Opinion
Spirituality



by NCR Staff

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

September 13, 2019
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

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 published reader responses a couple of weeks ago, but received many more responses. Letters have been edited for length and clarity.

At a first reading of the article reporting Bishop James Wall of Gallup, New Mexico, and his decision to offer Mass in his cathedral, ad orientem, I was upset and angry. But after a long walk, a reread and some serious reflection, I can understand his decision (though I do not support it).

As a bishop in the United States, he has finally mustered the courage to model liturgically, what in fact many, if not most bishops have been doing to the people for several decades — that is turning their backs on them.



When it comes to the abuse of children, enforcement of their own charter, the exclusion of women in church leadership, LGBTQ Catholics, the treatment of divorced Catholics and the Eucharist, the annulment process, their tolerance for two unjust visitations from the Vatican on women religious, the abysmal translation of the New Roman Missal and its required rubrics, they have constantly "turned their backs" on members of the flock.

When our political leaders persecute migrants, compromise the future of the planet by removing environmental protections, and relentlessly attack programs to protect the poor and vulnerable, the bishops say nothing. Even when Pope Francis speaks with apostolic authority about these issues sometimes in encyclical letters, the bishops of the United States have, for the most part turned their backs on him, too.

I have been priest for over 42 years and have served in many pastoral positions in high schools, parishes and the chancery. The state of church episcopal leadership in the United States is shameful. Our people are hungering to be fed and are willing to work with leadership that respects them. But the numbers of bishops today who face

their people and welcome them to share ministry is minimal.

Yes, keep turning your backs to the people. One day, when you decide to turn around and say, "The Lord be with you," there will be no response because the people will have accepted your message, and no one will be in the pews.

(Fr.) KENNETH E. MILLER

Niles, Ohio

***

*Let's just suppose that (as Catholic tradition including Vatican II teaches) what we do in the liturgy is an action of the body of Christ (the church).

This would imply it "re-presents" not just the interaction between the members of the body and Christ, but also the interaction among the members of the body.

One particular member of the body of Christ (Bishop James Wall) has decided that what he prefers the Mass to represent is only the interaction between the members and the head. He is quite literally turning his back on his fellow members of that body.

This is light years away from Augustine's lucid ecclesiological understanding: "With you I am a Christian; for you I am a bishop."

ROBERT KELLY

Le Mesnil-Saint-Denis, France

***

Regarding the subject of the Mass ad orientem, I would have nothing new to add, but would simply like to agree with and support the comments of Fr. Paul Bernier in a previous letter. We are of a similar era, he being a priest for 55 years and I for 47.

I, too, am grateful for the Second Vatican Council and its Constitution on the Liturgy and the ability to pray publicly in the same language that I use in my daily life and prayer.

I do not understand the desire for Latin, for the priest turning his back on the people, for the re-installation of communion rails, and the belief that somehow receiving Communion "on the tongue" is somehow more reverent than in one's hand. We all need to keep learning more deeply that Christ is really present in other people as well as on the altar.

(Fr.) TOM ZELINSKI

Washington, Michigan

***

In an age when the diagnosis for what ails the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church is a resurgence (or better the refusal to go way) of clericalism, Bishop James Wall casts his vote for the disease.

It is hard to take on "the smell of the sheep" when they are bowed in private reverie behind you. Instead, facing the wall, a cleric can bask in his specialness. Clothed in brocaded vestments and hiding the sacred from the masses except for brief moments of elevated host and chalice and an occasional turn for a forced greeting, the good bishop can hum the tune "without me there is no Mass; there is no church."

I don't see this as a burst of nostalgia for the past at all. I see it for what it is — a power grab to fashion the future. Wall, you see, was just 1 years old on the feast of the Immaculate Conception in 1965 when Pope Paul VI drew down the curtain on the great reformation that is Vatican II.

CULLEN SCHIPPE

Mendham, New Jersey

***

In the article written by Don Clemmer, he discusses the bishops who are all caught up in whether we should have the priest say Mass with his back to us or facing the parish family. How can this still be an issue? There are so many more important issues that Jesus taught us to address.

I would be happier if our Catholic faith was led by the sisters who have always, in my lifetime, been way out in front of doing God's work. If it were not for Pope Francis, I would have a hard time staying with the church that I was born and raised to believe in.

DORIS BAN

Hobart, Indiana

***

After reading the majority of the responses to this topic from a few days ago, I couldn't help but notice a common theme: disrespect.

Disrespect towards Bishop James Wall (whom I know nothing about), who surely came to this conclusion based on careful consideration, study, and prayer.

Disrespect for the changing traditions of the church's past, how they were formed, why they were formed, what they meant then, why they changed, and how they were designed and organized to honor Christ by people who were, at least, chronologically closer to Christ than I am typing this now.

But most of all, disrespect for Our Lord, who came down from Heaven, was born of the Virgin Mary, died for our sins, rose from the dead, is present with us at Mass, and whose presence is sufficient enough and reason enough to attend regardless of which way the priest is standing during the Most Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Are we attending to see priests' or each other's faces, or to see the backs of their heads, or to sit in the dark, or to sing (or not sing) songs together, or to speak English, or Spanish, or Latin, or Japanese? Rather, Catholics should ask themselves: "Why am I here in the first place?"

I have many friends who exclusively attend the Tridentine Mass and many more who don't even know what that is. Everyone has gaps in what they're capable of knowing, understanding, or practicing, but one thing we can do is show respect. Wall's personal version of this appears to mean facing our Lord during Mass (a tradition deeply rooted in the church).

If people gave half as much consideration to that idea as they do their own sociopolitical or ecclesiastical grievances, maybe we'd have more people praying the rosary, going to Mass every Sunday, and having a positive impact on their communities rather than sitting around waiting for the next bishop to resign over a scandal.

KEVIN LeBLANC

Chicago, Illinois

***

What I always say to people who want the church to return to the traditional Latin Mass, is that at the Last Supper, Jesus was sitting around a table with his disciples, facing them, not turned away from them.

The Eucharist is supposed to be an intimate, warm encounter with the one we love most of all. He would never turn his back on us.

(Sr.) CAROL GOODSON, CSJ

Concordia, Kansas

***

I am 82 years old. I have experienced Latin in Mass. Emigrating to an English-speaking country meant Latin Mass was the only place where I felt "in communion" with others. Until I could understand English.

After Vatican II , the priest facing us in our small mission church was not a shock to the system and we chose to angle the benches so that we were more together around a table than in a classroom setting.

I can imagine returning to ad orientem if the priest and the altar is not standing ahead of the people but that altogether as a bloc we are facing Jerusalem.

In France, even in my cathedral, when we removed the railing and moved the altar facing the people, we placed the chairs around so people could chose to follow Mass sitting behind, in front or on either side.

It should not become the new "rule" but be given as an option from time to time with the reason explained so it becomes an expression from within.

MONIQUE HUCHET

Castlegar, British Columbia

***

What better way to overtly demonstrate the clericalism "better than you attitude" infecting the church leadership then to turn your back on what is clearly the church, the faithful attending Mass to receive the Holy Eucharist. And to add additional insult to the body of the faithful is to execute the Mass in a language that virtually no one understands. My opinion is that Bishop James Wall is failing in his call to be a servant to his flock, and I use the term execute rather than celebrate the Mass in purposeful terms.

I have no doubt that Wall is following his heart in doing so, without malice. However, following my heart and without malice to Wall, I agree wholeheartedly that the faithful need to not avoid, but attend such an execution of the Mass, and respectfully offer silent protest by turning their back upon the "celebrant."

Additionally, the most effective secular method of changing behavior is to turn off the flow of money. While it might seem foreign to some that the establishment of the church can be influenced by such a base, secular monetary decision, I urge the faithful to choose to focus their monetary contribution to a worthy cause consistent with Jesus' call, such as Catholic Community Services or St. Vincent de Paul.

BOB PENHALE

Seattle, Washington

***

This bishop's turning his back on the children of God is totally inappropriate. His egotistical behavior is an insult to his parishioners. To all those who already feel that God has already turned God's back on them, he only empathizes what they already are feeling.

He needs to start worrying about the things Jesus worries about — the refugees fleeing violence and drought, the toddlers in the U.S. concentration camps, people deported back to countries where they will be put to death, etc.

He needs to prostate himself before Jesus asking his forgiveness for turning his back on God's people.

DARYL FORMAN

Santa Monica, California

Advertisement

***

It is depressing how the comments on this issue generally fall into a "traditional" or "liberal" pigeonhole.

Do we have to adopt groupthink positions and confirm these stereotypes?

I certainly do not want to look at the back of a priest mumbling in Latin. But, listening to its advocates and followers, it seems that ad orientem per se is not the attraction for them either.

They are angry about much else that has been changed, and, because ad orientem is advocated by certain prelates, they rally to it as a hope for regaining other, much greater, losses.

Am I alone? I want to see and understand the action of the Holy Mass, and yet I am profoundly distressed by flippant, nonchalant, behavior in regard to the Eucharist. Gregorian Chant is still supposed to be given pride of place and yet no priest I know

will do a Missa-di-Angelis (although judging by Youtube comments it is a direct form of evangelization for the nones). But we are subjected to tuneless dirges of "faux-chant" that try to shoehorn English into a non-melody, or to awful secoond-rate "pop-opera" Massings-Settings. A folk Mass or charismatic Mass is even a high point.

But the common theme is the loss of gravitas and the sense of the sacred. Whether in music, language, architecture, ceremonial, actions or comportment we have "de-sacralized" our Mass. Why? Probably Satan leading misguided leaders to think secular people will be attracted to a de-sacralized religion. They don't; when they find they want religion, they want the real deal!

L. HARLEY

Glendree Lower, Ireland

***

I cannot imagine that Jesus at the first Mass would have turned his back on the apostles. What are these priests thinking?

The Mass is a communal "celebration." When was the last time you celebrated with family and friends to have the host turn his/her back to you? Jesus has to have a great sense of humor!

JANE FRANCISCO

Charlotte, North Carolina

***

In the name of personal piety, we are going to have to repaint all those works of art depicting the Last Supper — not only to include women but also to have Jesus with his back to the apostles.

(Sr.) MARY PENELOPE WINK, CHM

Chiapas, Mexico

***

As a sister friend said, "Have you ever seen a picture of the Last Supper with Jesus' back to his disciples?" That would be the image of personal prayer, not communal prayer.

I'd have to admit that some of the homilies I hear might as well be in Latin, but I know that my being together to pray with others led by a presided who knows how to be the intermediary feeds my soul.

(Sr.) ADAIRE LASSONDE, SSND

St. Paul, Minnesota

***

It is not for nothing that Bishop James Wall sees in the letter of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI on pedophilia a warrant for presiding at Mass ad orientem. The pope's letter offers a critique of the post-1968 era in which "the previously normative standards regarding sexuality collapsed entirely," thus revealing the absence of God at the heart of western culture. It is curious that Benedict nowhere mentions celebrating ad orientem in this letter, though he did elsewhere. The primary indicator of divine withdrawal is the casual way the faithful receive Eucharist.

I perceive Wall's choice to preside ad orientem as his attempt to provide orientation to his flock overwhelmed by a chaotic world. Sexual freedom of expression represents said chaos. Celebrating Mass ad orientem portrays a vision of the universe in right relationship, hierarchically ordered persons who are ritually pure. Order and purity go hand in hand.

Other paradigms of right relationships in fact play out in every diocese in the world, I hazard. These other models give different answers to today's questions about chaos, sexuality, reverence, right order, and the "location" of God in the assembly. All of these practices, one way or another, reflect and support some particular political and philosophical ideology. And each one claims truth along with the right to dismiss and demonize the "other." That's what we do as human beings. That's what we Catholics do.

(Fr.) ROC O'CONNOR, SJ

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts and ideas, reactions and responses to letters@ncronline.org. The editor will collect them, curate them and publish a sampling in Letters to the Editor online or in our print edition.

We cannot publish everything. We will do our best to represent the full range of letters received. Here are the rules:

Letters to the editor should be submitted to letters@ncronline.org.

Letters to the editor should be limited to 250 words.

Letters must include your name, street address, city, state and zip code. We will publish your name and city, state, but not your full address.

If the letter refers to a specific article published at ncronline.org, please send in the headline or the link of the article.

Please include a daytime telephone number where we can reach you. We will not publish your phone number. It may be used for verification.

We can't guarantee publication of all letters, but you can be assured that your submission will receive careful consideration.

Published letters may be edited for length and style.

**This letter has been corrected from an earlier version.*

This story appears in the **Your thoughts** feature series. View the full series.