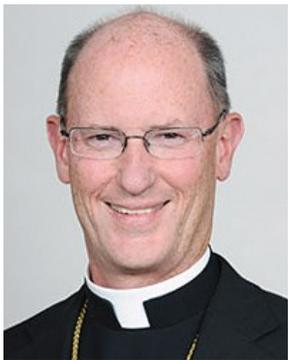


Since ancient times, Christians have faced the east during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass to remember to keep watch for Christ. Together, the priest and the people faced the east, waiting and watching for Christ. Even in Churches that did not face the east, the priest and people stood together in the Mass, gazing at Christ on the crucifix, on the altar, and in the tabernacle, to recall the importance of watching for his return. The symbolism of the priest and people facing ad orientem—to the east—is an ancient reminder of the coming of Christ. More recently, it has become common for the priest and the people to face one another during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. The priest stands behind the altar as he consecrates the Eucharist, facing the people. The people see the face of the priest as he prays, and he sees their faces. These positions can have important symbolism too. They can remind us that we are a community—one body in Christ. And they can remind us that the Eucharist, at the center of the assembly, should also be at the center of our families, and our lives.

But the symbolism of facing together, and awaiting Christ, is rich, time-honored and important. Especially during Advent, as we await the coming of the Lord, facing the east together—even symbolically facing Christ together at the altar and on the crucifix—is a powerful witness to Christ’s imminent return. Today, at a time when it is easy to forget that Christ is coming—and easy to be complacent in our spiritual lives and in the work of evangelization—we need reminders that Christ will come. During the Sundays of Advent, the priests in the Cathedral of the Risen Christ will celebrate the Mass ad orientem. With the People of God, the priest will stand facing the altar, and facing the crucifix. When I celebrate midnight Mass on Christmas, I will celebrate ad orientem as well. This may take place in other parishes across the Diocese of Lincoln as well. 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. “Be watchful!” says Jesus. “Be alert! You do not know when the time will come.” We do not know when the time will come for Christ’s to return. But we know that we must watch for him. May we “face the east,” together, watching for Christ in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and in our lives.



Bishop Conley was ordained a priest of the Diocese of Wichita and is a former pastor of Blessed Sacrament Church in Wichita.

Letter on the Position of the Priest During the Eucharistic Liturgy

Cardinal Jorge Medina Estevez, Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments responded on September 25, 2000, to a European cardinal's question about the position of the priest during the liturgy of the Eucharist. Adoremus' s translation of the original letter, written in Italian, appears below. Responses such as this are later published in Notitiae, the official publication of the Congregation of Divine Worship.

Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments

The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments has been asked whether the expression in no. 299 of the *Instituto Generalis Missalis Romani* constitutes a norm according to which, during the Eucharistic liturgy, the position of the priest versus absidem [facing towards 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:

Negative, and in accordance with the following explanation.

The explanation includes different elements which must be taken into account.

It is in the first place to be borne in mind that the word *expedit* does not constitute an obligation, but a suggestion that refers to the construction of the altar a *pariete sejunctum* [detached from the wall] and to the celebration versus *populum* [toward the people]. The clause *ubi possibile sit* [where it is possible] refers to different elements, as, 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. It reaffirms that the position toward the assembly seems more convenient inasmuch as it makes communication easier (Cf. the editorial in *Notitiae* 29 [1993] 245-249), without excluding, however, the other possibility.

However, whatever may be the position of the celebrating priest, it is clear that the Eucharistic Sacrifice is offered to the one and triune God, and that the principal, eternal, and high priest is Jesus Christ, who acts through the ministry of the priest who visibly presides as His instrument.

The liturgical assembly participates in the celebration in virtue of the common priesthood of the faithful which requires the ministry of the ordained priest to be exercised in the Eucharistic Synaxis. The physical position, especially with respect to the communication among the various members of the assembly, must be

distinguished from the interior spiritual orientation of all. It would be a grave error to imagine that the principal orientation of the sacrificial action is [toward] the community. If the priest celebrates versus populum (toward the people), which is a legitimate and often advisable, his spiritual attitude ought always to be versus Deum per Jesus Christum [toward God through Jesus Christ], as representative of the entire Church. The Church as well, which takes concrete form in the assembly which participates, is entirely turned versus Deum [towards God] as its first spiritual movement.

It appears that the ancient tradition, though not without exception, was that the celebrant and the praying community were turned versus orientem [toward the East], the direction from which the Light which is Christ comes. It is not unusual for ancient churches to be "oriented" so that the priest and the people were turned versus orientem during public prayer.

It may be that when there were problems of space, or of some other kind, the apse represented the East symbolically. Today the expression versus orientem (toward the East) often means versus apsidem (toward the apse), and in speaking of versus populum (toward the people) it is not the west but rather the community present that is meant.

In the ancient architecture of churches, the place of the Bishop or the celebrating priest was in the center of the apse where, seated and turned toward the community, the proclamation of the readings was listened to. Now this presidential place was not ascribed to the human person of the bishop or the priest, nor to his intellectual gifts and not even to his personal holiness, but to his role as an instrument of the invisible Pontiff, who is the Lord Jesus.

When it is a question of ancient churches, or of great artistic value, it is appropriate, moreover, to keep in mind civil legislation regarding changes or renovations. Adding another altar may not always be a worthy solution.

There is no need to give excessive importance to elements that have changed throughout the centuries. What always remains is the event celebrated in the liturgy: this is manifested through rites, signs, symbols and words that express various aspects of the mystery without, however, exhausting it, because it transcends them. Taking a rigid position and absolutizing it could become a rejection of some aspect of the truth which merits respect and acceptance.

Vatican City, 25 September 2000.

Signed: Jorge Arturo Cardinal Medina Estévez, Cardinal Prefect

Looking to the East

Bishop James Conley Column

Nov. 21, 2014

Southern Nebraska Register



Jesus Christ will return in glory to the earth. We do not know when he will return. But Christ promised us that he would return in glory, "as light comes from the east" to bring God's plan of redemption to its fulfillment. In 2009, Bishop Edward Slattery, of Tulsa, Okla., wrote that "the dawn of redemption has already broken, but the sun —Christ Himself—has not yet risen in the sky." In the early Church, Christians expected that Christ would come soon—any day. There was hopeful expectation. They were watchful—they looked to the sky in the east to wait for Christ. And because they did not know when he would return, they proclaimed the Gospel with urgency and enthusiasm, hoping to bring the world to salvation before Christ returned. It has been nearly two thousand years now since Christ ascended into heaven. It has become easier to forget that he will come again to earth. It has become easier to forget that we must be waiting, we must be watching, and we must be ready. In the season of Advent, as we recall Christ's Incarnation at Christmas, we are reminded to be prepared for Christ's coming. In the Gospel for the First Sunday of Advent this year, Nov. 30, Christ tells us his disciples "to be on the watch." "You do not know when the Lord of the house is coming," Jesus says. "May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping." We remember that Christ is coming whenever we celebrate the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. In the Holy Mass we are made present to the sacrifice at Calvary, and to the joy of Christ's glory in heaven. But we also remember that Christ will return, and we remember to watch, to be vigilant, to wait for him, and to be prepared. The Mass is rich with symbolism. The vestments of the priest remind us of the dignity of Christ the King. We strike our breasts, and bow our heads, and bend our knees to remember our sinfulness, God's mercy, and his glory. In the Mass, the ways we stand, and sit, and kneel, remind us of God's eternal plan for us.