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments issued a clarification (Prot. No. 2036/00/L) regarding #299 in the new Latin GIRM. That clarification says:

“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.”

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**jhayes** says:

7 November 2011 at 11:39 am

Henry Edwards quoted:

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.”

While it's true that 299 doesn't require that existing altars be moved if it would harm the artistic value of the existing altar, 303 provides that if using the existing altar makes the people's participation difficult, a new altar should be erected:

In already existing churches, however, when the old altar is positioned so that it makes the people's participation difficult but cannot be moved without damage to its artistic value, another fixed altar, of artistic merit and duly dedicated, should be erected and sacred rites celebrated on it alone. In order not to distract the attention of the faithful from the new altar, the old altar should not be decorated in any special way.

I believe I have read comments by Pope Benedict noting, approvingly, that in many cathedrals a new altar has been placed at the crossing, where it is closer to the people than the original altar beyond the choir.

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**reflector** says:

7 November 2011 at 11:40 am

Henry, there is no disagreement between us as to the best liturgical practice. It is a question of translation theory: Are we allowed to present a translation with a clear wording despite the vagueness of the original text – just because the author of the original has explained what he really wanted to say?

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**gowieury** says:

7 November 2011 at 11:47 am

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

299. The [main] altar should be built separate from the wall, ~~in such a way~~ [in order] that it is possible to walk around it easily and [to carry out the celebration] ~~that Mass can be celebrated~~ at it facing the people, [because this is allowed/convenient] ~~which is desirable~~ wherever possible.

Why translate quod as a relative pronoun when it is more likely that it is a conjunction? I do not know who wrote the Latin GIRM, but I usually see quod acting as a conjunction rather than a pronoun in Ecclesiastical Latin. Also, since when does “ut” mean “in such a way”? It is a purpose clause, not a clause of more specific description.

Ut having been translated properly, and quod being considered as “because” this instruction is not ambiguous in the least: Move the altar in order to make it possible to walk and celebrate, because this is allowed.

Expedit does not really mean suggested or desirable even, necessarily, expedient. It means “untied” or “not forbidden” or “less tied up – more convenient”. It is not as if they used “praestat”. Expedit could refer to anything from the action simply being permitted, so make the altars able to do it, to (at most) the action being faster, so make the altars able to do it. Perhaps they are considering coming persecutions where Mass will need to be celebrated without anything holding us up?

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**Dr. Lee Fratantuono** says:

7 November 2011 at 11:49 am

As a classics professor, I can say this: that article was one of the first I remember hastening to read in c. 2000 or whenever it first appeared in public print, and my first thought upon reading it was, this Latin is not clear, it's not written as precisely as it could have been, it is going to cause all manner of interpretive messes. I fear I was proven right.

Speaking more generally, if you read documents of the Holy See from the Leo XIII through Pius XI era, whether papal bulls, liturgical texts (new offices, etc.), you will find a style of Latin that while rather baroque and overly ornamental, is almost always crystal clear. That just hasn't been the case since around the reign of Pius XII, for whatever reason(s).

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**BaedaBenedictus** *says:*

7 November 2011 at 11:58 am

How does moving the altar close to the congregation "facilitate participation"? I suppose no one "participates" in churches with iconostases or rood screens. I suppose people think a sense of sacred mystery is a barrier to "participation" too. Mass now seems to be about celebrating community and doing "stuff".

We are also agonizing over the words of some vague "instruction" from Rome, whose guidance is always changing. Why not just wait till they change again?

Or perhaps we should approach liturgy the way the Orthodox do, and instead of asking, "What's Rome's latest whim at the moment?" ask, "What have we always done?" and just do it.

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**[Supertradum](#)** *says:*

7 November 2011 at 12:05 pm

The participation issue would not make sense in most modern churches, but in the old Baroque or English Perpendicular churches, the altars were, and are still, far removed from the people to the point that one could and can not see what was or is happening. So, the injunction was to allow people at least a chance to see the Mass as it progressed and to hear the priest. Even in some European churches today, one can hardly hear and must watch closely the movements to know what part of the Mass is occurring. For American or other new world churches, which, on the whole, were not made with the altars so far from the congregation, the issue doesn't exist.

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**Sixupman** *says:*

7 November 2011 at 12:18 pm

A typical Vatican II loophole to allow the bishops, en masse as it turned-out, to adopt Modernist, Protestant and anti-Tridentine policies. The full result can be seen from the burgeoning numbers of dissenting clergy groups, in both the UK and Europe at large, as recently broadcast as a feature on the BBC rolling news programme. Whatever these clergy are, they are not Catholic – but appear to proceed unchallenged.

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**[Henry Edwards](#)** *says:*

7 November 2011 at 12:19 pm

Reflector, as I understand this matter, the competent authority has stated what the original text does, indeed, say (and not merely what it regards either as best liturgical practice or the proper interpretation). Indeed, I wonder whether their patient explanation of Latin grammar in response to the dubium—surely most unusual for such a response—suggests some doubt as to the intent of the original English translation.

At any rate, this happens all the time in both secular and canon law, when the intent of a legislative text is questioned. Once an alleged ambiguity or vagueness has been removed by competent authority, surely one is not only allowed but obligated to state the matter subsequently in a correct matter.

Incidentally, many times in the new English translation of the Roman Missal—though evidently not in the postcommunion for the first Sunday

of Advent—that word order or grammar in a Latin collect has been significantly altered when its slavish rendition would have susceptible of likely misinterpretation in English.

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**jhayes** says:

7 November 2011 at 2:36 pm

Here is Pope Benedict on this subject – and urging avoiding “fanaticism” about it:

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, ‘It is better for the main altar to be constructed away from the wall so that one can easily walk around the altar and celebrate facing the people (versus populum).’ The General Instruction of the Missal issued in 2002 retained this text unaltered except for the addition of the subordinate clause, ‘which is desirable wherever 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 Congregation for Divine Worship on 25 September 2000, when it declared that the word ‘expedit’ (‘is desirable’) did not imply an obligation but only made a suggestion. The physical orientation, the Congregation says, must be distinguished from the spiritual. Even if a priest celebrates versus populum, he should always be oriented versus Deum per Iesum Christum (towards God through Jesus Christ). Rites, signs, symbols, and words can never exhaust the inner reality of the mystery of salvation. For this reason the Congregation warns against one-sided and rigid positions in this debate.

This is an important clarification. It sheds light on what is relative in the external symbolic forms of the liturgy and resists the fanaticisms that, unfortunately, have not been uncommon in the controversies of the last forty years. At the same time it highlights the internal direction of liturgical action, which can never be expressed in its totality by external forms. This internal direction is the same for priest and people, towards the Lord-towards the Father through Christ in the Holy Spirit. The Congregation’s response should thus make for a new, more relaxed discussion, in which we can search for the best ways of putting into practice the mystery of salvation. The quest is to be achieved, not by condemning one another, but by carefully listening to each other and, even more importantly, listening to the internal guidance of the liturgy itself. The labelling of positions as ‘preconciliar’, ‘reactionary’, and ‘conservative’, or as ‘progressive’ and ‘alien to the faith’ achieves nothing; what is needed is a new mutual openness in the search for the best realisation of the memorial of Christ.

[http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2005/forewd\\_umlang\\_may05.asp](http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2005/forewd_umlang_may05.asp)

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**Deacon Paul** says:

7 November 2011 at 2:49 pm

It seems to me that there is also a problem with people understanding English grammar.

The GIRM in English reads:

"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."

I was taught that when you have an explanatory clause, contained within commas, the sentence should make sense with the clause removed.

With the clause removed GIRM 299 reads:

The altar should be built apart from the wall which is desirable wherever possible.

To me there seems no doubt that it is desirable, wherever possible, for the altar to be built apart from the wall. This permits mass to be said facing the people but does not require it.

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**[SimonDodd](#)** says:

7 November 2011 at 3:23 pm

I might think that the more interesting question is why the GIRM says either of the two things it could be saying. I assume that Fr. Z's translation of the latin is correct and that ICEL's is wrong; still, the result is no more than that the GIRM says that it's desirable that the altar be constructed in such a way as to facilitate celebration in either direction. But that's not a great outcome either; even if it was perfectly translated, GIRM299 encourages the construction of freestanding altars, which in turn facilitates Mass versus populum. Isn't the underlying problem here a frustration that the GIRM seeks to actively facilitate celebration in either direction when we would prefer that it either take our side or say nothing? Yet the office of a translation isn't to fix (perceived) deficiencies of the underlying text; isn't that our beef with the lame duck translation? The solution seems to be a new GIRM, or an amendment thereto, that expressly repudiates not only the translation of 299, but what the instruction actually says.

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**jhayes** says:

7 November 2011 at 5:30 pm

DeaconPaul said:

To me there seems no doubt that it is desirable, wherever possible, for the altar to be built apart from the wall. This permits mass to be said facing the people but does not require it.

I agree and that is actually what that sentence said in the 1975 GIRM.

262. The main altar should be freestanding to allow the ministers to walk around it easily and Mass to be celebrated facing the people.

It didn't say that Mass couldn't be celebrated facing in the same direction as the people, only that it should be possible to celebrate facing the people.

In the 2002 revision, the extra comma and the bit at the end were added, making it ambiguous. Fortunately, the CDWDS clarified that the 2002 version doesn't mean that Mass can't be celebrated facing "ad absidem" i.e. facing in the same direction as the people.

Pope Benedict has said "This is an important clarification. It sheds light on what is relative in the external symbolic forms of the liturgy and resists the fanaticisms that, unfortunately, have not been uncommon in the controversies of the last forty years."

Sounds as if it is time to drop the fanaticism and accept that the issue has been settled.

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**[Mitchell NY](#)** says:

7 November 2011 at 9:07 pm

I still don't get how moving the Altar up a few feet towards the front of the Sanctuary helps active participation. Only the people in the first few rows can see anyway. I have never sat in the front pews of a Church and somehow know what is going on at the Altar. There is usually someone's head in front of you anyway and if you sit beyond the first couple rows it is all lost to one's immediate sight. So would those people who sit in the back be accused on not participating actively? Unless small Churches are constructed everywhere with a maximum of 10 rows or so and on a downward slope allowing you to see over the person in front of you I can't see how this makes much difference at all. Did you ever go into a Church that is not crowded? Take note of where the people sit. Scattered throughout, more often than not, towards the middle to back sections. So much for destroying older Altars, moving them up, or erecting a tablelike one a few feet closer to the first row in the name of active participation. Epic fail.

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**Byzcat** says:

7 November 2011 at 10:10 pm

Are you tired of all this nonsense in the Latin Rite? Then come on over to the Byzantine Rite. The Divine Liturgy is always Ad Orientem. Oh, and I almost forgot, we don't make up the liturgy as we go along (i.e. clown masses, etc.). Ugh.

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**Fortiter Pugnem** says:

7 November 2011 at 10:18 pm

Byzcat,

I almost had the chance to attend a Byzantine Rite Mass, but we went to a closer TLM instead. I don't think I could change, I am too enamoured of the Mass of Pius V. God Bless!

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**jhayes** says:

7 November 2011 at 10:25 pm

@Mitchell NY, here's Pope Benedict's comment on moving the altar closer to the people:

Every age must discover and express the essence of the liturgy anew. The point is to discover this essence amid all the changing appearances. It would surely be a mistake to reject all the reforms of our century wholesale. When the altar was very remote from the faithful, it was right to move it back to the people. In cathedrals this made possible the recovery of the tradition of the altar at the crossing, the meeting-point of the nave and the presbyterium.

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**jhayes** says:

7 November 2011 at 10:27 pm

Forgot to give the link:

[http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2006/ratzinger\\_altareast\\_jan06.asp](http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2006/ratzinger_altareast_jan06.asp)

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**Martin\_B** says:

8 November 2011 at 3:06 am

Apart from the questions regarding translation of this paragraph:

What makes an altar "freestanding"?

Is it just a physical separation from the wall or does it also mean a visual one?

I'm especially referring to the old high altars, which are placed apart from the church wall, but have a retable/reredos that looks like a (small) wall in itself and would make a priest circling the altar temporarily invisible to the congregation.

And as a follow-up to this question:

How should such an altar be incensed? By walking around (even if part of this way would be hidden from view) or by only incensing the front and sides?

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**jhayes** says:

8 November 2011 at 9:28 am

Martin\_B asked, "What makes an altar "freestanding"? Is it just a physical separation from the wall or does it also mean a visual one?"

399 requires that the altar be sufficiently freestanding that the celebrant can stand behind it to celebrate Mass facing the people. That wouldn't be possible if the altar is attached to a reredos.

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[Mitchell NY](#) says:

8 November 2011 at 9:33 am

Thank you Jhayes for the book passages. I have read the Holy Fathers book as well. But something troubles me. Earlier he states that the new Christian approach is that GOD is everywhere, and we should all come to accept this new concept. So wouldn't that invalidate the claim that it was beneficial to move the Altars up? If God is everywhere then why move them at all? Again I go back to my post, beyond the first few rows one can not see. Our Holy Father does not address this in his book so I can not look to him for direction on this point. From an audible standpoint I can see where this might be helpful, but from a visual one I can not. The Holy Father simply states this was beneficial, he does not go into why he thinks it so from what I read. And the facts on the ground are that people when scattered throughout the Church are not sitting as close as they can to the Altar. Many could indeed be closer but choose not to. Why ? Are they nto actively participating?

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**sallyr** says:

8 November 2011 at 10:39 am

I doubt the reason that Mass is said facing the people is only a result of a "mis-translation" of Latin into English. If it were, why would the French, German, Spanish, Italian (etc., etc.) people be celebrating their Mass in the same way? Did they all mis-translate the Latin too?

Furthermore, I disagree that those beyond the first few rows "cannot see" the altar. I often sit in the back of Churches, and I can see what is going on at the altar very easily because the altar is on a platform several steps above the rest of the Church.

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[SimonDodd](#) says:

8 November 2011 at 1:09 pm

jhayes says:

"399 requires that the altar be sufficiently freestanding that the celebrant can stand behind it to celebrate Mass facing the people."

Isn't the point of the CDW memo that 299 (which I assume you mean) *doesn't* "require[]" this but merely suggests its desirability?

Of course, even this is an unhappy instruction, making it harder to argue for the removal of temporary altars and the use of the high altar, and easier for horrendous damage to be done to our liturgical spaces as the trendies try to rip out those old high altars, a trend likely to accelerate in the next few years as they sense that it's "now or never."