

Position and orientation of the altar¹

Louis Bouyer

Until recently, the bishop or priest presiding over the Eucharistic celebration, among Catholics as well as Eastern Orthodox Christians, Anglicans and the most traditional Lutherans, celebrated, in principle, facing the East. The faithful were then grouped behind him.

Recently, there has been a desire to replace this arrangement with a celebration "facing the people", as it were, with the celebrant standing behind the altar.

What are we to think of these different arrangements? More specifically, which one can be considered preferable for the effective participation of the faithful?

One point that should be clarified before embarking on a discussion of this subject is that, until at least the Middle Ages, our current arrangement for meals, with guests facing each other on either side of a round or oblong table, was completely unheard of.

For Jews, as well as for Greeks and Romans, the table used was neither round nor oblong like our modern tables; it was sigma-shaped, like a flared horseshoe. Everyone sat on the convex side, leaving the concave side free for serving. Under these conditions, no one faced anyone else, but everyone sat in roughly the same direction. This was the arrangement, especially for festive meals such as Passover. In this respect, the only distinction made by the Jews was to turn towards Jerusalem.

However, Christians, from early on, turned instead towards the geographical East: think of "the light from above that came to visit us" in the Gospel of Saint Luke! This is how the first Christian churches distinguished themselves very early on from synagogues.

Two cases can then arise: either the back of the church building is oriented towards the East, or its entrance is. In the first case, which is more common, the celebrant stands on the side of the faithful. In the second case, as in the current St Peter's Basilica in Rome, he will face them, on the

¹ Proceedings I. Notre-Dame-du-Laus – Gap. 4 to 6 October 1995.

other side of the altar table. However, in general, the latter situation tends to be avoided, as the faithful, in order to face the East themselves, would have to turn their backs on the altar and the celebrant!

But what are we to think of what is happening now in many churches where the celebration facing the people has been introduced?

As the sense of direction has been more or less lost, the faithful no longer turn their backs on the altar and the celebrant, but look at him as he faces them. But what are we to think of a celebration in which they have become mere spectators of an action that the celebrant performs for them, but no longer at their head, with them, involving them?

In my humble opinion, we must speak frankly here: we cannot truly unite ourselves with an action of which we are spectators.

On the contrary, one can only participate by being in solidarity with the celebrant, having him at the head, as the leader of the body that one must form with him.

We cannot emphasise this enough: watching someone do something for you, as if in your place, is in direct opposition to doing it with them, united with them.

We must necessarily choose between a liturgy of participation and a pseudo-liturgy that is nothing more than a spectacle, or at least tends towards it!

What conclusion can we draw? We must say without hesitation: it is the old way of doing things, prior to the recent liturgical movement – where the best, alas, too often rubs shoulders with the worst – that was the right one! The faithful, united as one body with the celebrating priest at their head, and therefore with him, on the same side of the altar, are thus led by him to unite with him in the celebration of the sacrifice. On the contrary, the faithful, who merely watch him perform the ceremony, separated from them, facing them to celebrate and consecrate the oblation, are in no way inclined or committed to unite with him!

A choice must be made: either a sacramental liturgy that engages you, introduces you, associates you with the sacrifice, or a liturgy that is simply a spectacle, where the priest does

everything apart, alone on his side, with the faithful merely detached witnesses: either a participatory liturgy or a liturgy-spectacle!