

'Ad Orientem': The Cardinal Virtues of Worship

Cardinal Robert Sarah and others encourage priests and people to look east.

BY TRENT BEATTIE

| Posted 12/22/15 at 9:05 AM

ANN ARBOR, Mich. — Father Gerald Gawronski, pastor of St. Patrick's Church in Ann Arbor, conducts Masses in the ordinary form — that of Pope Paul VI — in a way most Catholics are unfamiliar. While he does face the congregation during homilies and other times he addresses them, he does not do so at specific instances when the majority of priests today do — most notably at the Offertory, Consecration and elevation.

This traditional direction of liturgical prayer, referred to as *ad orientem* (facing east), had been nearly ubiquitous before the Second Vatican Council, yet almost vanished after it. This left most Catholics feeling the Council called for the priest to face the congregation, yet this was just that — a feeling — rather than a correct perception. None of the 16 conciliar documents contains an endorsement, let alone a mention, of the practice of the priest facing the congregation (*versus populum*) during the prayers of the Mass.

When Father Gawronski points this out to parishioners, he finds them to be generally receptive to it. "Old St. Patrick's" worshippers have found his *ad orientem* Masses to be coherent and meaningful expressions of prayer. Rather than thinking of Father Gawronski as "having his back to the people," parishioners see his positioning as the Church intends, expressive of the unity of the priest and congregation in their quest for God.

Father Gawronski believes the whole point of *ad orientem* worship is to demonstrate that the entire community is on the same page by facing the same God in prayer.

"The priest is meant to lead the people to God, not to be a distraction," Father Gawronski said. "Liturgical positioning is not about making me or the community the focus; it's about making God the focus. This God-centeredness is the hallmark of any authentic worship."



Cardinal Virtues of Worship

Authentic worship has been on the mind of Cardinal Robert Sarah, prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. He published a [noteworthy article](#) on this theme on June 12 in *L'Osservatore Romano*. The topic drawing most attention in the article was the direction of liturgical prayer — specifically, how the priest and people should be facing the same way during many parts of the Mass.

While some see this as a return to a "pre-Vatican II" liturgy, Cardinal Sarah showed it is quite the opposite — that it is, in fact, consonant with conciliar teachings. In the opening sentence of the prefect's letter, he sets the stage by asking, "Fifty years after its promulgation by Pope Paul VI, will the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy [*Sacrosanctum Concilium*] finally be read?"

The African cardinal explained that "it is in full conformity with the conciliar constitution — indeed, it is entirely fitting — for everyone, priest and congregation, to turn together to the east during the penitential rite, the singing of the *Gloria*, the orations and the Eucharistic Prayer, in order to express the desire to participate in the work of worship and redemption accomplished by Christ."

Cardinal Sarah emphasized that the priest must become the "instrument that allows Christ to shine through." In the pursuit of this goal, he references Pope Francis remarking that the celebrant is not the host of a show, nor should he be seeking affirmation from the congregation, as if the primary concern of worship were a dialogue between the priest and assembly.

On the contrary, Cardinal Sarah believes that in order to enter into the true conciliar spirit, self-effacement is necessary for the priest who leads public worship. This self-effacement is implicit in the rubrics of the Roman Missal, which presume the priest will *not* be facing the congregation through the entirety of the Mass.

The Spirit of the Liturgy

Bishop Edward Slattery of Tulsa, Okla., has offered the ordinary form of the Mass *ad orientem* for nearly five years. "Ninety percent of the time in the cathedral I offer Mass facing the same direction as the people," he said. "The exceptions are when a great number of priests are concelebrating, because they would block the view of what is happening in the sanctuary."

Bishop Slattery sees Cardinal Sarah's recent liturgical remarks as a continuation of what Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger taught, especially in *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, while serving as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith prior to his election as Pope Benedict XVI. This, in turn, is seen by Bishop Slattery as a continuation of what the Fathers of Vatican II taught: "It's nothing new, really. It's not only a decades-old tradition, but a centuries-old tradition of the Church that has solid theological and practical foundations."

It is common sense to Bishop Slattery, who recalls simple rules of communication: "When I'm speaking to someone, I usually face that person. So when I'm giving a sermon, I face the people, because they are the ones I'm addressing. When I'm in prayer — especially offering Jesus to the Father at the altar — I'm addressing the Father, so it is no wonder that I should be facing him, rather than the people."

Bishop Slattery believes authentic participation is not facilitated by the priest facing the people at these times, because then the priest becomes the central focus: "The metaphor I use to describe this is of a door. The only time you notice a door is when it's locked. Otherwise, you don't even think of the door, because the purpose of an unlocked door is to lead you from one place to another."

"The priest is supposed to lead the people in Christ to the Father," the bishop added, "yet when the priest faces the people, he becomes a *locked* — rather than an *open* — door. Instead of thinking about Christ going to the Father, the faithful are thinking about the personality of the priest."

While Bishop Slattery prefers *ad orientem* worship, he believes there is a deeper, more important element of prayer underlying the discussion. Regardless of the physical position or posture of the priest, what matters most, he said, is whether or not those present at Mass are entering into the sacred mysteries made present.

This entrance has been commonly seen in recent decades as an "active participation," which calls the laity to proclaim the readings, distribute holy Communion and do various other things that were once reserved for the priest or deacon. However, Bishop Slattery sees the matter of active participation differently.

"The phrase *participatio actuosa*, which appears in Vatican II's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, was frequently translated as 'active participation,' but it's more accurately stated as 'actual participation,'" Bishop Slattery said. "The Fathers were not calling for more commotion; they were calling for an enhanced interiority. They wanted to have the hearts and minds of worshippers *actually* attuned to what was taking place, rather than merely being physically present."

O Come, Emmanuel

Actual participation is seen in similar terms by Bishop James Conley of Lincoln, Neb. He offered Christmas midnight Mass *ad orientem* last year and wrote [an explanatory letter](#) preparing the faithful for his actions. Bishop Conley recalled that the Second Coming was especially emphasized in the early Church, where it was commonly understood that the reappearance of the Savior would take place soon. Because his first appearance occurred "in the East," it was taken for granted that the second one would be similar.

Bishop Conley wrote, "In the season of Advent, we recall Christ's Incarnation at Christmas, and we are reminded to be prepared for Christ's coming. In the holy Mass, we are made present to the sacrifice at Calvary and to the joy of Christ's glory in heaven. Yet we also recall that Christ will return, so we are called to be vigilant for this reality."

For those who may have been concerned about the celebrant turning away from them at Mass, Bishop Conley reminded his flock, "In the *ad orientem* posture at Mass, the priest will not be facing away from the people. He will be with them — among them and leading them — facing Christ and waiting for his return."

Father Gawronski shares these sentiments and is grateful that Bishops Conley and Slattery — as well as Bishop Robert Morlino of Madison, Wis. — are among those on board with Cardinal Sarah's recent comments. Father

Gawronski also reinforced Cardinal Sarah's call to an honest reading of the documents of Vatican II by saying, "The hour has come to take another look at what Vatican II really taught."

The St. Patrick's pastor added, "In *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 'the expectation of blessed hope and of the coming of the Lord' is written of. This should be evident at Mass throughout the year, but especially during Advent, when we face the east in the joyful hope of the return of our Savior and King."

Register correspondent Trent Beattie writes from Seattle.
