

Tridentine Community News

February 21, 2010

Introduction to the Spirit of the Liturgy by Msgr. Guido Marini, Part 3 of 6

On January 6, 2010 a landmark speech was given by Msgr. Guido Marini, the Pontifical Master of Liturgical Ceremonies, at the Year For Priests Clergy Conference in Rome. There is no need to speculate on what Rome believes is suitable liturgy when clear direction such as this is given. Msgr. Marini was appointed by Pope Benedict XVI to reform papal liturgies according to our Holy Father's thinking. We believe Msgr. Marini's words speak for themselves, and so we are presenting his speech in its entirety.

2. The orientation of liturgical prayer.

Over and above the changes which have characterised, during the course of time, the architecture of churches and the places where the liturgy takes place, one conviction has always remained clear within the Christian community, almost down to the present day. I am referring to praying facing East, a tradition which goes back to the origins of Christianity.

What is understood by "praying facing East"? It refers to the orientation of the praying heart towards Christ, from whom comes salvation, and to whom it is directed as in the beginning so at the end of history. The sun rises in the East, and the sun is a symbol of Christ, the light rising in the Orient. The messianic passage in the Benedictus canticle comes readily to mind: "Through the tender mercy of our God; * whereby the Orient from on high hath visited us"

Very reliable and recent studies have by now proven effectively that, in every age of its past, the Christian community has found the way to express even in the external and visible liturgical sign, this fundamental orientation for the life of faith. This is why we find churches built in such a way that the apse was turned to the East. When such an orientation of the sacred space was no longer possible, the Church had recourse to the Crucifix placed upon the altar, on which everyone could focus. In the same vein many apses were decorated with resplendent representations of the Lord. All were invited to contemplate these images during the celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy.

Without recourse to a detailed historical analysis of the development of Christian art, we would like to reaffirm that prayer facing East, more specifically, facing the Lord, is a characteristic expression of the authentic spirit of the liturgy. It is according to this sense that we are invited to turn our hearts to the Lord during the celebration of the Eucharistic Liturgy, as the introductory dialogue to the Preface well reminds us. Sursum corda "Lift up your hearts," exhorts the priest, and all respond: Habemus ad Dominum "We lift them up unto the Lord." Now if such an orientation must always be adopted interiorly by the entire Christian community when it gathers in prayer, it should be possible to find this orientation expressed externally by means of signs as well. The external sign, moreover, cannot but be true, in such a way that through it the correct spiritual attitude is rendered visible.

Hence the reason for the proposal made by the then Cardinal Ratzinger, and presently reaffirmed during the course of his

pontificate, to place the Crucifix on the center of the altar, in order that all, during the celebration of the liturgy, may concretely face and look upon Lord, in such a way as to orient also their prayer and hearts. Let us listen to the words of His Holiness, Benedict XVI, directly, who in the preface to the first book of his Complete Works, dedicated to the liturgy, writes the following: "The idea that the priest and people should stare at one another during prayer was born only in modern Christianity, and is completely alien to the ancient Church. The priest and people most certainly do not pray one to the other, but to the one Lord. Therefore, they stare in the same direction during prayer: either towards the East as a cosmic symbol of the Lord who comes, or, where this is not possible, towards the image of Christ in the apse, towards a crucifix, or simply towards the heavens, as our Lord Himself did in His priestly prayer the night before His Passion (John 17.1) In the meantime the proposal made by me at the end of the chapter treating this question in my work 'The Spirit of the Liturgy' is fortunately becoming more and more common: rather than proceeding with further transformations, simply to place the crucifix at the center of the altar, which both priest and the faithful can face and be lead in this way towards the Lord, whom everyone addresses in prayer together." (trans. from the Italian.)

Let it not be said, moreover, that the image of our Lord crucified obstructs the sight of the faithful from that of the priest, for they are not to look to the celebrant at that point in the liturgy! They are to turn their gaze towards the Lord! In like manner, the presider of the celebration should also be able to turn towards the Lord. The crucifix does not obstruct our view; rather it expands our horizon to see the world of God; the crucifix brings us to meditate on the mystery; it introduces us to the heavens from where the only light capable of making sense of life on this earth comes. Our sight, in truth, would be blinded and obstructed were our eyes to remain fixed on those things that display only man and his works.

In this way one can come to understand why it is still possible today to celebrate the Holy Mass upon the old altars, when the particular architectural and artistic features of our churches would advise it. Also in this, the Holy Father gives us an example when he celebrates the Holy Eucharist at the ancient altar of the Sistine Chapel on the feast of the Baptism of our Lord.

In our time, the expression "celebrating facing the people" has entered our common vocabulary. If one's intention in using this expression is to describe the location of the priest, who, due to the fact that today he often finds himself facing the congregation because of the placement of the altar, in this case such an expression is acceptable. Yet such an expression would be categorically unacceptable the moment it comes to express a theological proposition. Theologically speaking, the Holy Mass, as a matter of fact, is always addressed to God through Christ our Lord, and it would be a grievous error to imagine that the principal orientation of the sacrificial action is the community. Such an orientation, therefore, of turning towards the Lord must animate the interior participation of each individual during the liturgy. It is likewise equally important that this orientation be quite visible in the liturgical sign as well.