

## The orientation of the altar in the symbolic construction of space

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Let me start from the assumption that we need to use "symbolic geography" to understand the architecture of religious buildings, as stated at the beginning of the book *Le monde des symboles*<sup>2</sup>, in the Zodiaque collection formerly published by the monks of La Pierre-qui-Vire. This is the project I will undertake to assess what this can contribute to our understanding of the place of the altar and its orientation. I will attempt this within the framework of a spatial approach where "symbolic geography" can remain truly geographical in the sense of my discipline, by noting what can be retained from the organization of space itself, since geography also works on representations of space, particularly religious and potentially Catholic ones<sup>3</sup>. The organization of space to be evaluated in this way is doubly a *construction* of this space: in the figurative sense of the design of its structure, but also in the literal sense of its architecture, space being a word that literally means something that is physically constructed. It is to this religious architecture that a whole reflection on liturgical space applies, with the altar as its centerpiece, and therefore with a major structuring place and role, due to the belief in the divine Eucharistic presence. To think about it in its symbolic dimension is, as we shall see, to conceive of it in its foundations, but also in what these conceptions inscribed in stone say about another spatial reality, which is of the realm of the divine and the heavenly liturgy, from which the earthly liturgy cannot be separated in any of the communions of traditional Christianity. It is this connection, this analogy in the full sense of the term, that introduces us to the symbolic reality of liturgical space.

This look at the symbolic foundations of liturgical space seems to me all the more important and timely because, in my opinion, current concerns about liturgical space focus mainly on the "how" and seem to neglect the very reasons for this space, its "why," particularly in the symbolic realm. Admittedly, in his recent apostolic letter *Desiderio desideravi*, Pope Francis, quoting Romano Guardini (1885-1968), evokes, in liturgical formation, the need for man to "rediscover his symbolic power<sup>4</sup> but the letter explicitly concerns the "liturgical formation of the people of God" and not the understanding of the foundations of liturgy and its space, and its references are mainly to the Second Vatican

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<sup>2</sup> Gérard de CHAMPEAUX, Dom Sébastien STERCKX, *Le monde des symboles*, La Pierre-qui-Vire: Editions du Zodiaque, 1980, p. 68.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Robert PITTE, *The Catholic Planet, A Cultural Geography*, Paris: Tallandier, 2020, p. 177.

<sup>4</sup> Apostolic Letter *Desiderio desideravi* of June 29, 2022, no. 44. Reference given by Guardini in note: R. GUARDINI, *Liturgische Bildung* (1923) in *Liturgie und liturgische Bildung* (Mainz, 1992) p. 99; French translation: *La formation liturgique*, Leuven: Peteers, 2017, p.75.

Council's constitution *Sacrosanctum concilium*, where this space is not explicitly addressed as such, in its foundations, but only indirectly, in relation to sacred art. In the field of research on liturgical space, the "how" also seems to take precedence over the "why" in most cases, if we refer to what is undoubtedly the last major French scientific symposium on liturgical space, led in January 2019 by Fr. Drouin, himself involved in the interior and liturgical part of the ongoing restoration of Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris after the fire<sup>5</sup>. This is indeed a direct reference to liturgical space, from a profound and diverse perspective, but alongside the welcome rehabilitation of Fr. Louis Bouyer, who explained it so clearly<sup>6</sup>, the very foundation of liturgical space is not clearly questioned in the deliberately stated intention to adhere to it—and to remain to the conception of liturgical space decided by the Roman instruction *Inter oecumenici* "for the implementation of the constitution on the liturgy" in 1964, whose implementation is to be resumed, with a critical eye ultimately focused only on the visual and artistic quality of its previous realizations. More fundamental, among the colloquiums organized in the context of the Italian abbey of Bose, seems to be that of 2006, *L'espace liturgique et son orientation*<sup>7</sup>, notably through the participation of Fr. Uwe Michael Lang, who clearly raised the question of the "cosmic symbolism" of the orientation of the altar<sup>8</sup>. On the French-speaking side, it is important to highlight the contribution of fundamental elements, based on the medieval model, in the symposium *Espace ecclésial et liturgique au Moyen Âge (Ecclesial and Liturgical Space in the Middle Ages)* led by Anne Baud, also in 2006, notably by Alain Rauwel on the historical perspective of the orientation of the altar<sup>9</sup>. However, despite Cardinal Ratzinger's publications prior to his election as pope<sup>10</sup>, the general atmosphere in recent years has been one of neglecting the "why" of liturgical space. For us, this is also an invitation to engage in debate on this issue, insofar as the reasons—particularly those linked to a committed and militant vision of Christian antiquity—that were put forward to legitimize, especially after World War II, the reversal of the liturgical space (of which the turning of the altar is the key and main manifestation) are no longer invoked. Has the

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<sup>5</sup> Gilles DROUIN (ed.), *L'espace liturgique, un espace d'initiation, Proceedings of the symposium of the Institut Supérieur de Liturgie, January 23-24-25, 2019*, Paris: Cerf, 2019, p. 291. Note the principle stated on p. 16 of the preface: "I will start with the Second Vatican Council because this symposium aims to outline a theology of space for liturgies according to Vatican II."

<sup>6</sup>Notably through the reference to *Architecture and Liturgy*.

<sup>7</sup> The proceedings were published in Italian by the monastery: Frédéric DEBUYST, Paul DE CLERCK, Albert GERHARDS (eds.), *Spazio liturgico e orientamento*, Magnano: Qiqajon Edizioni, 2007, 288 p.

<sup>8</sup> Uwe Michael LANG, "Una direzione comune nelle preghiere liturgiche," DEBUYST, *Spazio liturgico...*, pp. 203-2015. See in particular pp. 208-209: "Il simbolismo cosmico del culto sacramentale."

<sup>9</sup> Alain RAUWEL, "L'orientation des autels: un problème mal posé?" In: Anne BAUD (ed.), *Espace ecclésial et liturgique au Moyen Âge*, Lyon: Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée Jean Pouilloux, 2010, pp. 21-26

<sup>10</sup> Especially in: Joseph RATZINGER, *L'esprit de la liturgie*, Geneva: Ad Solem, 2001, 184 pp.

normative reference to the sixty-year-old tradition initiated by *Inter oecumenici* become a mark of conservatism?

I will only take the liberty of returning to certain points from the perspective of spatial organization, emphasizing how the orientation of the altar, in its symbolic dimension, is key to this. My remarks will therefore focus primarily on a spatial and symbolic interpretation of already known scriptural, archaeological, and patristic realities. This will also *provide* an opportunity to see the convergence between the weakening of this symbolic understanding and that of the orientation itself with the contemporary history of the reversal of altars.

## **1 The symbol, the orientation of the sacred space of the church, and Christ the light**

### **1.1 The church, a sacred space that can be conceived in a symbolic construction**

If the application of this symbolic geography is possible to our churches, it is mainly because they are considered, by the believing and practicing conscience, to have a particular identity distinct from the homogeneous space of the surrounding world, which is considered profane. that is to say, they are thought of and above all experienced as sacred spaces, even if Christian sacredness differs from that of other religions in its relationship to the Incarnation of God and the holiness of the Church assembly that celebrates worship<sup>11</sup> . Separated from the secular world by their consecration and use, these sacred places have a particular spatial structure, distinct from the indeterminacy of secular space, which determines their orientation. This sacred conception of churches, key to their symbolic interpretation, is not linked to a backward-looking or external view, but also corresponds to their status in current Catholic Church law. Sacred places, *loca sacra*, as defined in the current code of canon law, officially concern worship and, what may seem less important to us today, burial, according to their definition: "Places intended for divine worship (places of worship) or burial (cemeteries) by dedication or constitutive blessing (can. 1205-1213)." These places become sacred through dedication (*dedicatio*): "Consecration of a place (church, altar, cemetery, etc.) normally performed by the bishop (can. 1169 and 1205-1213)"<sup>12</sup> . Twenty-one years after the promulgation of the new Code of Canon Law, in 2004, the Vatican confirmed its commitment to the concept of *sacred places* in relation to the Mass in the Instruction *Redemptionis Sacramentum*: "The Eucharistic celebration will take place in a sacred place unless, in a

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<sup>11</sup>Marc LEVATOIS, "[Peut-on parler de lieux sacrés dans le christianisme ?](http://geoconfluences.ens-lyon.fr/informations-scientifiques/dossiers-thematiques/fait-religieux-et-construction-de-l-espace/articles-scientifiques/peut-on-parler-de-lieux-sacres-dans-le-christianisme)" (The sacred in the Middle Ages: can we talk about sacred places in Christianity? The case of the Church of Saint-Jean-de-L'Aigle in the Loire Valley), *Géoconfluences*, October 2016. <http://geoconfluences.ens-lyon.fr/informations-scientifiques/dossiers-thematiques/fait-religieux-et-construction-de-l-espace/articles-scientifiques/peut-on-parler-de-lieux-sacres-dans-le-christianisme> (accessed on 15/01/2023)

<sup>12</sup> Jean WERCKMEISTER, *Petit dictionnaire de droit canonique* (Small Dictionary of Canon Law), Paris: Cerf, 1993, p. 132.

particular case, necessity requires otherwise"<sup>13</sup> . This official recognition does not, of course, dispel the contemporary movement of desacralization, whether thought or accepted, which has affected the symbolic dimension, especially since the mid-20th century, and which has led to the loss of the sense of orientation of the altar.

Beyond what is clearly expressed by the Magisterium in the above references, it is difficult to go further in the texts on the foundations and structure of this spatial sacredness as the key to a symbolic reading. The current era is mainly concerned, as we have seen, with the "how" rather than the "why," and the concept of sacred space is dependent on the more general concept of *space*, which is itself recent and initially linked to its architectural meaning, with origins outside ecclesiastical circles<sup>14</sup> . The theorization of space has now become commonplace in geography, but it has been developed mainly since the 1960s and 1970s<sup>15</sup> . It addresses the structure of the space in question—including, legitimately, its orientation—but it is conceivable that explicit ancient conceptions of the church as a sacred space may be rare. It seems to me that the first exact mention of a "sacred space" in Catholic thought dates back to the early decades of the 20th century, again penned by Romano Guardini, in a short work translated into French under the title *Les signes sacrés (Sacred Signs)*, one chapter of which is aptly titled "L'espace sacré" (Sacred Space)<sup>16</sup> , which helps us understand the structuring role of the orientation of liturgical action, the dynamic origin of its spatial dimension, in its relationship to the symbolic and Christic world where light plays, it should be emphasized, a major role. This text is important, and what follows will, in a way, mainly be an explanation of it: "Natural space has three dimensions, for it is not chaos [...] Nor is the religious sphere without order. And its beautiful order arises from the mysteries of faith. The church is oriented from east to west, from sunrise to sunset. It is the sun that gives direction to its vessel. The first rays of the day must caress it, and the last. In the world of souls, the sun is Jesus: we must always orient ourselves towards him, for in this way our actions and our hearts take on eternal value. To read the Gospel, the missal is carried from right to left, that is, towards the north, because the altar faces the east [...] The south is the homeland of dazzling light, a sign of the clarity of the heavens; and the north is the land of cold, gray horizons. The Gospel comes from the land of light [...] Finally, there is a third dimension that goes from bottom to top. The priest who prepares the victim raises the paten

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<sup>13</sup> Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship, *Instruction Redemptionis Sacramentum on certain matters to be observed regarding the Most Holy Eucharist*, March 25, 2004, no. 108.

<sup>14</sup> Françoise CHOAY, article "Space and Architecture," *Encyclopaedia Universalis, Supplement*, Paris: 1996, p. 640.

<sup>15</sup> To the point that, especially with the influence of American geography, it can be oriented towards spatial analysis: Peter HAGGET, *Spatial Analysis in Human Geography*, trans. Hubert FRÉCHOU, Paris: Armand Colin, 1973, 395 p.

<sup>16</sup> Romano GUARDINI, *Les signes sacrés*, Paris: Spes, 1930, pp. 72-73, "sacred space" translating here the German "Heiliger Raum".

and chalice toward heaven; his eyes and hands rise *from the depths* toward the divinity, for God is above [...] Thus is the religious world oriented.<sup>17</sup> . In this text, sacred space, in its singularity, is therefore oriented, and this orientation is clearly expressed at the altar through the analogy of symbolism<sup>18</sup> .

## **1.2 Christian and Christological relevance of symbolic interpretation: the preeminence of the symbol of light**

It is now important to return to the definition of the symbol, without which there can be no symbolism. Here we are dealing with a relationship between the signifier and the signified, as indicated, for example, by what Littré's dictionary places at the center of its definition: "a figure or image used as a sign of something"<sup>19</sup> but where the symbol is distinguished from the sign as such, as imposing itself and not being a simple social convention, which is more generally accepted for the linguistic sign in the general concepts of modern linguistics. This predetermined character of the symbol allows it to be linked to its usual etymological origin in ancient Greece, referring to "an object of recognition cut into two parts, each allowing messengers or bearers to recognize each other by fitting them together"<sup>20</sup> . In fact, what is important in the symbol, when it goes beyond these practical origins to reach the world of ideas, is, through its relationship to the natural world, the designation of higher realities, classically of a religious nature in ancient and traditional civilizations: "The symbol should not be confused with the sign, for it is not conventional and intellectual, but rather an appeal to the sensitive imagination toward a spiritual realm that it suggests without signifying"<sup>21</sup> . The religious dimension of symbolism can certainly be drawn towards the excesses of esotericism, as cultivated in the Masonic world; it can also be deployed to the extreme in poetry capable of proclaiming, with Baudelaire's "Correspondences": "Nature is a temple where living pillars Sometimes let out confused words; Man passes through forests of symbols, Which observe him with familiar looks," even if liturgy can also be associated with

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Guardini's short work was published in German under the title *Von Heiligen Zeichen*, referring to signs, *Zeichen*, rather than symbols in the strict sense, but from the outset the author openly equates these signs with their symbolic dimension (*Symbole*): "So sollte empfunden werden, inwiefern sie Zeichen, Symbole sind," *Von Heiligen Zeichen*, Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald, 1933, p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted by Baudouin DECHARNEUX and Luc NEFONTAINE: *Le symbole*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, "Que sais-je ?", 2014, p. 10.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* P. 19, with the commonly accepted Greek etymology given by Littré, from the Latin *symbolum*: "from *σύμβολον*, agreed mark, from *συνβάλλειν*, to put together, from *σύν*, with, and *βάλλειν*, to throw."

<sup>21</sup> Anne SOURIAU (ed.), *Vocabulaire d'esthétique*, Paris: PUF, "Quadrige," 2010, p. 1405.

this "forest of symbols," as Abbé Barthe showed a few years ago<sup>22</sup> . This tree structure does not, however, dismantle the constant reality in human history of the symbol, with its traditionally strong and religious dimension, determining a relationship of analogy between the symbol and the reality it signifies, a relationship that goes beyond simple comparison and implies a strong association—of a quasi-ontological nature—with the idea of the reality thus signified: "In symbolism proper, the symbol is very clearly assumed to be 'objective'. The world of realities is truly, in the thinking of the symbolists, like the material world that spreads out before our eyes"<sup>23</sup> . Conceived in this way, even devoid of potential esoteric excesses, is the symbol not more suited to pagan religion than to Christianity?

Without further questioning the general theory of symbols, which permeates all human thought, from the most remote archaeology to psychoanalysis, it seems necessary to me now to return to the appropriateness of a symbolic reading of Christianity, allowing us to evaluate the oriented vision of the Eucharistic celebration previously expressed by Guardini. The project seems paradoxical at first glance, insofar as the word symbol, of Greek origin, is absent from the vocabulary of the New Testament, particularly in its Greek version, the oldest known form, in its form *σύμβολον*, regardless of the related terms (image, imprint, mystery, resemblance, etc.) that may be associated with it. Greek is the language of the New Testament, but also of the Hellenistic Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX). Jean Borella, in his book *Le mystère du signe*<sup>24</sup> , searched for our word in it. He found only one meaning, which I quote here, in the Book of Wisdom (entitled Wisdom of Solomon in the Septuagint) in chapter XVI: "[6] But for their correction, they were troubled for a short time, having a symbol of salvation [*σύμβολον ἔχοντες σωτηρίας*], to remind them of the precept of your law. [7] For whoever turned back was saved, not by the object he saw, but by you, the savior of all" (Wisdom XVI, 6-7).. The Greek reference is essential, insofar as this book, written in Greek, does not exist in the Hebrew Bible and the Vulgate translates *σύμβολον* here as *signum*<sup>25</sup> . Jean Borella uses this unique but powerful quotation of the word symbol *σύμβολον* in the Bible as a gateway to its presence in Christianity, in a development whose main elements are worth reviewing: "The scribe [editor of Wisdom] alludes here to the episode of the bronze serpent recounted in Numbers. The Jews, weary of wandering in the desert, murmur against YHVH, who punishes them by sending fiery serpents. Repenting, they beg Moses to intercede for them. God accepted Moses' prayer and said to him (according to

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<sup>22</sup> Claude BARTHE, *La messe, une forêt de symboles*, Versailles: Via Romana, 2020, 354 p.

<sup>23</sup> P. M. DE MUNNYNCK, "L'analogie métaphysique," *Revue néo-scholastique de philosophie*, 98 (1923), pp. 136-137.

<sup>24</sup> Jean BORELLA, *Le mystère du signe*, Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1989, 270 p.

<sup>25</sup> In fact, the translation I have used here, to provide a recognized reference, given by the website *La Bible en ses traditions*, which claims to be common to both the Septuagint and the Vulgate for this book, had used *the word signe (sign)* for this reason, which I have taken the liberty of correcting to *symbole (symbol)*.

the LXX version): "Make yourself a bronze serpent and set it up as a sign ( *sémeion* ) [θὲς αὐτὸν ἐπὶ σημίῳ] [...] whoever has been bitten and looks at it will live" [Numbers, XXI, 8]. It is interesting to note that the Hellenistic scribe [of Wisdom] who reads the Bible in its LXX version, and for whom the term *sémeion* is therefore guaranteed by Scripture, does not use this term and substitutes it with *symbolon* [...] The reason for this preference, we believe, is that for a Jew steeped in Greek culture, the religious significance of *symbolon* appears much more meaningful than that of *sémeion*<sup>26</sup> . This revival of the image of the bronze serpent therefore allows Jean Borella to think of it as a "symbol of salvation," according to the classic patristic interpretation<sup>27</sup> , even though the word is absent from Numbers, and to attribute it to Christ, as he himself explains in the Gospel according to St. John: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (John, III, 14-15). We can therefore recognize a certain legitimacy in the Christian presence of the symbol in relation to the scriptures, which, by bringing the Christic relationship to light, gives meaning to the orientation of the altar. If the symbol represents a higher reality, connected and associated with God, it is a tangible manifestation of this reality, in a relationship of presence-absence, which Jean Borella describes as an "implicit metaphysics" that structures the Gospel according to St. John, particularly in the relationship between light and Christ and God: "It is worth noting the insistence with which St. John speaks of the 'true light' (I, 9) [...] And if there is a true vine, a true light, a true bread<sup>28</sup> , it is because there is an apparent light, vine, and bread, which are only shadows of reality."<sup>29</sup> . The reference to light is central among all the symbolic analogies of Christ that the Gospels deploy and that time does not allow us to develop. We can undoubtedly affirm that light is the symbol par excellence of Christ throughout the New Testament, with, in its reality as a natural sign, the quasi-absolute domination of the light of the rising sun, from the east to the west. Light is also the only symbolic attribute of Christ that appears in the solemn expression of faith, rightly called a symbol (in an ecclesiastical sense of the term, but one that is related to it), in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, for whom he is "Light from Light"<sup>30</sup> , which is also read or sung at the altar.

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<sup>26</sup> BORELLA, *Le mystère du signe*, p. 31.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* The author adds in this regard the explicit reference, for the early Christian authors, to Saint Justin and Saint Irenaeus of Lyon.

<sup>28</sup> With the use, each time, of the same adjective *ἀληθινός*, which allows all these terms to be associated in their symbolic meaning of superior celestial and divine reality.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>30</sup> *Φῶς ἐκ Φωτός*, *Lumen de Lumine*, Ref.: H. DENZINGER, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, Fribourg: Herder, 1955, p. 41.

## **2. Christ as the rising sun: the power of liturgical symbolism and the orientation of the altar**

### **2.1 The rising sun and the orientation of prayer**

The orientation of the altar is, in its spatial organization, linked to the orientation of the celebration of the liturgy which, in its ritual nature, is, as Fr. Bouyer showed, both word and gesture, that is to say—fundamentally—movement in space<sup>31</sup>. Its meaning is eminently symbolic, which can be established in relation to the rising sun, which is in natural reality the most obvious manifestation of light. It was partly on the basis of a challenge to the Christian validity of this symbolism of the rising sun that the common orientation of the celebrant and the faithful—and therefore the traditional orientation of the altar—was called into question at the time of the post-conciliar liturgical reform, which underlines the crucial nature of symbolic interpretation. Among other grievances, the argument was made that there had previously been a predominantly solar pagan cult, particularly in Rome, which could be considered sun worship, thus making the practice of liturgical orientation a pagan tradition fraudulently introduced into the liturgy that had no place in Christian worship. This was Monsignor Martimort's interpretation of a famous sermon by St. Leo for the feast of Christmas, asking people not to greet the east before entering the Roman basilica (western, as it is today) of St. Peter's, thus delegitimizing the orientation.<sup>32</sup> Justice has been done to this forced interpretation of St. Leo by showing the difference between a gesture of worship of the sun as a deity, which could have been the meaning of the greeting before entering the basilica, and the orientation of worship in the basilica itself, in an exclusively symbolic dimension. The risk of confusion can be better understood on Christmas Day, because of the earlier pagan solar festival whose date it had taken over in Rome in the 4th century. This genealogical distinction, showing the Christian and symbolic specificity of this solar borrowing at Christmas, was made, in the context of a more general anthropology, by Mircea Eliade in his *History of Religious Beliefs and Ideas*. He recalls how Emperor Aurelian (270-275) reintroduced the solar cult to Rome and "set the birthday of *Deus Sol Invictus* on December 25, the 'birthday' of all Eastern solar deities"<sup>33</sup> and how his successor Constantine, before his conversion, "was a follower of the solar cult and saw *Sol Invictus* as the foundation of his empire [...] But unlike Aurelian, for whom *Sol Invictus* was the supreme god, Constantine considered the sun [only] as the most perfect symbol of God. The subordination of the sun to the supreme God was most likely the first consequence of his conversion to Christianity; but

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<sup>31</sup> Louis BOUYER, *Le rite et l'homme*, Paris: CERF, 1962, pp. 79-80.

<sup>32</sup> Aimé-Georges MARTIMORT (ed.), *L'Eglise en prière*, Vol. 1, *Principes de liturgie*, Tournai: Desclée, 1983, p. 191. The quotation from St. Leo given in reference to this same page is: *In Nativitate Domini, Sermo 7*, no. 4-5, *Sermons*, Paris: Cerf, 1964, col. Sources chrétiennes, vol. 22 bis, pp. 156-161.

<sup>33</sup> Mircea ELIADE, *History of Beliefs and Religious Ideas*, Vol. 2, *From Gautama Buddha to the Triumph of Christianity*, Paris: Payot, 1978, p. 390.

the idea had already been expressed by the Neoplatonist Porphyry"<sup>34</sup> . Eliade did not go further in his approach to solar symbolism in the Christian tradition, but its major importance for understanding the orientation of the liturgy was masterfully explored in *Sol salutis*<sup>35</sup> , a masterpiece by Franz-Joseph Dölger (1879-1940), a contemporary and compatriot of Romano Guardini in the first generation of the German Liturgical Movement. Due to its scope and the references it cites, it undoubtedly offers the most systematic approach to the solar dimension of orientation in Christian worship, explaining and establishing the legitimacy of what can be thought of as a borrowing from a symbolic environment (also but not exclusively pagan) in the natural and cultural reality of the symbolic signifier. Dölger, after recalling that the ancients prayed to the deities of light in the morning, facing east, and to the deities of the night in the evening, facing west, assumes the borrowing of orientation by Christian prayer, positing, perhaps prematurely in contemporary thought, the idea of a cultural borrowing. This adoption of orientation, with its obvious solar connotation, is thus explained by the cultural milieu—including that of Judaism—in which ancient Christianity was born, in the Mediterranean basin: "This state of affairs dates back to the expansion of Christianity from the East to the Mediterranean basin, a period when it had to adapt to Greek and Roman culture. It then practiced very early on (certainly soon after the destruction of Jerusalem) the usual orientation of prayer, from the vicinity of Antioch and Alexandria, at the point of contact between Judaism and paganism. It also made it a law early on. [...] The Christian orientation in the liturgy draws confirmation and a sense of obviousness from this."<sup>36</sup> . This fact can be compared to the adoption of the Greek and then Latin languages, in what could be thought of as the "inculturation" (in the current sense of the term)<sup>37</sup> of Christianity in the Mediterranean world, a meaning that could also be applied to the liturgical use of incense, wine, and even wheat, due to the biogeographical and not only cultural domain of the plants from which they are derived, which is important in the relationship between symbols and natural elements. Reissued some fifty years ago, translated into Spanish but never into French, Dölger's book remains a reliable reference, which was further explored some twenty years ago by Martin Wallraff, who explained its symbolic dimension<sup>38</sup> .

Meanwhile, in 1951, the future Cardinal Jean Daniélou (1905-1974) highlighted the evidence from the early Christian centuries regarding the link between the orientation of

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 391.

<sup>35</sup> Franz-Joseph DÖLGER, *Sol salutis, Gebet und Gesang im christlichen Altertum*, Münster: Verlag der Aschendorffschen Verlagbuchhandlung, 1925, 445 pp.

<sup>36</sup> DÖLGER, *Sol salutis...*, pp. 321–322 (free translation).

<sup>37</sup> Pierre-Marie GY, *La liturgie dans l'histoire*, Paris: Cerf-St-Paul, 1990, pp. 59–72.

<sup>38</sup> Martin WALLRAFF, *Christus Verus Sol, Sonnenverehrung und Christentum in der Spätantike*, coll. *Jarbuch für Antike und Christentum, Ergänzungsband 32*, Münster: Aschendorff, 2001, 248 p.

prayer in general, the basis for the orientation of the altar, and sunlight, particularly in relation to the baptismal ritual, in his work *Bible et liturgie (Bible and Liturgy)*. The orientation of prayer in general was thus accompanied, in the early centuries, by the orientation of the ritual prayer of the newly baptized, which clarified its symbolic dimension, providing yet another possible explanation for the borrowing of the solar symbolism of orientation from the surrounding culture, based on the rite then practiced during the Easter Vigil of renunciation of Satan and adherence to Christ. It deserves a long quotation:

The last preparatory rite for baptism [...] is commented on by Cyril of Jerusalem [...] in the first of *the Mystagogical Catecheses*. We find it in all authors and in all Churches, in Jerusalem and Milan, in Antioch and Rome. Its origin is ancient. It is already mentioned in the writings of Tertullian. It seems to be directly related to the renunciation of idolatry. In this sense, it must have appeared, not in Judeo-Christianity, where it would have had no meaning, but in the Christianity of the mission [...] <sup>39</sup> .

Daniélou also emphasizes the eschatological dimension of this orientation, which can be linked to the return of the Messiah and, in this circumstance, introduces a break with the manifestation awaited by the Jews in Jerusalem:

The eschatological significance of this rite [...] corresponds well with what we have said about its presence among those who are about to die. They are waiting for Christ to come and take them. Moreover, a number of texts point to this eschatological meaning. It seems to have its starting point in St. Matthew: "For as the lightning comes from the east, so shall also the Son of Man come" (XXIV, 27). The *Didascalia of Addai* explicitly links it to this text: "The apostles have determined that you must pray toward the east, because, as lightning appears in the east, so will be the coming of the Son of Man [...] <sup>40</sup> .

It may be added that this parousial dimension of light coming from the east can also be associated with the first coming of Christ at his birth, as evoked in the Roman liturgy of Advent, the Great Antiphon of December 21: "O Oriens, splendor lucis aeternae et sol iustitiae, veni ad illuminandos sedentes in tenebris et umbra mortis <sup>41</sup> ."

Martin Wallraff's more recent research expands on what was previously put forward by Dölger (whose monumental work he praises) and clarified by Daniélou. Martin Wallraff

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<sup>39</sup> Jean DANIELOU, *Bible et liturgie, La théologie biblique des sacrements et des fêtes d'après les Pères de l'Eglise*, Paris: Cerf, 1951, pp. 38-39 and 43-45. The references given by Daniélou are generally taken from Migne's *Greek Patrology* or *Latin Patrology*. They have been omitted from this quotation.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> "O Orient! Splendor of eternal light, and sun of justice, come and enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death."

develops the distinction between the obvious orientation of prayer, also in its religious architectural dimension, and the complexity of its interpretation, which highlights its purely symbolic dimension. He does so without reference to the dissensions (or imposed consensus) that characterized the Catholic Church during the second half of the 20th century, relying instead on his status as a Lutheran historian and theologian and drawing on primary sources. One of the major interests of his approach is to show a disconnect between what he establishes as the evidence of the antiquity and quasi-total ubiquity of the orientation of Christian prayer, particularly for the Eucharistic celebration<sup>42</sup>, and a relatively late exposition of what constitutes its reason and explanation. This confirms the tacit borrowing of liturgical orientation from the surrounding cultural and religious environment (pagan and partially Jewish, except for the direction of synagogues towards Jerusalem), which had been exposed by Dölger, but also highlights its symbolic dimension, since the symbol (in this case, the direction of the rising sun) is a sign that speaks essentially for itself, as we have pointed out, and not through a linguistic convention. According to him, the explanation for this symbolism appears in the 3rd century, coinciding with the completion of the rise of a solar dimension in the pagan cult of imperial Rome, as suggested by the previous quotation from Eliade. He refers to a "solarization" (*Solarisierung*) of the prevailing religious culture, which helps us understand the complexity of the parallelism with the imperial cult that Saint Leo would later point out<sup>43</sup>. For him, this process finds a kind of completion in the aforementioned affirmation of Christ as "light from light" in the 325 version of the Nicene Creed. As for the orientation of prayer itself, Wallraff sees Origen (185-253) as playing a central role in the rise of the solar explanation, and he quotes an excerpt from his *Treatise on Prayer* in which the symbolic dimension (συμβολικῶς) of the assimilation between prayer towards the rising sun and the soul's gaze towards the coming of the true light is clearly expressed<sup>44</sup>.

## 2.2 The orientation and expectation of Christ

In the Scriptures, this Christological symbolism of the East and the rising sun is confirmed by its connection not only to the Parousia, in the previously quoted verse from Matthew (XXIV, 27), but also to the Ascension, through the use, which Daniélou in *Bible and Liturgy* considers classic in the patristic era, of verse 34 of Psalm 67 (in the version and numbering of the Septuagint and the Vulgate), evoking the Lord "who rises in the east [κατὰ ἀνατολάς]". For Daniélou, this reference supports and extends the symbolism of an ecclesial orientation of prayer:

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<sup>42</sup> "Christians pray towards the East. This basic principle was a matter of course for the entire early Church," WALLRAFF, *Christus Verus Sol...*, p. 60.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

This verse is of great importance for liturgical history. It affirmed that Christ's Ascension had taken place in the east. The angels of the Ascension had announced that "Christ would return as he had ascended into heaven" (Acts 1:11). From then on, it was in the east that Christ's return was expected. For Erik Peterson, this is the original origin of the orientation of prayer. It is the expectation of the return of Christ, who must appear in the east<sup>45</sup>.

The Roman liturgy confirms this symbolism once again, repeating in this context the verse commented on by Daniélou in the communion antiphon of the Mass of the Ascension: "Psallite Domino, qui ascendit super caelos caelorum ad orientem, Alleluia."

The symbolism of the East, as it is taken in reference to orientation, seems to be valid only in its relationship to both light and the rising sun. It should be noted that, in the New Testament, the Greek text of the Gospel of Saint Luke uses the term *anatolè* (ἀνατολή) to refer to the Messiah, whose coming Saint John the Baptist is called to prepare for in the Canticle of Zechariah (Luke I, 78): "Through the tender mercy of our God, by which the dawn [ἀνατολή] from on high has visited us." However, this mention of the term *anatolè* is not repeated in the classical patristic commentaries on orientation cited by Daniélou and Dölger. In fact, the clarification "from on high [ἐξ ὐψους]" suggests that it is certainly a star and not the sun, whose light appears not high in the sky but on the horizon, and *The Bible in its traditions* translates here literally as "the star rising from on high." Similarly, the angel bearing the seal is described as "rising from the east of the sun [ἀπὸ ἀνατολῆς ἡλίου]" in Revelation (VII, 2); this is an eschatological image, but not specifically Christological. The term *anatolè* - ἀνατολή is used again by Saint Matthew in the story of the Magi in the first chapter of his Gospel, but with an exclusively regional meaning<sup>46</sup>: "Magi came from the East [ἀπὸ ἀνατολῶν] ...". At the same time, the open symbolism—commonly read as such—of the announcement of the parousia, "like lightning, from east to west" in Matthew XXIV, 27, is all the more obvious: despite the mention of "lightning" (this is the primary meaning of the word *astrapè* [ἀστραπή]), but it is also found with the more general meaning of light, particularly from a lamp, as explicitly stated in Luke XI, 36), it is a course analogous to that of the sun that is described. Thus, Christ is not the sun god, but his coming can be understood through the image of the sun's course; he can be symbolically likened to the sun. The association between the rising sun and Christ, whatever its original inculturation, expresses a symbolism that underpins the orientation of ecclesial prayer, insofar as it is based on the light of the rising sun and suggests the expectation of the parousia.

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<sup>45</sup> Reference given in a footnote by Daniélou: Erik PETERSON, "La croce e la preghiera verso l'Oriente," *Eph. Liturgicae*, 54 (1945), p. 52 ff.

<sup>46</sup> In the plural, attesting to this regional meaning in Bailly's classical Greek dictionary.

### 2.3 The orientation and symbolic place of the altar: the example of Rome

The aim here is not to present the patristic references that establish the antiquity of this orientation, nor the archaeological remains that allow us to evaluate its early implementation in the stone of sanctuaries, but simply to return to the example of the early Christian churches of Rome, which, in their complexity, reveal the symbolism of light. It should also be considered as a textbook case in the references to a questioning of the classical orientation. We can cite, for example, the *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie* (Dictionary of Christian Archaeology and Liturgy) from the 1930s, for which the orientation of ancient Roman basilicas seems to follow no defined rule: "One has its façade to the south, another to the north, east, or west"<sup>47</sup>. This Roman situation, coupled with the presence of churches where the altar is traditionally turned towards the nave, as in St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican, was analyzed in depth about thirty years ago by Sible de Blaauw<sup>48</sup>, who summarized his conclusions in a more recent contribution to a superbly illustrated academic collective work on liturgical architecture, under the evocative title: "Towards the light: a forgotten principle in the orientation of early Christian places of worship"<sup>49</sup>. This representative area, the elements of which she discusses here, is of essential interest to the question because of the frequency of Roman spatial organization with the altar facing the nave, which, in the mid-20th century and at the time of the conciliar reform, was often put forward to justify the historical precedence and superiority of the so-called "facing the people" celebration<sup>50</sup>. If the altar had been turned towards the nave in the past without any major concern for astronomical orientation, it would have been the principle of *versus populum* that would have been in view. Sible de Blaauw provides a fundamental answer here, which also allows us to overcome the paradox of apparent anarchy. She starts from a systematic view, on several maps, of the location of the most venerable churches in Rome: "Looking at the map of the city of Rome, one does indeed get the impression that the churches point in all directions of the compass. This does not mean that we should conclude that there are no rules."<sup>51</sup>. She then points out that many of them are, in fact, truly "westernized," as has long been recognized for some, which corresponds to a celebration facing the east of the narthex, rather than strictly "facing

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<sup>47</sup> Fernand CABROL, Henri LECLERC, Henry MARROU, *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, Paris: Letouzey et Ané, Vol. 12, 1936, p. 2666.

<sup>48</sup> Sible DE BLAAUW, *Cultus et Decor; Liturgia e architettura nella Roma tardoantica e medievale*, Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1994, 2 vols., 921 pp.

<sup>49</sup> Sible DE BLAAUW, "En vue de la lumière: un principe oublié dans l'orientation de l'édifice de culte paléochrétien" [Towards the light: a forgotten principle in the orientation of early Christian places of worship], in: Paolo PIVA (ed.), *Art médiéval, Les voies de l'espace liturgique* [Medieval art, The paths of liturgical space], Paris: Picard, 2010, pp. 15-45.

<sup>50</sup> RAUWEL, "The Orientation of Altars...", p. 21.

<sup>51</sup> DE BLAAUW, "Towards the light: ...", p. 21.

the people." This is clearly the case with St. Peter's Basilica. For other churches, topographical or urban planning constraints may explain, in her view, occasional deviations. If we stick to the current major basilicas, the real problem concerns St. Paul Outside the Walls, where the high altar currently faces both west and the nave, seeming to support the principle of a celebration effectively "facing the people." However, the original Constantinian basilica from the early 4th century was oriented toward the west. On the other hand, when it was enlarged at the instigation of Theodosius at the end of the same 4th century, it was oriented eastward, and until the early 19th century, its high altar faced the apse, which Fr. Michaud, the historical promoter of celebration facing the people in the 1940s, recognized as a peculiarity (an exception) among the great Roman basilicas<sup>52</sup>. Renovated over the centuries, the Basilica of Theodosius was ravaged by fire in 1823. It was almost completely rebuilt, until its consecration in 1854, with the overall layout preserved but the altar now facing the nave, i.e., towards the west. It seems that, following the predominant spatial organization of papal basilicas, even before the beginnings of contemporary celebrations facing the people, there was a kind of assimilation between this mode of celebration facing the nave and a papal privilege. This assimilation was manifested, for example, in its association with the authorization granted (in the 18th century) to the Patriarch of Lisbon to wear the tiara and be accompanied in procession by flabellums, following the example of papal ceremonies at the time<sup>53</sup>. This shift towards a hierarchical rather than symbolic meaning of the orientation of the celebration facing the nave may be at work in the relatively recent reversal at St. Paul Outside the Walls. In this sense, we might also question the surprising face-to-face encounter with the celebrating priest shown in Pope Julius II's attendance at the Eucharistic consecration in the famous fresco *The Mass at Bolsena*, painted by Raphael in the loggias of the Vatican Palace. The origins of this assimilation, at a certain point in history, of the celebration facing the nave are in fact neither early Christian nor symbolic. It should also be noted that, at least since the Middle Ages, papal celebrations in major basilicas did not involve any real visual face-to-face contact between the pontiff and the congregation in front of the altar, due to the monumental nature of the candlesticks and

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<sup>52</sup> Maurice MICHAUD, "The Celebration of Mass Facing the People," *La Maison-Dieu*, 2 (1945), p. 94.

On the orientation of the basilica in Theodosius's building: André Chastagnol, "Quelques documents relatifs à la basilique Saint-Paul-hors-les-Murs" (Some documents relating to the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls), *Bulletin de la Société nationale des Antiquaires de France*, 1957, p. 125.

<sup>53</sup> Abbot Barthe, when asked, provided the following information, for which I am grateful: "I [...] note that there are no written references to the patriarch celebrating facing the people. As is often the case, custom plays a large part in liturgical practices. When I write that the celebration facing the people "was one of the liturgical privileges of the pope granted to the patriarch of Lisbon, etc.," I should have specified that the three great privileges (tiara, sedia gestatoria, flabelli) and a few others (fanon, guard, etc.) are well documented (Joaquim Nabuco, *Ius pontificalium* 1956, for Lisbon, p. 51 ff. <https://archive.org/details/JusPontificalium>), but that the papal style of celebration (with the throne at the back of the apse, the altar facing the people) seems to be customary. In any case, the following two videos attest to this manner of celebration.

<https://liturgia.mforos.com/1699131/7992588-patriarca-de-lisboa/>  
<https://youtu.be/AdEAof-b5oo> "

reliquaries on the altar, unlike the *tabula rasa* manifested by the altar of the first celebration facing the people—official and televised—by Paul VI in the Roman church of All Saints on March 7, 1965, the first true manifestation of *Inter Oecumenici*<sup>54</sup>. In ancient times, we must also consider the chancels and curtains around the ciborium, which evolved in the East into the clear separation of the current iconostasis.

In the early centuries of Christian architecture, symbolism also dominated in Rome, and Sible de Blaauw asserts, having reached maturity in her thinking, that despite the paradoxical appearances, the existence of a primitive rule governing the orientation of worship, which had long been misunderstood and which she acknowledges was contested, particularly at the time of the Second Vatican Council, based on the most widely cited works of Otto Nussbaum<sup>55</sup>. Sible de Blaauw's solution to this Roman problem lies at the level of principles rather than circumstances, clearly defining the orientation and, more precisely, that of the altar:

The impasse in the scientific debate can be explained by a distorted view of the relationship between architectural orientation and liturgical orientation, in other words between the axial direction of the place of worship and the position of the officiant [...] By architectural orientation of the building, we mean here the direction of the spatial and optical axis that can be deduced from the plan [...] as for liturgical orientation, a purely functional category, it can only be understood through the arrangement of liturgical furniture or written sources<sup>56</sup>.

With the support of maps and archaeological documents, she is able to put forward a Roman rule—applied whenever possible—in favor of effective architectural orientation, with two conclusions:

The first concerns the main axis itself: from the outset, the east-west axis was a principle pursued in Christian architecture in Rome [...] The second concerns the direction of the axis: in the 4th century, the apse facing west was favored, while in the following centuries, east and west orientations coexisted as equivalent variations, until the 9th century, when a marked preference for the west-facing axis reappeared<sup>57</sup>.

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<sup>54</sup> Christophe CHALAND, "Fifty years ago, Catholics began celebrating Mass in French," *La Croix*, March 5, 2015.

<sup>55</sup> Otto NUSSBAUM, *Der Standort des Liturgen am christlichen Altar vor dem Jahre 1000*, Bonn, Hansteil, 1965, 2 vols., 478 and 218 pp.

<sup>56</sup> DE BLAAUW, "Towards the light:...", pp. 18-19.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

The existence of an oriented architectural axis can therefore be considered a rule of the early church in Rome as well. Sible de Blaauw also distinguishes between the orientation of the celebrant and that of the faithful. In Rome itself, according to Sible de Blaauw, the position of the celebrant facing the nave, in imitation of St. Peter's in the Vatican, was only adopted in the early Christian centuries in churches that were actually west-facing, which, for her, confirms the primacy of orientation in liturgical celebration—and therefore of the altar—and, when the apse faces east, the celebrant stands facing it, in front of the altar, according to the most common traditional arrangement outside Rome. Ultimately, then, "the monuments of Rome correspond to the general framework of liturgical orientation in the early Christian world"<sup>58</sup>. Sible de Blaauw also provides part of the answer to the hitherto more uncertain question of the orientation of the faithful in a west-facing church. She explains that in Rome, in comparison with ancient priestly Judaism (which she finds in Ezekiel VIII, 16<sup>59</sup>), the architectural dynamics are associated with the hierarchical organization of Constantinian churches, so that in all cases the faithful remain facing the altar, leaving the celebrant to determine the actual liturgical orientation. Sible de Blaauw emphasizes the ecclesial importance of this orientation as observed in its evolution in Rome, in contrast to the purely external orientation of pagan temples:

The religious building becomes interior architecture, which also means that its orientation will be experienced more from the inside than from the outside. The fact that the axiality of the interior, marked by an altar at its center, prevailed and that the apse—a typical element of the interior—was oriented toward the east is very revealing of the concept of Christian religious buildings<sup>60</sup>.

The importance of the east is indeed that of light: "The façade and apse form the two luminous ends of the longitudinal axis of the basilica, which, emphasized by a series of tall windows, becomes a real axis of light"<sup>61</sup>. The Roman case therefore conforms, despite its apparent irregularities, to the traditional rule of orientation, summarized from its patristic dimension by Cyrille Vogel in a major article in 1962<sup>62</sup>, with a symbolic nature that he

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>59</sup> "And behold, at the entrance to the temple of the Lord, between the portico and the altar, were about twenty men with their backs turned to the temple of the Lord and their faces toward the east, and they were bowing down toward the east before the sun."

<sup>60</sup> Sible DE BLAAUW, "In View of the Light:...", p. 35.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>62</sup> Cyrille VOGEL, "Sol aequinoctialis. Problems and techniques of orientation in Christian worship," *Revue des Sciences religieuses*, 36 (1962), pp. 175-211.

highlights by quoting Tertullian: "Amat figura enim Spiritus Sancti orientem, Christi figuram"<sup>63</sup> .

### 3 The symbolism of orientation, from its heyday to the contemporary crisis

#### 3.1 From the medieval heyday to classical attenuation

To reinforce the symbolic significance of the altar's orientation, it would also have been possible to develop, based on the rites of its consecration, what makes it a *microcosm*<sup>64</sup> , itself internally oriented and not merely placed in the general orientation of the church. This is explained by the Benedictines in *Le Monde des Symboles*, quoted at the beginning of this article: "The altar is a microcosm not only of the natural world, but also of the universe spiritualized by consecration. The rite of consecration of altars prefigures and begins to liturgically realize that of the universe. Twice the pontiff traces five crosses on the altar table: we know that this is the pattern of spatial extension"<sup>65</sup> . This microcosm of the altar can itself be thought of as oriented, as reflected in the celebrant's movements at the altar during Mass, as Guardini's lyricism in *Sacred Signs* explains. It also resonates with the traditional medieval conception of man as an oriented microcosm, based on a symbolic patristic reading of the four letters of Adam's name in Greek as corresponding to the initials of the four cardinal points<sup>66</sup> . The importance of orientation became increasingly affirmed during the European Middle Ages. Cyrille Vogel points out that this symbolic sacred model is theorized by Durand de Mende in his *Rational des divins offices* at the end of the 13th century<sup>67</sup> . According to Cyrille Vogel, Durand's law of equinoctial orientation is part of a medieval reflection nourished by Roman science transmitted by Isidore of Seville (c. 570-636) and subsequently endowed with its own meaning: "The Middle Ages will adhere to this principle of sacred architecture [i.e., orientation]; however, the documents add a clarification: the orientation will be towards the rising of *the sol levator aequinoctialis* and not towards the solstice points. Medieval authors thus revived the technique of the Roman *agrimensores*, while developing a specifically Christian symbolism around equinoctial orientation: spring equinox (incarnation and passion

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187. Ref. note 29: TERTULLIAN, *Adversus Valentianos* c. 3 (PL 2, 515).

<sup>64</sup> Who assumes, in the analogy of symbolic language, a correspondence with the macrocosm of the spatial organization of the universe: Jean-Jacques WUNENBURGER, *Le sacré*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, "Que sais-je ?", 2019, p. 22.

<sup>65</sup> CHAMPEAUX and STERCKX, *Le monde des symboles*, p. 204.

<sup>66</sup> Dominique CERBELAUD O.P., "Le nom d'Adam et les points cardinaux, Recherches sur un thème patristique," *Vigiliae Christianae*, vol. 38, no. 3, Sept. 1984, pp. 285-301; BORELLA, *Le mystère du signe*, p. 88.

<sup>67</sup> Cyrille VOGEL, "*Versus ad Orientem*. Orientation in the *Ordines Romani* of the Early Middle Ages," *Studi Medievali, Serie Terza*, I, 1960, pp. 447-469.

of Christ), autumn equinox (conception of the Precursor)<sup>68</sup> . Dölger isolated<sup>69</sup> , among other theoretical references from the same period, in the work of Honorius of Autun (12th century), a text also situated at the height of medieval symbolism, which summarizes three main reasons for this orientation: the location of paradise lost, the place of Christ's return, and the expectation of resurrection, associated with the morning return of the sun, symbol of the risen Christ<sup>70</sup> .

The turning point at the end of the Middle Ages may already have brought about changes that led to the weakening of the sacred and oriented conception of churches. In his monumental *Maison Dieu*, Dominique Iogna-Prat highlighted this break with the Renaissance, but he also saw its anticipation before the end of the Middle Ages in what he calls the "discordant voices" that, from the 11th century onwards, challenged this sacralization, or at least some of its developments<sup>71</sup> . Without considering the specificities of the quasi-absolute desacralization of the Calvinist Reformation, with the total and deliberate loss of orientation, visible in the centered redesign of Geneva Cathedral, for example, the new post-Tridentine Catholic models no longer accord symbolic importance to orientation as such, without revolutionizing forms but from a perspective that is now more empirical than symbolic and, if it were not anachronistic to say so, already, in a certain way, "pastoral." This can be seen<sup>72</sup> , in one of the few texts that can be invoked here as a rule, first of all because it concerns Italy in the immediate aftermath of the Council of Trent: *the Instruction of St. Charles Borromeo (1538-1584) for the construction and furnishing of churches*<sup>73</sup> . In this *Instruction*, published seven years after the reformed missal of St. Pius V, the criterion of orientation now appears to be downplayed, for although it is still recognized, with the mention of the equinoctial east, it is possible for the bishop to authorize (increasingly tacitly in practice) the choir to face in another direction<sup>74</sup> .

Here we see a break with the intangibility of the principles set out in Durand de Mende's *Rational* and the beginning of a possible generalization of the loss of the axial

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 457.

<sup>69</sup> DÖLGER, *Sol salutis*, p. 257.

<sup>70</sup> HONORIUS OF AUTUN, "*De situ orationis. Tribus de causis ad Orientem cum oramus nos vertimus*," *Gemma animae*, chap. XCV, in: PL 172, 575.

<sup>71</sup> Dominique IOGNA-PRAT, *La Maison Dieu, Une histoire monumentale de l'Église au Moyen Âge*, Paris, Seuil, 2006, pp. 354-359.

<sup>72</sup> Costantino GILARDI, "Le modèle borroméen de l'espace liturgique," *La Maison-Dieu*, 193 (1993), pp. 91-110.

<sup>73</sup> Charles BORROMEO, "*Instructionum fabricae et superellectilis ecclesiasticae*" in: Achille RATTI [the future Pius XI], ed., *Acta Ecclesiae mediolanensis*, Vol. II, Milan: Ed. St-Joseph, 1890, col. 1409-1588.

<sup>74</sup> Saint Charles Borromeo, however, excludes the north without justification: *Ibid.*, col. 1422

orientation towards the cardinal east in newly constructed buildings, especially in cities, with the preferred alignment of the main façade on the street. This change is visible in Paris, to take one example, from the early decades of the 17th century. At the same time, the proliferation of monumental altarpieces, effectively closing off the axial window of the choir in churches of the Classical and Baroque periods, led to a certain disconnection from the symbolism of light. The development of altarpieces since the late Middle Ages had undoubtedly begun this disconnection from the orientation towards the light of the rising sun itself, even though, for the past twenty years or so, there has been a firm and definitive rejection of attempts to exploit this development, based on a few examples of antependiums that became altarpieces, to establish the principle of a very late medieval reversal of a celebration that was initially faced towards the people<sup>75</sup>.

### 3.2 Loss of orientation and crisis of symbolism

However, the common orientation of the faithful and the celebrant towards the altar, inside the building, remained until the mid-20th century, which allowed the symbolism of the altar's orientation in the interior architecture to be preserved, even if separated from its actual lighting function, especially since the decorative register of altarpieces sometimes represents it, particularly in France in the form of radiant "glories," also visible in Paris<sup>76</sup>. Without really succeeding, the 19th century sought, among other things for France, under the dual inspiration of Dom Guéranger and neo-Gothic architects, to restore the medieval church; Above all, it preserved and stabilized the interior orientation inherited from the Tridentine model, with its landmark of the tabernacle enthroned in the middle of the high altar. It was mainly from the 1960s onwards, after the publication of *Inter oecumenici* in 1964, that the celebration facing the people became widespread and the orientation was effectively abandoned.

It is undoubtedly important to note how this evolution since the 1960s has been accompanied by a decline and then an abandonment of the symbolic reading of sacred space, beyond even the erosion of the sacred character of the liturgical building. In the reform that followed Vatican II, the loss of symbolic reference was fully accepted, even embraced, as we see in the writings of Fr. Joseph Gelineau, himself an actor in this reform in France, acknowledging this loss of symbols in connection with the publication of liturgical books which, unlike their predecessors, do not codify or rectify practices considered immemorial, but create and establish new ones: "At Vatican II, we did the opposite; we made the books

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<sup>75</sup> Jean-Pierre CAILLET, "L'image culturelle sur l'autel et le positionnement du célébrant (IX<sup>e</sup>-XIV<sup>e</sup> s.)" [The cult image on the altar and the position of the celebrant (9th-14th centuries)], *Hortus Artium Medievalum*, 11 (2005), pp. 139-146.

<sup>76</sup> Bernard CHEDOZEAU, "Architecture et liturgie au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, Promenades dans Paris" [Architecture and liturgy in the 17th century, Walks in Paris], *Dix-septième siècle*, 210/1 (2001), pp. 145-151.

first"<sup>77</sup> . This preeminence of the text and its intelligibility over the symbolism of the rite itself seems to underlie, between the lines, the conciliar constitution on the liturgy, no doubt in connection with the promotion—which later became, in fact, exclusivity—of vernacular languages in worship. It is also in line with the modernity to which the Roman Church wishes to open itself on this occasion, for which, particularly in the artistic field, the more discursive explanation of allegory<sup>78</sup> has long since taken precedence over the silent sign of the symbol, even if its register remains similar. In the scientific age, can the natural world itself still be grasped in a symbolic reality, since its primary given has become, first and foremost, the object of a geometric, physical, or chemical explanation? This is the question posed by philosopher Olivier Rey in a recent book on water and its poetic symbolism<sup>79</sup> . He had indirectly asked the same question before about the sky, since Galileo's geometric equations of the planetary cycle<sup>80</sup> .

The crisis in liturgy and the crisis in symbolism are linked<sup>81</sup> . Emerging from the liturgical crisis certainly calls for a rediscovery of the symbolic reality of liturgy, which many current initiatives aspire to in their own way. But this requires a deep understanding of symbols, with their given adequacy to natural reality, beyond attempts that it is no longer necessary to detail but which, for the most part, are limited to the aesthetic inventiveness of artistic creation. This restoration of liturgical symbolism, in its fundamental and Christological axiality, will certainly require an understanding and restoration of the orientation of the altar as it had been received as a legacy. This was one of the intuitions, also inspired by his compatriot Bishop Klaus Gamber<sup>82</sup> , of the return to fundamentals of our late Pope Benedict XVI on the eve of his election, in *The Spirit of the Liturgy*<sup>83</sup> . He may have been criticized for this; was he wrong?

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<sup>77</sup> Joseph GELINEAU, *Demain la liturgie*, Paris: Cerf, 1977, p. 15.

<sup>78</sup> DECHARNEUX and NEFONTAINE: *Le symbole*, pp. 13–14.

<sup>79</sup> Olivier REY, *Réparer l'eau* (Repairing Water), Paris: Stock, 2021, 200 pp.

<sup>80</sup> Olivier REY, *Quand le monde s'est fait nombre*, Paris: Desclée de Brouwer - Poche, 2021, p. 15.

<sup>81</sup> Their association is developed in: Jean BORELLA, *La crise du symbolisme religieux*, Lausanne: L'âge d'homme, 1990, 381 p.

<sup>82</sup> Klaus GAMBER, *Tournés vers le Seigneur* (Turned Toward the Lord), Le Barroux, Ed. Ste-Madeleine, 1993, 90 p.

<sup>83</sup> RATZINGER, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*.