The Orientation of the Altar: History and Theology

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I – Introduction

Since the 1920s, but particularly since the liturgical reform that followed the Second Vatican Council, the position of the celebrant at the altar during the celebration of the Holy Eucharist has become a bone of contention. The *celebratio versus populum* was increasingly called for, and has now become almost exclusively the norm.

The origin of this requirement lies in the fact that, at the beginning of this century, it was believed that, during the celebration of the Eucharist in the early Church, the celebrant stood behind the altar, facing the people, just as Christ would have done at the Last Supper. As was subsequently demonstrated, the proponents of the *celebratio versus populum* were making a historical error. They were convinced that they were reviving the tradition of the original or early Church. It was only later that a theological basis was provided for this new orientation of the celebration: the aim was supposedly to restore to the Eucharistic celebration the character of a meal, which had been forgotten. However, our historical knowledge shows that, in the history of the Church, the *celebratio versus populum* is not attested anywhere. On the contrary, it was considered essential from very early on that the priest and the people should face the Lord together. This eastward orientation of the Eucharistic celebration appears as an eschatological sign that has held an important place in the life of the Church since its very beginnings.

In support of this thesis, we shall demonstrate, in the first part of this paper, that originally the priest and the people turned together towards the Lord, drawing on archaeological evidence – which we shall, however, limit to around the 5th century, insofar as, from the perspective that concerns us, the subsequent period offers no new insigh u[2]. Then, in the second part of our presentation, we shall attempt to analyse the theological significance of these historical findings. We shall endeavour to understand why, during the celebration of the Eucharist, the priest and the congregation faced the same direction, and in doing so, we shall see that this shared orientation was not a matter of practical necessity but rather stemmed from a theological conception: the Holy Eucharist constitutes the first fruits of the heavenly liturgy as well as an anticipated participation in it.

II- Historical overview: the eastward orientation of the church, the celebrant and the faithful

As we shall see in more detail later, (private) prayer facing east outwardly expresses the inner orientation of the soul which, during prayer, turns towards the coming Christ

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[2] This can only be a brief overview that makes no claim to be exhaustive.

and, through him, towards the Father, this orientation frequently being marked by a cross. Very quickly, this orientation of private prayer determined the direction in which churches were built, as well as the position of the priest and the faithful during Mass [e3]. As we cannot, due to lack of time, go into detail or explore specific examples, we shall have to content ourselves with offering a few fundamental ideas on these subjects. We shall begin with the arrangement of those taking part in the Eucharist, then briefly address the question of the orientation of different types of churches, and finally discuss the position of the priest and the congregation during the liturgy.

A – The Last Supper and the celebration of the Eucharist in the early Church

Originally, the debate regarding the orientation of the celebration was sparked by the idea of the 'seating arrangement' at the Last Supper. Martin Luther had already said on this subject: "But in the true Mass among true Christians, the altar should not remain as it is, and the priest should turn towards the people, as Christ undoubtedly did at the Last Supper. But this may wait." [4] Regardless of the fact that, at the Last Supper, there was no "people", this notion of facing one another contradicts the seating arrangement adopted at the table in antiquity. "As for the idea that the Eucharist, to be a meal, should involve participants facing one another, this is a modern naivety. In all meals of antiquity, whether Jewish or pagan, people never faced one another,... for the simple reason that all participants were seated on the convex side of a sigma-shaped table, the concave side being reserved for the comings and goings of any servants !..."[5].

The tables used at that time were round or sigma-shaped (semicircular); in the rear semicircle there was often a sigma-shaped bench or seat on which the guests sat or reclined. The place of honour, that of the host, was not in the centre but *in cornu dextro*, at the far right end of the table.

We regularly find this arrangement in depictions of the 'Last Supper' right up to the Middle Ages [6]. Jesus is always seated or reclining on the right-hand side of the table (for the observer, at the front and on the left). This is how it is shown in what is (probably) the oldest depiction of the Last Supper in the church of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna (c. 520). It was only later that the table was partially turned so that Christ – still *in cornu dextro* – was then situated in the centre of the room. From around the 13th century onwards, a new type of

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[3] See in particular on this subject: O. NUSSBAUM, *Der Standort des Liturgen am christlichen Altar vor dem Jahr 1000*, 2 vols. Bonn 1965; M. METZGER, "La Place des liturges à l'autel", in: *Recherches religieuses 45* (1971), pp. 113–145; K. GAMBER, *Liturgy and Church Architecture*, Regensburg 1976; K. GAMBER, *Facing the Lord*, Le Barroux 1993; C. VOGEL, "The Eastward Facing of the Celebrant and the Faithful during the Eucharistic Celebration", in: *L'Orient Syrien*, 1964, pp. 3 ff.

[4] M. LUTHER, *Deutsche Messe und Ordnung des Gottesdienstes*, 1526.

[5] Louis BOYER, "Afterword to the French edition", in: K. Gamber, *op. cit.,* p. 67.

[6] Cf. K. WESSEL, *Abendmahl und Apostelkommunion*, Recklinghausen, 1964; K. GAMBER: *Domus Ecclesiae*, Regensburg, 1968, pp. 86 ff.

depiction: Jesus is seated at the head of a table (now rectangular in most cases), surrounded by the apostles, which effectively appears as a *celebratio versus populum*.

In the early days of the Church, in imitation of the Last Supper, the same arrangement was maintained during the celebration of the Eucharist, for as long as the relatively small number of members in the community allowed. Thus, according to the New Testament, 'they continued to meet together in their homes and to break bread' (Acts 2:46). And we can be sure that, on this occasion, as at the Last Supper, the faithful sat at a U-shaped table, with the presider seated *in cornu dextro*.

1 - The *domus ecclesiae*

The rooms in which relatively small communities gathered for worship were called *domus ecclesiae* (domestic churches): this term appears for the first time in a sermon on the reading from the Book of Exodus during the Easter Vigil, which is thought to have been written by Nicetas of Remesiana (c. . 420)[7].

The term "domestic church" or "house of the community" (of God) should no doubt be understood to refer to a small "church", as opposed to the great basilicas: these were either a room within a house or small churches built specifically for divine worship. Throughout the empire, liturgies were celebrated both in the *domus ecclesiae* and in the vast basilicas. It was in the domestic churches that Christians gathered when they were not attending the episcopal Eucharist; but they were also found in settlements that did not have a bishop. In this sense, they could be described as the "ancestors" of our present-day parishes. These rooms measured on average 7x12 m. The oldest known *domus ecclesiae* dates from the year 232 and was discovered at Dura-Europos, a small town on the Parthian-Roman frontier. Clearly, a partition had been knocked down between two small rooms to form a hall measuring 5x12.5 m. It may have been the home of a wealthy member of the community who, once the necessary work had been carried out, made it available to the community for worship. Places of worship used for baptism and the Eucharist are all oriented east-west. Similarly, the churches built at that time – from the pre-Constantinian era onwards – are also oriented east- t[8].

In the 20th century, a whole series of domestic churches were discovered, particularly in the Alpine and Danube regions. They all correspond to the descriptions given. During the first three to four centuries, the same arrangement of participants at the Eucharist was adopted there, in faithful imitation of the Last Supper. In the centre of the relatively small room, but sometimes also in its eastern or western part, there is always a sigma-shaped bench 5 to 7 m in diameter, which will be discussed again in the following chapter.

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[7] K. GAMBER, *Weitere Sermonen ad competentes I*, Regensburg, 1965, pp. 115–119. This term is found in *Sermo* 22,6.

[8] See RORDORFF, "Was wissen wir über die Gottesdiensträume in vorkonstantinischer Zeit?" in: *Zeitschrift für Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft 55* (1964), pp. 122–128.

As the communities grew – which happened quite early on – it became impossible for all the members of the community to gather in a single house; they therefore began to take their meals in separate groups (cf. Acts 2:46). In his epistles, Saint Ignatius of Antioch (c. 110) mentions conflicts between these different communities, and sometimes even outright schisms .[9]. He therefore exhorts: "As for the assembly of the community, let no one act without the bishop. Only the Eucharist celebrated under the presidency of the bishop or of the one he has appointed is legitimate... It is not permitted, in the bishop's absence, to baptise or to celebrate the agape "[10]. Perhaps, in many cases, several tables were also provided for, to which reference is made in Acts 6:2 regarding the choice of deacons: one table was reserved for the clergy, others were intended for men and women. At that time, it cannot be said that an eastward orientation was the norm; one had to adapt to the layout and orientation of the existing rooms.

As the communities grew and it was no longer sufficient to have several tables, people began to gather in houses that had a large hall. By then, there was only the table for the bishop and his presbyters, whilst the community stood before the table during the celebration. This arrangement of those participating in the Eucharist is found in the *Disdascalia Apostolorum*, which dates from the 3rd centur [e 11].

The arrangement of the table (in the shape of a sigma) in the refectory of certain ancient monasteries may give an idea of how tables were arranged in domestic churches11. A particularly fine example can be found in the refectory of the Great Lavra on Mount Athos, where the abbot sits at a sigma-shaped table raised three steps high and situated in the apse. It may be assumed that the arrangement was the same in the double churches mentioned earlier. We should also mention the *triclinium* (dining hall) of Leo III at the Lateran, which also featur [nt12] apses with tables and *accubita*, as well as the *'triclinium* of the nineteen couches' in the imperial palace of Constantinople.

2 - The sigma-shaped bench and table

In the past, this bench was often called the "clergy's bench" , which cannot apply to the early Church: on the one hand, small rural communities did not have so many clerics, who would then have been as numerous, if not more so, than the "laity"; on the other hand, in many churches there would not have been enough room for the "people". We must therefore find another use for it.

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[9] Cf. IGNATIUS, *Magn*. 7:1.

[10] Cf. IGNATIUS, *Smyrn*. 8.

[11] See K. GAMBER, "The Early Christian House Church according to the Didascalia Apostolorum" II,57,1–58,6, in: *Studia Patristica X*, Berlin 1970, pp. 337–344.

[12] O. NUSSBAUM, "On the Problem of Round and Sigma-Shaped Altar Slabs", in: *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum 4*, 1961, pp. 26–27.

[13] E. DYGGVE, "Über die freistehende Klerusbank", in: *Festchrift R. Egger*, Klagenfurt 1952, 41–52.

> The continuity observed in the iconography of the Last Supper leads us to believe that in the past, during the celebration of the Eucharist, the place of honour – that is, the place of the celebrant – was on the left-hand side of the sigma-shaped bench surrounding a table that was most often round or semi-circula re[14].

We may conclude that the bishop's seat was also initially *in cornu dextro* and that the members of the community then took their places in a specific order. The altar table was sigma-shaped, but sometimes also round [115]. Thus, the front section remained free for the service. This ancient form was retained as long as the communities were very small. It was also the prescribed arrangement for the celebration of Easter.

From the 4th century onwards, in small churches (for example at Silchester and Aquileia), these benches were often arranged facing west. For the consecration, as the prayer was then said whilst facing east, the faithful could not remain in their seats (which may have been the case previously). This is why they not only stood up but also moved into the open space in front of the altar, so that the celebrant stood directly in front of the altar. This was the only way to stand *conversi ad Dominum*. According to the instructions in the didascalia, standing behind the priest were first the men, then the women, probably forming a semicircle open towards the east, in the centre of which stood the pri re [16].

As the communities in these regions grew, the apse came to be reserved for the clergy; as for the congregation, they sat along the side walls of the hall. Thus, at the moment of consecration, they simply had to stand up and turn towards the east. In this way, a semicircle open towards the east was also formed.

3 - The *domus ecclesiae* according to the *Didascalia Apostolorum*

In the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, a Syriac canon from the early 3rd century, though preserved for us only in later transcriptions s[17], the arrangement of participants around the table during the Eucharistic celebration of the early Christians plays an important role. In its various versions, the Didascalia gives an idea of the evolution that took place from the *domus ecclesiae* (2nd and 3rd centuries) to the basilica (4th century).

At the time of the earliest version, there was clearly no church as such; people still gathered in the dining room of a private house. Furthermore, by all appearances, the first version still practised the separate consecration of the bread and the chalice: indeed, a visiting bishop would be invited to recite, at the end of the celebration, at least the prayer of thanksgiving over the chalice (c. 58,3). In contrast, in the later 4th-century version—the

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[14] O. NUSSBAUM, *Der Standort des Zelebranten am christlichen Altar vor dem Jahre 1000*, Bonn, 1965, p. 377.

[15] A large number of altar tables, both round and sigma-shaped, have been found.

[16] See K. GAMBER: *Das Patriarchat Aquileja*, Regensburg, 1987, pp. 31–33

[17] See K. GAMBER, *Domus ecclesiae*, Regensburg, 1968, pp. 71–75.

Constitutiones Apostolorum [18] – there is already mention of a dedicated place of worship, which is to be rather long and oriented towards the east; it already comprises several adjoining rooms (called pastophoria). The consecration of the bread and that of the wine are combined; there is only a single act of thanksgiving over both offerings.

From the perspective that concerns us, what is important are the instructions given regarding the arrangement of those attending Mass, which, in the first version, already suggest a direction of prayer. The area reserved for the priests is in the eastern part of the room: the bishop sits in the middle, his priests at his sides, and the laity are in the other part of the hall. The deacons are responsible for maintaining order; they assign seats and ensure that everyone behaves properly. It is mainly the older members of the community who are seated in a strict order: the men at the front, the women behind them. Young people may only sit if there are seats remaining; otherwise, they must stand. Children are seated either with their parents or, when there is insufficient space, behind the women. Widows and elderly women must be seated. The deacons must only allow the faithful to enter, and they are responsible for assigning them their seats. A visiting priest must be seated with the priests, and a visiting bishop will even be invited to address the congregation (homily) or, as we have seen, to give thanks over the chalice and, subsequently, to bless the people. When a person of distinction arrives, the bishop shall not interrupt; the brothers shall receive him in his place. A poor person will be received with particular kindness, and a seat will be provided for him. If the young people do not give up their seats for him, they must, as a punishment, go and sit at the back, with the children. If necessary, the bishop himself will give up his seat, thereby putting the others to shame.

A later addition to the Syriac text further emphasises the orientation: to the east sit the priests with the bishop, behind them are the men, then the women, "*ut cum surgitis orantes praepositi surgant primi et post eos viri laici, deinde iterum feminae*". This is followed by a precise justification for praying towards the east: *"Nam versus orientem oportet vos orare sicut et scitis quod scriptum est: Date laudem Deo, qui ascendit in caelum caeli ad orientem*." This orientation of prayer, which is clearly emphasised here, would subsequently also determine the construction of the church itself facing east.

This document does not mention a table, but one must be presumed. It must also be assumed that, at the beginning, the bishop and the priests were not the only ones to have a table; the laity had them too, as we have seen previously. It was only later that the practice of having individual tables was abandoned (at the latest after the separation of the agape meal from the Eucharist). Only the bishop and the presbyters retained their sigma-shaped bench in the eastern part – or in the apse – and the corresponding sigma-shaped table became the altar, placed further forward.

The layout described in the caption corresponds exactly to the arrangement of *the* south *nave* of the double church at Aquileia, which dates from the 4th century and was discovered in the early 20th century. The floor of the

[18] Cf. FUNK, *Didascalia et Constitutiones Apostolorum I*, Paderborn, 1905, pp. 158 ff.

eastern part of the hall is entirely covered by a mosaic depicting the story of Jonah, making it a self-contained unit. This is where the bishop and the presbyters sat. Laymen stood in the second area, women and children in the third, and there were probably no seats in the last area. It is likely that the central part of each of these areas was left clear so as not to obstruct the passage of worshippers or the comings and goings of the deacons. Thus, by the 4th century, the order within churches was strictly codified, with particular emphasis placed on eastward orientation. It was not merely, in this instance, that there was a need to maintain a very specific order within the now-enlarged communities; it was also a matter of the conception held of the Eucharist itself. Linked to the Eucharistic ceremony was the expectation of the Parousia, the visible expression of which was that those taking part in the ceremony faced east.

4 - From the *domus ecclesiae* to the basilica

Whilst initially the 'table arrangement' of the Last Supper was retained—with the Eucharist being celebrated at one or more tables—it is evident, as we have noted, that in the subsequent phase the tables for the laity disappeared. The sigma-shaped table, usually made of wood, became a stone altar. During the service, the priest stands *ante altare*, as stated in *De sacramentis* 5.1. Now, the worshippers are, as in synagogues, seated on benches arranged along the sides of the church building. These benches represent a sort of extension of the sigma-shaped bench, on which henceforth only the bishop and his presbyters take their places. The evolution from the ancient domestic church is clear, but this is already more of a church in the sense that the term later came to have.

As the communities grew, it became necessary to adapt to the new circumstances. Churches became larger; however, the old sigma-shaped bench with its backrest was often retained, as evidenced by numerous examples. From this point on, it is purely and simply a clerical bench. In most cases, this bench is situated in a clearly defined space, separated by *cancelli* from around the 5th century onwards. The altar is no longer placed within the space defined by the bench but, with no visible connection, slightly further forward. In doing so, the church is divided in a different way, this arrangement having its origins in the previous one, when the celebrant stood in the centre of a semicircle. There is now a slightly raised area for the clergy and another, larger one for the congregation, who attend the service standing. Seating is only available on the benches arranged along the walls (these will mainly be for the elderly or infirm). The Eastern Church has retained this arrangement to this day.

This development did not take place simultaneously throughout the empire. The change occurred relatively late – around the beginning of the 5th century – in remote regions and in the provinces. It can be assumed that it occurred at the same time as the separation between the agape and the Eucharist.

Initially, the altar area was separated by wooden barriers (*cancelli*), but these were soon constructed of stone. Generally, they consisted of 4 to 6 pillars supporting a crossbeam to which curtains were attached; these remained closed outside of worship but also at certain points during the Mass (canon). Lamps were also hung from this pergola. In the semicircle of the apse, beneath the apse decoration, the bishop now presided from a raised seat, surrounded by his priests; as for the faithful, they sat along the walls – in basilicas, they stood in the side aisles.

Soon, the appearance of the altar itself changes in turn: it is no longer simply a table. It is often surmounted by a baldachin; it is covered with precious cloths that have their origins in the ancient decoration of the sigma-shaped table (*antependium*). On the altar there are only the chalice, the paten and the Gospel book, and frequently also a casket containing the Eucharist and relics.

Whilst in the *domus ecclesiae* efforts were already being made to choose a room oriented west-east, buildings intended to become churches were, all the more so, constructed facing east. It was particularly after Emperor Constantine's edict of religious tolerance that the great era of church construction began. Both in the East and in the West, places of worship were then being built everywhere, all of which were oriented in such a way that either the apse faced east or the entrance itself was in that directi on [19].

It seems that churches with their entrance to the east represent the oldest form (especially in Rome and North Africa). From the end of the 4th century and the beginning of the 5th, they were replaced by churches whose apse was oriented towards the e t[20].

Thus, the church increasingly became a place of worship, the Eucharist a solemn feast, which people attended with awe; it became *a mysterium tremendum*. The officiating priest was no longer the father of the family but the sacrificial priest, separated from the congregation to offer the sacrifice for the people's prayers. Whereas previously it was the aspect of a meal that predominated at Mass, that of sacrifice took precedence. But it is the same ceremony as before, of which these two aspects are constitutive. The form in which the Eucharist was previously celebrated in domestic churches was now only possible within the small circle of 'set-apart Christians'. When the Church became "popular", it did the only thing that was possible and right by shifting the emphasis somewhat (from the point of view of the rite). Yet, from the very beginning, it was evident that the Eucharistic celebration was the service before God – and this is now more clearly reflected in the external rite.

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[19] Cf. NUSSBAUM, op. cit. I, pp. 24–372.

[20] In Syria, this was the customary arrangement of churches from the outset; cf. Nubbaum, op. cit. pp. 395–401.

B – The position of the altar, the celebrant and the congregation during the Eucharistic celebration

Let us now turn to the question of the celebrant's position in these churches, which now feature only an altar table. Did he stand in front of or behind the altar? At first glance, one might think that the celebrant would have moved directly from his place in the apse to the rear of the altar, thus standing *versus populum*.

However, even at that time, it was essential, when praying, to face the rising sun, which was seen as a symbol of Christ ascending to heaven and returning.

In churches where the entrance was to the east, the light of the rising sun, during the morning Eucharistic celebration, entered the basilica through the open doors. The celebrant was to stand behind the altar, facing east during the sacrifice. However, the priest was not alone in turning towards the east to pray: the faithful, standing in the side aisles, also turned in that direction. The Egyptian Liturgy of Saint Mark expressly exhorts them to do so: *"Ad orientem adspicite*". Contrary to what is often claimed, there was therefore no face-to-face interaction between the priest and the congregation. In these basilicas, the congregation gathered for the Eucharistic celebration stood in a semicircle open towards the east, and the celebrating bishop (or priest) stood at the apex of this semicircle. Here we find the same arrangement as with the sigma-shaped pews of old.

In churches where the apse faced east, the celebrant's position at the altar was necessarily different. He stood before the altar, with his back to the congregation, facing the apse to the east. "Thus, the priest stands at the head of the people, and not *versus populum*. The whole community forms a kind of procession which, led by the priest, moves towards the east, towards the sun, to meet Christ the Lord, to offer to God, together with him, the sacrifice "[21]. Furthermore, there are also churches in which, whilst the apse is indeed situated to the east, the altar is placed in the middle of the nave. This was particularly the case in North Africa and in northern Italy (Ravenna). In this instance, the entire space between the altar and the apse constituted the *presbytery*. As for the faithful, as in other buildings, they were situated in the side aisles, which corresponds to the side pews in small churches. Here too, during the Holy Sacrifice, the celebrant stood at the altar, facing east. In this case, he does not constitute the head of the holy people of God but, as in basilicas with their entrance to the east, he stands at the focal point of a wide semicircle open towards the east. Thus, for the era of the early basilicas, we can observe two different arrangements of the positions of the priest and the congregation. In churches where the apse faces east, the entire congregation forms a procession facing east, with the priest at its head. This arrangement recalls the dynamic of the column of the chosen people in the desert, and it is the one that has been maintained to this day. In other churches—whether the entrance was to the east or the altar was in the middle of the nave—the congregation formed a semicircle open towards the east, with the celebrant standing either at the point of convergence or in the centre of this semicircle. This arrangement, which is rather

[21] J.A. JUNGMANN, *Liturgy of the Early Christian Period*, Fribourg 1967, p. 126.

Static means that the community opens itself to the Lord, to receive him into its midst. It awaits his coming now, in the Eucharist, but also at the Parousia.

III - Theology: the theological significance of praying towards the east

Having studied the historical development of the early church hall and the orientation towards the east during the Eucharistic celebration, we must now ask why the early Church attached such importance to this orientation. We have already seen, in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, the most frequently cited reason for this orientation: "You shall pray towards the east, for you know that it is written: Praise the Lord who ascended into heaven towards the east." In addition to various other reasons put forward, it is above all to Christ's Ascension towards the east and to his expected return from the east at the end of time that reference is made. Thus, praying towards the east, particularly during the celebration of the Eucharist, appears as an eschatological sign of the liturgy: the entire community turns towards the Lord to await and receive him, now in the Eucharist, but also, subsequently, at the Parousia.

A - Praying towards the east and its justification among the early Christians

By "praying towards the east", we generally mean "turning one's gaze towards the east, that is, towards the region where the sun rises every day, the source of life. Thus, in the religious sphere, this orientation gives visible expression to the faith in the presence of sacred power in the place where one stands" (. [22]). As such, this orientation of prayer is not limited to Christianity. It is also frequently found in non-Christian religions, sometimes even today. Christianity adopted this orientation towards the east from paganism for its prayer and for the construction of its churches, whilst giving it a different symbolism, based on the Bible. It was henceforth considered from a purely Christological perspective. For Christians, turning towards the east to pray replaced the Jewish custom of turning towards Jerusalem to pray [r23].

In early Christianity, this practice of facing eastwards to pray can be observed from a very early stage. In Syria and Palestine, it had become customary by the end of the first century. However, it spread rapidly to other regions. Thus, Tertullian (c. AD 220) writes that Christians "pray in the direction of the rising sun " [24]. According to Origen (d. 253), this orientation towards the east dates back to Christ himself and the apostles and pertains to divine mysteries: "Among the customs of the Church, there are many which all must certainly observe but whose deeper meaning not all understand. Indeed, not everyone will easily understand, in my view, why... of all the regions of the sky, we always and everywhere offer our prayers facing east... If

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[22] G. LANCZKOWSKI, "Ostung", in: LThK VII, p. 1293.

[23] Cf. A.G. MARTIMORT, *The Church in Prayer. An Introduction to the Liturgy*, vol. 1, Paris 1983, p. 191.

[24] TERTULLIAN, *Apologeticum* c. 16

The reason we perform and observe all this is that we have received it from the High Priest (Christ) and his sons (the apostles), who handed it down to us and entrusted it to us " [25]. Augustine (d. 430) himself mentions the orientation towards the east: "When we rise to pray, we turn towards the east, where the heavens rise. Not that God is there, having abandoned the other regions of the world..., but to exhort the spirit to rise towards a higher nature, that is to say, towards God "[26]. And Paulinus of Nola (d. 431) describes the orientation of the apse *as usitatior* (Ep. 32,13). In the East, particularly in Syria, people also turned towards the east to say their private prayers. Undoubtedly, praying towards the east was a custom common to Christians and other religions, but Christians gave it a different justification: it was above all because Jesus had ascended to heaven towards the east and his return was expected from the same direction; moreover, paradise was believed to lie in the east. Dölger provides ample evidence that the earliest justification for this orientation rests on the Lord's Ascension towards the east and his expected return in that direction. Thus, Saint John of Damascus (d. 750) writes: "At his Ascension, he ascended towards the east, and it was in that direction that his apostles worshipped him, and it is thus that he will return, just as they saw him ascend into heaven, as the Lord himself said: 'For as the lightning comes from the east and is seen as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.' Since we await him, we pray facing east. This is an unwritten tradition of the apostles " [27]. It is also to this quotation from the Gospel of Saint Matthew (24:27) that the first canon of the Syriac *Doctrina Apostolorum* refers, the prescription of which was taken up in later Syriac texts: "Thus the apostles determined that you should pray facing eastwards, for 'as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man', so that through this we may recognise and understand that he will appear suddenly from the east " [28]. Here, prayer facing east, which is justified by Christ's return in the east, clearly appears as an evocation of the Parousia.

The early Church gave another justification for this orientation: paradise was considered to be in the east. "Just as the souls of martyrs (and saints) ascend to paradise towards the east, so too does their archetype, Jesus, ascend to heaven towards the east." Similarly, "he must also return from the East" (Dölger). All writers of the 4th and 5th centuries associated with the Antiochene liturgy emphasise that the reason for turning towards the East to pray is that paradise lies in that direction. In doing so, the Christian remembered paradise, his former homeland, which he longed to return to. In the Western Church, the ancient justifications for praying towards the East were maintained until the Middle A ge [29].

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[25] ORIGEN, *In numeros homilia* V.1 CVII 25

[26] AUGUSTINE, **De sermone Domini in Monte** II,18; PL 34, p. 1277.

[27] Johannes DAMSC., *De fide Orth*. IV,12; PG 94, p. 1136.

[28] Quoted from F.J. DÖLGER, op. cit., p. 172.

[29] Cf. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa* Theologiae II, q. 84, art. 3,3.

B – The *Sursum corda* and prayer facing east

In all liturgical traditions, both Eastern and Western, the Eucharistic Prayer is preceded by a dialogue that generally begins with a greeting, which has been preserved in various forms. However, there is one part of the dialogue that is found in all cases: the invitation to lift up our hearts. In the Latin rites, it is expressed as follows: "*Sursum corda*", "Let us lift up our hearts!" – or, in St Augustine: "*Sursum cor*" [30]. The response to this invitation is always: "They are turned towards the Lord". As for the phrase "*Gratias agamus Domino Deo* nostro", its origin is found in the Jewish liturgy. During the Jewish meal, there is also a preface recited before the cup of blessing, which contains the invitation: "Let us bless !"[31]. In synagogues, during morning worship, the blessings begin in a very similar way: "Bless Yahweh, the All-Glorious One!" [32]. These invitations to prayer clearly recall the *Gratias agamus* that precedes the Christian Eucharistic prayer. The *Sursum corda*, certainly of later origin, is, according to Baumsta rk33, of Greek origin. Perhaps it has its earliest origin in the Apostle Paul himself: "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above (*'quae sursum sunt* quaerite')" (Col 3:1). Whilst the Eucharistic prayers of the Didache (circa AD 100) do not yet contain this introductory dialogue, it appears in the earliest forms of the Eucharistic prayer, for example, already in the Eucharist of Saint Hippolytus (c. 235), composed around 21534, as well as in the anaphora of the eighth book of the Apostolic Constitutions, before the end of the 4th century ,[35] where we read: "*Sursum mentem*". From that time onwards, this formula has formed part of the permanent core of the Eucharistic liturgies of the various rites. Together with the corresponding response, it constitutes part of the preface, the introduction to the *Prex eucharistica*, as Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258) already attests in his work *De dominica oratione* (ch. 31).

As it is an invitation to lift up one's heart—or spirit—to the Lord, the *Sursum corda* appears, in the liturgy, as a sign of the Second Coming. The Lord, to whom the faithful must turn their inner attention, is the *Kyrios* who has been raised to the glory of the Father and who is to appear *hic et nunc* in a mysterious way, he whom Christians await at the end of time so that, when he comes, he may judge the living and the dead.

This parousial significance of *the Sursum corda* is particularly clear when one considers this exhortation in relation to the orientation of the liturgy. The invitation to inner concentration was at the same time a call to manifest visibly and outwardly the spiritual attention one was directing inwardly towards God. This was already found among the pagans, who raised their arms and eyes, and more specifically towards the east, as explained in detail

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[30] St Augustine, *Sermo* 227.

[31] Ber. VII, 1; VIII, 8b; cf. A. HÄNGGI-I. PAHL, *Prex eucharistica*, 9.

[32] Cf. ELBOGEN, *Der jüdische Gottesdienst in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung*, Frankfurt am Main, 2/1931, pp. 16 ff.

[33] Cf. A. BAUMSTARK, *Liturgie comparée*, Chévetogne, 1940, p. 97.

[34] A. HÄNGGI and I. PAHL, op. cit., pp. 80–81.

[35] *ibid*., p. 83.

Dölge r. [36]. “One turns one’s gaze towards God and his dwelling place, one raises one’s eyes to heaven and, in so doing, finds oneself close to God. One stretches out one’s hands towards heaven to symbolise that the soul itself has turned towards the Lord [ur”37].

This posture of prayer, which was widespread throughout the Mediterranean world, was adopted by Christians, who nevertheless gave it a different meaning and content. In this context, the response “*Habemus ad Dominum*” means nothing other than: “We are turned towards the East, towards Christ, the Lord”. Thus we read in the Acts of the Martyrdom of Saints Fructuosus, Augurius and Eulogius (ch. 2): *“Fructuosus, the bishop, turned towards the Lord and began to pray within himself*.” Here again, it is a physical gesture: looking towards the Lord, which is confirmed by the prayer of the heart: *the orare intra se*.

In certain parts of the Church, in addition to the Sursum corda, the dialogue preceding the Eucharistic prayer was accompanied by a specific invitation to turn towards the east. Thus, in the eighth Book of the Apostolic Constitutions (VIII,12,1), the deacon exhorted the faithful as follows
: “Let us stand facing the Lord”. In the second book of these Constitutions (57.14), there is already mention of standing up and turning towards the east. Another example is found in the Egyptian Anaphora of Saint Basil [e 38]. The customary dialogue is followed by the first part of the prayer of praise (the homage to the Father), after which the deacon first invites the faithful to rise: “*Qui sedetis surgite*”. In the transition to *the Sanctus*, he then says: “*Ad orientem adspicite*”. In the West, we find no such clear indication in the liturgy proper. Perhaps the *Sursum corda* was regarded as an even more explicit parish invitation to look towards the east. Yet, in many of St Augustine’s sermons, we find as a closing formula: “*Conversi ad Dominum*” (followed by *“oremus*” or something similar). Thus, *Sermo* 141 ends with the words: *“Conversi ad Dominum, gratias agamus ei qui vivat in saecula saeculorum*.”

In the Western Church, however, it is only in the Mozarabic liturgy that one finds an invitation to silence and a call for attention, although it is not specified that one should turn towards the east. In one of the rubrics preceding the blessing of the lights during the Easter Vigil, we read: *“Post haec silentium datur III vicibus”,* followed *by: “Equum et justum* est… ”[39]. The *Sursum corda* repeats the exhortation to be attentive to the sacred action that is to follow. Similarly, even today, the opening dialogue of *the Illatio* (preface) of the Mozarabic liturgy of the Mass is preceded by the priest’s call: *“Aures ad* Dominum”, to which the faithful respond: *“Habemus ad* Dominum” [40]. Originally, this invitation—like all other admonitions—was reserved for the deacon.

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[36] J. DÖLGER, *Sol salutis. Gebet und Gesang im christlichen Altertum*, Münster, 2/1925, pp. 306, 313–314, 318.

[37] *Ibid*., p. 316.

[38] A. HÄNGGI and I. PAHL, op. cit., pp. 347–357.

[39] Quoted from F.J. DÖLGER, op. cit., p. 323, note 1.

[40] *Missale Hispano-Mozarabicum. Ordo Missae. Liber offerentium*, Toledo 1991, p. 71.

If, during prayer – and particularly during the anaphora – Christians turned their gaze towards the east, it was not simply to show that they were looking for the transfigured *Kyrios* in heaven, who will return at the end of days – this is the meaning given by the justifications for the orientation towards the east; it was also a matter of expressing the keen anticipation and ardent desire that the end of time might be fulfilled and that the coming Kingdom might be revealed, precisely during the celebration of the Eucharist. Undoubtedly, we must see here the influence of a passage from the prophet Ezekiel (43:1): "He brought me to the gate, the gate facing east, and behold, the glory of the God of Israel was coming from the east." Similarly, Christians celebrating the Eucharist also awaited the coming of the Lord, as if he were participating in the holy celebration. In this sense, praying towards the east signifies that one's gaze is constantly fixed on the place of the Lord. To echo what Origen said in chapter 32 of his book on the Lord's Prayer, one might also say that this orientation "symbolises the soul turning its gaze towards the rising of the true light", "awaiting the blessed object of our hope and the glorious manifestation of our great God and Saviour, Christ Jesus" (Titus 2:13).

It is also from this perspective that we should view the phrase concluding the prefaces, which serves as a transition to the *Sanctus*. It almost always contains expressions evoking the communion of the earthly assembly with the heavenly host. The faithful celebrating the Eucharist join the heavenly hosts to sing God's praise together with them. Even whilst still on pilgrimage on earth, the Church, already standing at the right hand of Christ, is his bride, inasmuch as she already belongs to the heavenly mode of existence. Thus her celebration can already be a participation in the liturgy of the hereafter.

C - The Cross, an eschatological sign

As we have seen, from very early on, the direction of prayer was frequently marked by a cross fixed to the wall es [t41]. In the *Acta Hipparchi, Philotei et sociorum* (Syrian martyrs under Diocletian), we read: "There was, in the house of Hipparchus, a suitable room; in it, he had painted a cross on the east wall. It was there that seven times a day, before the cross, with their faces turned towards the east, they worshipped Jesus Christ the Lord." In this case, as in other similar examples, it is private prayer that is performed facing east.

But this same posture must have been adopted very early on in the public worship of the Church. Thus, in the *Canons* of Jacob of Edessa (c. 640–708), there is a question as to whether a layperson may enter the choir to place a cross on the wall. And, in his liturgical homilies, Narses of Edessa (c. early 6th century) states that the altar is richly adorned and that upon the altar lie the Gospel of life and the adorable wood (the cross).

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[41] E. PETERSON, "Das Kreuz und das Gebet nach Osten", in: by the same author, *Frühkirche*, *Judentum und Gnosis*, Fribourg 1959, pp. 13–15. The examples cited in the text can also be found in this work.

These examples, like many others, clearly demonstrate the connection established between the cross and the direction of prayer. That said, none of these accounts predates the 5th and 6th centuries. Yet they do not appear to describe something new, but rather an ancient and well-established custom. In fact, this custom can be traced back to the 2nd century and is already evident in *the Apocryphal Acts* of Peter and Paul. A later version of these *Acts* speaks of a cross of light appearing on the east wall of a house, where the wooden cross normally marked the direction in which one prayed.

Another witness from this period is Tertullian. In his **Apologeticum** (16.6–8: CCL 1.115–116), he attacks the pagans who suspected Christians of worshipping the cross. Immediately afterwards, he speaks of praying towards the east. The same assertion is found in Minucius Felix: "We do not worship any cross" . [42]. The object of the prayer is not the cross as such; it merely indicates the direction in which the prayer is to be said. Nor, however, is it just any sign that could be replaced by another. On the contrary, there is a close connection between the cross and the significance of the direction of prayer.

The cross is the sign that precedes the Son of Man. Thus we read in Matthew 24:30: "Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky. Then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory."

Very early on, the cross was understood under this eschatological sign. In *the Apocalypse of Peter*, written before 150, the Lord speaks thus: "My cross going before my face, so shall I come in glory." And in *the* later *Epistula Apostolorum*, we find the promise that Christ will return like the sun at its rising: "And, preceded by my cross, I will come to earth to judge the living and the dead."

As early as the first half of the second century, a close connection between the cross and the Parousia was evident. The cross would appear in the sky as an eschatological sign and would precede the Parousia of Christ. For the early Christians, the cross was not a reminder of the Passion but a sign of Christ's return – that is to say, a sign of the glorified Christ. This connection between the cross and the Parousia remained alive for a long time. In a hymn, Ephrem the Syrian sings: "When Christ appears in the east, then the Cross will appear before him, like a standard before the *Basileus*." Here, Ephrem brings together all the elements we have seen regarding orientation: the Lord's return in the east and the sign of the cross that will precede the Parousia. Cyril of Jerusalem expresses himself in the same way in his *Catecheses* (13.41: PG 33, 821 A): "With Jesus, the cross will return from heaven; for the *tropaion* will be carried before the *Basileus*." Finally, Saint John Chrysostom says (Hom. in Matth. 54.4: PG 58, 537): "Do not, then, be ashamed of such a great blessing, so that Christ too may not be ashamed of you when he comes in his glory and when his sign appears before him, brighter than the rays of the sun. Yes, then the cross will come, and by its appearance it

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[42] Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 29, 6–8: PL 3,332A.

will proclaim aloud, it will bear witness to the Lord throughout the earth, and it will show that he has neglected nothing that depended on him."

Viewed in relation to prayer and the liturgy, the sign of the cross thus had, from the 2nd century onwards, an eschatological significance, which it would retain for a long time to come during the patristic period.

In summary, we can therefore say that, very early on, Christians turned towards the east to pray. This orientation of prayer visibly expressed their hope in the Lord's return. Also very early on (especially in the Syrian region), the direction of the east was marked by a cross placed on the eastern wall of halls or places of worship. This cross, however, was not just any symbol that could have been replaced by any other; it was closely linked to the direction of prayer. The cross was then less a reminder of the Lord's Passion than the eschatological sign of the Son of Man, a sign that would immediately precede his return. However, this expectation of the Parousia was founded on the historical sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus. Just like prayer towards the east itself, this cross, which marked its direction, is a sign of the expectation and hope with which people prayed: "Just as prayer towards the east is explained by the fact that the early Christians awaited the second coming of Christ from that direction, the cross that directs prayer is not merely a sign of direction but a symbol of the eschatological thought of the early Christians... In the orientation of prayer, the cross is a living expression of faith in the return of Christ for the Judgement "[43].

As for the cross itself, it was most likely, in the beginning, a simple wooden cross or even a cross painted on the wall. It was from this simple cross that both the altar cross and the apse cross developed – the latter, moreover, was for a long time the sole motif of apse decoration, especially in Syria and Mesopotamia. Since the cross represented less a reminder of the Passion than an eschatological sign of the Lord's coming in glory, its ornamentation became, over time, increasingly elaborate. Thus it eventually shone as *a crux gemmata* on the apse vault, the latter representing the celestial vault. Examples include the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia and the Church of Sant'Apollinare in Classe in Ravenna, Santa Pudenziana and Saint Paul Outside the Walls in Rome, and Monreale Cathedral. On this gemmed cross, one often sees the medallion of Christ (Sant'Apollinare in Classe); above the cross (Saint Paul) or below it (Monreale, Santa Pudenziana), one sees the *Pantokrator*. This signifies: above the cross appears the Lord; it precedes, as an eschatological sign, the Lord who is to come. Moreover, these apse decorations evoked not only the coming Parousia but also, in every case, the present Parousia: the Kingdom that Christ won through the cross is already established in heaven; through prayer and the liturgy, Christians already share in this Kingdom on earth, yet at the same time they await it in the future, when they hope to participate in it fully.

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[43] E. PETERSON, *Frühkirche, Judentum und Gnosis*, Fribourg 1959, pp. 28–30.

The orientation of prayer and the liturgy, as well as the sign of the cross, were visible symbols of the Christian expectation and hope for the Parousia. However, neither the orientation nor the cross are mere references to an uncertain future; on the contrary, through the liturgy, they bring the future into the present. The depiction of the cross on the wall or in the apse of churches is a foreshadowing of the sign of the Son of Man who will one day appear in the vault of heaven. When Christians turn towards the east and look at the cross, they know that, in the holy liturgy, they are already moving forward to meet the Lord who is coming. And when the mystery of the Eucharist is celebrated beneath the parish cross, we know that Christ never ceases to come, until the day when the sign of the Son of Man appears in the sky and the Lord comes for the final parousia. Thus is the double meaning of the early Christians' *"Maranatha"* visibly expressed in the concrete liturgical symbols of the orientation and the cross upon which we gaze: "Lord, come! Now in the Eucharist and soon at the Parousia "[44].

D – The *Majestas Domini*

Whilst the representation of the cross discussed in the previous chapter is found mainly in Eastern churches or in regions that were strongly influenced by the East (Ravenna), another type of apse decoration is frequently found in the West: the *majestas Domini*. It is particularly widespread in regions of the former Gallican rite but also in regions that used the Roman liturgy.

It should be noted at the outset that, in the early days of the Church (that is, during the first millennium), the layout of the church was not left to the free discretion of the artists, as is most often the case today. Even the smallest church was entirely painted: these were, in this case, 'liturgical' or 'typical' representations, if you will. The themes were largely fixed. Strictly speaking, this was what should be considered religious art; its rules and subjects were determined by the liturgy and by the conception of divine worship. This also explains why the themes are essentially the same in the East and the West.

In the case of the *majestas Domini*, this involves the depiction of Christ enthroned in glory – the "Christ in Glory". Christ is frequently depicted seated on a rainbow, surrounded by a mandorla. Beside him are the four beasts of the Apocalypse, or sometimes a few angels.

This **Majestas Domini** is in fact a simplified version of an older depiction that can still be found in a few ancient churches: the Ascension of the Lord. In the lower register, we see the twelve apostles with the Mother of God in their midst, facing the viewer. Mary is depicted with her hands raised (the Orante): she is the image and the *typos* of the Church. In the upper register, we see the Lord enthroned in heaven, surrounded by angels or the

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[44] On this whole aspect, see also: J. RATZINGER, *Fest des Glaubens*, pp. 123, 124–125.

beasts of the throne (which symbolise the Evangelists) – or both. It is a representation of both the Ascension of Christ and of Christ exalted and seated in glory. This representation is found in both the East and the West nt45.

There is a close connection between this decoration and prayer facing east. Christ ascended to heaven towards the east, and it is from there that he will return "accompanied by his angels" (Mt 16:27), just as, in the sight of the apostles, he was "taken up into heaven" (Acts 1:11). It is to him, "the Almighty" (Rev 1:8), that the faithful gathered for the Eucharistic sacrifice pray, whilst at the same time awaiting his return. They themselves are represented by Mary, as *a type* of the Church (the Praying One), by the apostles, as the foundations of this Church (cf. Eph 2:20), and often by doves (or sheep), representing the souls of the faithful.

As we have said, the upper part of this depiction of the Ascension was subsequently separated to become an independent motif. We now see the Lord enthroned in the Kingdom of the Hereafter; in most cases, he is seated on a rainbow, a sign of creation and of the covenant made by God with humankind, but he is also sometimes depicted seated on the globe. As a general rule, he holds the Gospel book in his left hand and raises his right hand to bless. Here too he is surrounded by angels or the four beasts of the Apocalypse of Saint John. This apse decoration can be regarded as a typical feature of churches of the Gallican rite, but also of the West in general. It is frequently found in Western illuminations. The four beasts represent the evangelists, but they also constitute a remembrance of the mystery of Christ: "The four beasts signify the fourfold word of the Gospels and characterise the four evangelists, but also the four great stages of the Lord's coming: the angel, the sign of Matthew, represents the Incarnation; the bull, the sign of Luke, the Crucifixion; the lion, the sign of Mark, the Resurrection; the eagle, the sign of John, the Ascensi on"[46].

Even after the abolition of the Gallican rite by Pepin in 754, the *majestas Domini* was retained in the region where this rite had been practised, and this continued until the Romanesque period, and often even into the early Gothic period, primarily as apse decoration. This is attested by numerous examples, particularly in Spain and South Tyrol.

In the Gallican rite, the *majestas Domini* depicted in this way is accompanied by a whole series of Mass chants. Of particular note in the ancient Milanese rite is *the Ingressa* for the feast of Saint John the Evangelist (which may also have been sung, in the past, on other occasions). In the Roman rite, it is evoked in the Introit for the First Sunday after Epiphany: "On a lofty throne I saw a man seated, whom the multitude of angels adore, singing with one voice: 'Behold him whose power is eternal'". Another antiphon from the Gallican rite sings of the victory of the "King of the Lordship" over hell and death – this is known as the *Canticum triumphale*, which was

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[45] In the West, at Lavaudieu in Auvergne, at Charlieu in Burgundy, at Moncherrant in the Swiss Jura.

[46] W. NYSSEN, *Drei Säulen tragen die Kuppel*, Cologne 1989, p. 327. It would be desirable that in future, when building churches, the typical layout of churches of old be borne in mind more, and that the *majestas Domini* be restored to its rightful place!

preserved to this day in what was the Frankish region: *"When Christ, the King of Glory, entered to vanquish hell, and the angelic choir commanded before him that the gates of the princes be lifted up, the people of the saints, who were held captive in death, cried out with a tearful voice: 'You have come, O Desired One, whom we awaited in darkness, to lead those bound in these chambers out this night: our sighs called upon you, our lamentations sought you out; you have become the hope of the despairing, a great consolation in torment. Alleluia*.'"

The **Majestas Domini** adorning the apse drew inspiration from two sources: on the one hand, Psalm 102:19–21: "The Lord has established his throne in heaven; his sovereignty reigns supreme. Bless the Lord, you his angels, ... who carry out his word, attentive to the sound of his word"; and, on the other hand, the vision of Ezekiel (1:5–25): "On this throne-like form... (sat) a being with a human appearance... and... I saw something like fire and a glow all around; the appearance of this glow, all around, was like the appearance of the rainbow that appears in the clouds on rainy days." The *majestas Domini*, which thus appears to us as a (simplified) representation of the Ascension, in fact evokes not only the Ascension of the Lord as such but also his glorious return at the end of time, according to the words of the two angels: "(He) will come back in the same way as you saw him go up" (Acts 1:11). It is to him, the Almighty—he who is in the sovereignty of the Father (cf. Phil 2:11), whom the heavenly powers serve and worship with trembling—that the faithful gathered for the Eucharistic sacrifice turn their gaze. At the same time, they await the coming of the Lord in the celebration of the Eucharist and his glorious parousia. Thus, the apse decoration of the early Western churches—just as, previously, the cross—appears as a parousial element of the liturgy, which gives the Eucharist the character of a ceremony celebrated whilst facing the Lord.

E – Praying towards the east and the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist

The question of the priest's position at the altar is, moreover, closely linked to the sacrificial character of the Mass. "He who presents the offering turns towards the one to whom the offering is presented. According to the understanding of the early Christians, this was done by directing one's gaze towards the east " [47]. Thus, the churches of the Reformation, whilst denying the sacrificial character of the Mass, demanded that "the minister turn his face towards the people " [48]. But, according to the Catholic (and Eastern) understanding, in the Mass, the sacrificial character and the character of a meal are inseparable; they are not opposed to one another; meal and sacrifice are two elements of the same celebration, even if, throughout history, equal importance has not always been attached to the visible expression of either. Yet the Didache itself (c. 100) expressly presents the Sunday "breaking of bread" as a sacrifice (XIV,2).

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[47] K. GAMBER, *Ritus modernus*, Regensburg, 1972, p. 27.

[48] This is what Martin Bucer called for in Strasbourg; see F. SCHULZ, "Das Mahl der Brüder", in: *Jahrbuch für Liturgik und Hymnologie* 15 (1970), p. 34.

"According to the Catholic understanding, the Mass is more than a mere communal meal in remembrance of Jesus of Nazareth. The essential point is not the gathered and lived community, although this aspect must not be neglected (cf. 1 Cor 10:17), but rather the service of this community before God.

The point of reference must always be God, and not man. This is also the reason why, from the very beginning, in prayer, everyone turned towards him, rather than the priest and the community facing one another. We must therefore now draw the necessary conclusions and regard the celebration *versus populum* for what it really is: an invention and a demand of Martin Luther" [49].

IV - Summary and synthesis

To conclude all these considerations, let us briefly summarise our findings.

Archaeological discoveries made in church buildings from the first five centuries – which we have unfortunately been able to present only in a schematic manner – clearly show that, from the very beginning, these buildings intended for Christian worship were constructed facing east; even when rooms in private homes were set aside for divine worship, a room facing east-west was chosen where possible.

During the celebration of the Eucharist, the whole community faced east to await the coming of Christ – both in the Eucharistic celebration and at the Parousia – or was arranged in a great procession of the nations to go forth to meet the Lord who is coming and the heavenly Jerusalem, in which the community itself already participates through the liturgy.

From the earliest times, Christians have turned towards the east to pray: the two main reasons for this were the conviction that Christ ascended into heaven towards the east and the promise made by the angels that he would return in the same way. When Christians turn towards the east to pray, they look in the direction from which the Lord will come. The rising sun is the cosmic sign of the Lord's coming, who is himself the true sun of righteousness.

Since the time of the early Church, Christians have been in the habit of marking the direction of the east with a cross, which later became the altar cross and the *crux gemmata* in the apse. This cross is the eschatological sign which, according to Matthew 24:30, will precede the Son of Man at his coming. When the whole community turns towards the cross in the east, it visibly expresses the way in which the early Christians, in their prayer and during the celebration of the Eucharist, hoped for and awaited the Parousia.

Similarly, the apse decoration (in the West) depicting the *majestas Domini*, which constitutes a specific aspect of the representation of the Ascension, emphasises the eschatological aspect

[49] K. GAMBER, op. cit., p. 28.

of the holy celebration. The faithful turn towards the Lord who sits in the glory of the Father and who now comes in the Eucharist, which is the firstfruits and anticipation of his final parousia.

Thus, orientation is a profoundly eschatological sign that belongs to the very foundations of Christian liturgy. It is an expression of the living hope in the coming of the Lord. However, the prospect of this coming is not relegated to a distant future

: through the liturgy, the orientation and the signs that accompany it bring to the present the event that is yet to come. “When Christians turn towards the east to pray and look upon the cross, they go forth to meet Christ, and Christ comes with his sign to meet mankind. In the orientation towards the east, the prayer of the early Christians: *‘Maranatha!*’ is visibly expressed in its double meaning: ‘Lord, come into this Eucharist and come for your parousia!’” [50]. One might therefore ask whether, without this orientation, the celebration of the Eucharist does not lose a necessary dimension, the community no longer opening itself together to the Lord who comes but closing in on itself in a circle.

Finally, it may be said that the orientation towards the east, as we have just seen, is equally important from the point of view of the sacrificial nature of the Mass.

Even though people today are often less attuned to the eastward orientation and the significance of the rising sun, everyone should nevertheless be able to understand why the priest and the congregation face the same direction when they pray. It is, however, necessary to clarify what this shared orientation signifies. When we celebrate the Holy Eucharist, it is not in the direction of the altar or even the tabernacle, but rather in the direction of the Lord who is coming. Consequently, as in the first millennium and as is the case today in the Eastern Churches, the altar should stand alone in the centre, “so that one may walk around it without difficulty ” [51]. Furthermore, as in times past, it should be covered with precious cloths (*antependia*) and, where possible, surmounted by a ciborium. This would demonstrate that it is not merely a secular dining table, but that this is the place “where the highest unites with the lowest, where the earthly and the heavenly, the visible and the invisible, come together ”[52].

Furthermore, in order to renew our understanding of the liturgy and to truly rediscover the significance of praying towards the east, we need to specify precisely when the priest faces east and when he faces the congregation. On this subject, I would like to conclude by quoting two texts which can provide concrete guidance on how the celebration of the Eucharist should unfold. "The best way to express the sacrificial nature of the Mass is to ensure that, during the Eucharistic Prayer – in which the holy sacrifice is performed – the entire assembly turns, together with the priest, in the same direction (i.e. towards the east). Furthermore, the meal-like character of the Mass could be better emphasised by

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[50] E. KELLER, *Eucharistie und Parusie*, Fribourg 1989, p. 147.

[51] Sacred Congregation for Rites, Instruction, *Inter Oecumenic*, 26 Sept. 1964, no. 91.

[52] GREGOIRE, *Dial*. IV 58; PL 77, pp. 429 ff.

developing the rite of communion. It goes without saying that, for the proclamation of the Word of God, it is necessary for the priest – or the reader – and the community to face one another " [53]. "The liturist's posture might be as follows: facing the assembly when addressing it, that is, during the greetings..., when proclaiming the Word of God and during the distribution of Communion; facing the apse for all the prayers "[54].

[53] K. GAMBER, op. cit., p. 28.

[54] M. METZGER, op. cit., p. 143.