

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[:~)

What does GIRM 299 really say?

Posted on 27 April 2006 by Fr. John Zuhlsdorf

For those with too little time to read at length, let me give you a blunt summary: For decades the liturgical establishment has operated as if the Council required the abolition of Latin and the ripping out of *versus Deum* altars in favor of free standing altars. They imposed, unjustly and incorrectly, a misperception that Mass had to be celebrated “facing the people”. At the same time, the supremely shallow description of Mass “with the priest’s back to the people” has been lent to celebrations *ad orientem versus*. Some good work has been done in recent years to reopen the issue and rethink it in a more balanced way.

In another entry I said I had attended the presentation of the Italian edition of [Turning Towards The Lord](#) by Uwe Michael Lang. In that entry I mentioned the controversy about the infamous paragraph 299 of the 2000 GIRM (which applies to the 2002 *Missale Romanum*). No. 299 refers to the position of the altar in the *presbyterium* (sanctuary).

Here is something I wrote about this in the pages of *The Wanderer* for the 5th Sunday of Easter back in 2002. This gives you a taste of the issue and how the misrepresentation of the altar issue can have dire consequences:

In WDTPRS last week I said we might review the translation controversy surrounding the now-in-force General Instruction of the Roman Missal’s (2002GIRM) paragraph #299, about the placement of the altar and the direction of celebration of Holy Mass. Background: the U.S. Bishops’ Conference issued on 16 November 2000 a document called “Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship” (BLS). BLS was intended to replace the heinous 1978 statement Environment and Art in Catholic Worship which served as the foundation for the “denovation” of countless churches even though it really had no authority. BLS has a section about the placement of the altar in which it quotes 2002GIRM #299 (remember that what I now call the 2002GIRM had been released in Latin in 2000, far in advance of the release of the 2002 *Missale Romanum*). The bishops’ BLS gives an English translation of #299 in footnote #75:

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....

In the National Catholic Register of 7-14 April 2002, a statement was made that, according to the new GIRM, it is now preferable to celebrate Mass “facing the people.” If the Register is making this mistake, it would appear that there was some serious damage caused from the mistranslation of #299 used by the bishops. Let us look at #299. The last time we examined it at length was in the third article of WDTPRS for the 2nd Sunday of Advent in the year 2000:

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

The English version in BLS (above) is faulty. The translator failed to see that quod refers back to the main clause of the sentence. The bishops' translator fell into the common trap of translating the Latin word by word, rather than reading the whole sentence. Their translator made #299 read as if there is a preference or even a requirement in the law itself to celebrate Mass facing the people. But #299 indicates nothing of the kind. That paragraph really says:

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. (Emphases added)

This paragraph explains the distance of separation from the wall: at least far enough so that it can be used from either side, rather than just an inch or two of separation. The Latin doesn't even hint that Mass must be said versus populum. It only provides that it can be. And that is not an absolute, either. What makes this very troubling is that 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 sejunctum (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.

Clearly, there are continuing difficulties in providing dependable translations of the Latin texts. This particular error demonstrates that we need a good and accurate translation of the 2002GIRM – which is now in force – and we need it NOW. Is it too much to imagine that the Holy See released the new GIRM appearing in the new 2002MR way back in the year 2000 so that we could have a good translation in hand at the moment it came into force? The texts of the new Latin GIRM and BLS can be found at the U.S. Bishops' website (<http://www.nccbuscc.org>).

During the 27 April 2006 presentation of the Italian edition of Lang's Turning Toward The Lord,

there is a preface by Joseph Card. Ratzinger. Then Card. Ratzinger took up this very issue about the translation of paragraph 299 making it clear, with the Congregation, that (my trans.):

“... the word ‘*expedit*’ (‘is desirable’) required no obligation, but was a simple suggestion.”

Lang in his first chapter takes us through the genesis of that paragraph in the GIRM, pointing out also how it was applied, or rather misapplied, throughout the decades following the post-Conciliar reform for the liturgy. It is a very useful resource in itself.

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[GIRM 299 and the old, uncorrected translation](#)

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About Fr. John Zuhlsdorf

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

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2 Responses to *What does GIRM 299 really say?*

AM says:

27 April 2006 at 5:46 pm

Clearly *expedit* is only a suggestion, and it seems obvious that the whole paragraph isn't principally about the orientation of celebration as such anyway, but about the placement of the altar.

That said, I still don't understand why that *quod* doesn't refer back to *celebratio* which is the nearest (actually the only) accusative neuter noun. Why doesn't it mean "Altars should be built thus-and-so, so that such-and-such a (desirable) celebration is possible"? That seems to accord better with the answer from the CDW, who refer to the people "participating in the celebrations".



Fr. John Zuhlsdorf says:

27 April 2006 at 6:05 pm

AM: *celebratio* is feminine, not neuter. The *tio* ending is your clue that the noun is feminine.