

## Rome Answers Question on Orientation of Priest and Altar

### *Congregatio De Cultu Divino Et Disciplina Sacramentorum*

Prot. No. 2036/00/L

#### *Quaesitum*

The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments has been asked whether the expression in n.229 of the *Institutio Generalis Missalis Romani* constitutes a norm according to which the position of the priest versus *absidem* is to be considered excluded.

The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *re mature perpensa et habita ratione* [after mature reflection] and in the light of liturgical precedents, responds:

**Negative et ad mentem.** [Negatively, and in accordance with the following explanation].

The explanation includes diverse elements which must be taken into consideration.

Before all else, it is to be borne in mind that the word *expedit* does not constitute an obligation, but a suggestion that refers to the construction of the altar *a pariete sejunctionum*. The clause *ubi possibile sit* refers to different elements, such as for example, the topography of the place, the availability of space, the artistic value of an existing altar, the sensibility of the people participating in the celebrations of a particular church, etc. It reaffirms that the position towards the assembly seems more appropriate inasmuch as it makes communication easier (Cf. the editorial in *Notitiae* 29 [1993] 245-249), without excluding, however, the other possibility.

Whatever the position of the celebrating priest, however, it is clear that the Eucharistic Sacrifice is offered to the one and triune God, and that the principal Eternal High Priest is Jesus Christ who acts through the ministry of the priest who visibly presides as His instrument. The liturgical assembly participates in the celebration by virtue of the common priesthood of the faithful which requires the ministry of the ordained priest to be exercised in the Eucharistic Synaxis. One must distinguish between the physical position particularly in relation to the communication between the various members of the assembly and the internal spiritual orientation of all concerned. It would be a grave error to imagine that the principal orientation of the sacrificial action is toward the community. If the priest celebrates *versus populum*, which is legitimate and often advisable, his spiritual attitude ought always to be *versus Deum per Jesum Christum*, as representative of the whole Church. Furthermore, the Church, which takes concrete form in the assembly which participates, is entirely orientated *versus Deum* in its first spiritual movement.

It appears that the ancient tradition, though not unanimous, was that the celebrant and the worshipping community were turned *versus orientem*, the direction from which the light which is Christ comes. It is not unusual for ancient churches to be "orientated" in such a way that the priest and the people were facing *versus orientem* during public prayer.

It may well be that when there were problems of space, or some other kind, the apse represented the east symbolically. Today, the expression *versus orientem* often means *versus absidem*, and in speaking of the position *versus populum* it is not the west but rather celebration facing the community present that is intended.

In the ancient architecture of churches, the place of the Bishop or the celebrating priest was in the centre of the apse, from which, seated and turned towards the community, he heard the proclamation of the readings. Now this presiden-

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