Opinion
Spirituality

by NCR Staff

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Bishop James Wall of Gallup, New Mexico, announced in a July 22 letter that he would begin celebrating Mass in his cathedral *ad orientem*, that is, "toward the east," with his back to the people. "I know this can be a contentious topic. To make changes to the way we pray can be difficult, especially when it comes to liturgical prayer," he wrote. NCR reader responses to this topic are below. Letters have been edited for length and clarity.

It seems that what "an allowance for religious diversity" really means is an "allowance" to embrace the practices of the past, but not an "allowance" to explore new ways the liturgy might draw all members closer to an intimate relationship with God.

If we are "allowed" look to the past and to the present, we also need to look toward the future. Isn't this what Jesus did?

DARIA FITZGERALD

Milford, Connecticut

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It seems strange to me that, some 50 years after Vatican II, people are still trying to turn back the clock on liturgical reform. Pope Paul VI refused to allow the Tridentine Mass, saying that it would imply that the liturgical changes were invalid. I've been a priest for 55 years and remember how refreshing I found it when the liturgy was

changed to the vernacular, making it possible for people to participate consciously and actively in the Mass. I have never gone back to the Latin.



Yes, I've been asked to celebrate in Latin on occasion, and have always answered that I would do so on one condition: that I would also preach in Latin. No one wanted that. When I would ask why, they would answer that they would not understand. My answer would then be, "Then why do you want the whole Mass in Latin?"

Vatican II taught that the Mass is not a private devotion, that we worship together as God's covenant people, and that it is the entire congregation that celebrates the Eucharist. It is not the prerogative of the priest to turn it into his own private devotion and turn the assembly into passive spectators, which some presiders have done. Do we really benefit from having the entire canon recited silently?

I'm sorry, but I can indulge (and I do) my desire to pray to the Lord in chapel before the Blessed Sacrament. The liturgy, I feel, is meant so that I can participate actively with all my brethren.

(Fr.) PAUL BERNIER, SSS

Cleveland, Ohio

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Where is God? Wherever God is, there should we be also.

Where is God in the *ad orientem* stance of the presider? Obviously "in the east." This makes no sense to the faithful today. We are taught, and we believe, that God is 1) in the presider as he leads the liturgy, 2) in the proclamation of the word, 3) in the gathered community, and especially 4) in the bread and wine consecrated during the Eucharist.

Priests who are obsessed with their own sense of devotion rather than in the servant role they are ordained to perform in community have lost their theological center. I lack the patience in this time of my life to argue dispassionately further.

DON HENDERSON

Frederick, Maryland

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My immediate reaction to reading Don Clemmer's online article, " 'Ad orientem' tussles turn on matters of community, liturgical diversity," was as follows: Immigrant children are dying, being confined to concentration camps and being separated from their parents; mass shootings have escalated in American cities; tropical forests in the Amazon are ablaze; President Donald Trump continues to throw gasoline on the racial divide within the country and partisan politics prevents Congress from passing bills that address needed fixes for infrastructure, tax reform, medical insurance for all citizens and, while all this is happening, a member of the hierarchy deems it an appropriate time to address the liturgical practice of celebrating Mass facing to the east.

Is there little wonder why millennials and many young people under 30 consider the Catholic Church to be irrelevant?

THOMAS SEVERIN

Connellsville, Pennsylvania

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What do Catholics think about when they read Don Clemmer's article on *ad orientem* ? When the bishop of Gallup, New Mexico, celebrates Mass facing east with his back to the people, that brings me back to the Mass of the 1950s. I'm an 83-year-old Catholic who recalls those days of looking at the back of the celebrant's head as he mumbled on in Latin, and my four years of Latin failed me.

Does Bishop James Wall believe that this worship style is more pleasing to Jesus? Will the faithful in the pews believe they have an integral role in this liturgical celebration? This defies my imagination. A bishop in Wisconsin celebrated *ad orientem* but did not mandate this in his diocese because he "realized not every priest is comfortable with this." That is a gross understatement.

Do we believe these changes could help bring the "nones" back or empower those who currently celebrate with us? Does this image of Mass help you see the church as a "field hospital?" I don't believe so. It is best for me to continue following Pope Francis.

STAN FITZGERALD

San Jose, California

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This certainly won't help the church which is still so full of "they" and us. When will some get Christ's message: We offer our sacrifice to the Father. Why are bishops going backward?

In New Mexico, there is much more for the church and the bishop to do with the immigration situation. Wake up bishops.

MARGARET MEEKER

Williamstown, West Virginia

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Who turns their back on their family/friends at a meal?

Maybe the best way to respond to those who want to "turn their backs to the church" during liturgy, is for us to turn our backs on them.

JAMES OFFENBERGER

Vienna, West Virginia

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There is an underlying problem exhibited by many of those interviewed about celebrating the Eucharist *ad orientem*. They do not seem to understand that liturgy is not just prayer in public, but communal prayer. Any reference to people being able to individually pray "better" misses the point that all are supposed to be praying together. In private prayer, each can seek what works best personally. In liturgical prayer, the personal experience is subject to the communal participation and shared experience.

What one gets from liturgy is meant not to be subjective but interactive within and building up the community. Liturgy calls for the full, conscious, and active participation of all in the communal activity, not a passive presence with internal reflection. One can take the communal event and reflect on it later in one's private prayer. One may even experience moments of enlightenment during the process, but it is not the time to distance oneself from the communal action and go inside.

It is vital that all be catechized in the different types of prayer and their different requirements. We seem to still have the hangover from the days when the liturgy was entirely clericalized and not proclaimed so as to be understood by all. In those times, private prayer was taken to church. However, liturgy, devotions, and meditation each have their own processes. Private prayer is not appropriate when we are called to liturgical prayer.

There is the root of the problem with *ad orientem*. It returns the presider to private prayer, turned away from the community. It encourages members of the community to private meditation or devotion instead of participation, especially if a choir is taking most of the communal parts.

TOM POELKER

St. Louis, Missouri

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I am so upset at the lack of ability of individual priests, parish level advisory councils and diocesan office to deal with conflict resolution it is obvious that there is a stark lack of training throughout the Catholic organization.

I am strongly considering leaving the organized Catholic Church as it is now structured. I am not the only one and as you know, many have already left and more leave every day. Does the church care? I think maybe not.

MARTY CORTEZ

Tucson, Arizona

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"So when Bishop James Wall of Gallup, New Mexico, announced in a July 22 letter that he would begin celebrating Mass in his cathedral ..." First of all, it's not his cathedral. The cathedral belongs to the people of God — whoever they are, wherever they are.

"They say it takes out the personality of the presider." Really? Making a display of yourself by facing opposite of the form instituted by Vatican II and not involving the worshipping community in what visually is happening draws attention away from the presider? All one can see at that point is the presider.

When, oh when, will we realize that making a seemingly desperate grab for the past will faithfully, trustingly, and successfully take us into the future?

JEAN LOPEZ

St. Louis, Missouri

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