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Okla. bishop no longer faces people at Mass

by Dennis Coday



Bishop Edward J. Slattery of Tulsa, Okla., faces the crucifix on the altar as he celebrates Mass in early June at Holy Family Cathedral.

Saying he wants "to recover a more authentic Catholic worship," Bishop Edward J. Slattery of Tulsa, Okla., has announced that he will return to the ancient custom of *ad orientem*, in which the presider at Mass does not face the people in the pews, but turns to face the altar.

Having the priest face the congregation was one of the major liturgical changes brought to the Mass during the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Slattery said this change had had unforeseen, negative consequences that he hoped to counter by reverting to the *ad orientem* tradition.

As Slattery's decision became widely publicized in late August, Vatican officials were downplaying a report that major liturgical reforms are being considered by Pope Benedict XVI, including a curb on the practice of receiving Communion in the hand.

Slattery explained his reasoning in the September issue of the *Eastern Oklahoma Catholic*, his diocesan magazine.

He wrote that *ad orientem*, which literally means "toward the East" or the direction from which Jesus would return for the Second Coming, was the liturgical norm for nearly 18 centuries.

Slattery wrote, "It's incorrect to think that only the priest offers Mass. All the faithful share in the offering, even though the priest has a unique role. He stands 'in the person of Christ,' the historic head of the Mystical Body, so that, at Mass, it is the whole body of Christ -- head and members together that make the offering.

"From ancient times, the position of the priest and the people reflected this understanding of the Mass ... Everyone -- celebrant and congregation -- faced the same direction, since they were united with Christ in offering to the Father Christ's unique, unrepeatable and acceptable sacrifice."

He continued: "In the last 40 years, however, this shared orientation was lost. Now the priest and the people have become accustomed to facing in opposite directions. The priest faces the people while the people face the priest, even though the eucharistic prayer is directed to the Father and not to the people.

"This innovation was introduced after the Vatican Council, partly to help the people understand the liturgical action of the Mass by allowing them to see what was going on, and partly as an accommodation to contemporary culture where people who exercise authority are expected to face directly the people they serve, like a teacher sitting behind her desk."

This change brought by Vatican II, he wrote, had "unforeseen and largely negative effects," including:

- "It was a serious rupture with the church's ancient tradition."
- "It can give the appearance that the priest and the people were engaged in a conversation about God, rather than the worship of God."
- "It places an inordinate importance on the personality of the celebrant by placing him on a kind of liturgical stage."

Slattery said that he will use the *ad orientem* position when he celebrates Mass at his cathedral. He did not order his priests to follow his example, but he does note that "Benedict has spoken repeatedly of the importance of celebrating Mass *ad orientem*," as part of his urging Catholics "to draw upon the ancient liturgical practice of the church to recover a more authentic Catholic worship."

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In late August the Italian newspaper *Il Giornale* reported that the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments had sent Benedict a report in April recommending concrete steps toward the "reform of the reform" in liturgy, according to Catholic News Service.

The newspaper article said the congregation proposed to promote a greater sense of the sacred in liturgy, recover the use of the Latin language in celebrations, and reformulate parts of the Roman Missal to end abuses and experimentation.

Responding to the article, Vatican spokesman Fr. Ciro Benedettini said Aug. 24, "At the moment, there are no institutional proposals for a modification of the liturgical books currently in use."

Vatican sources told Catholic News Service that the worship congregation did not, in fact, suggest a

program of liturgical change, but simply forwarded to the pope some considerations from its discussions focusing on eucharistic adoration, the theme of the plenary session.

Some individual members may have added opinions on other liturgical issues, but they in no way constituted formal proposals, one source said.

The article in *Il Giornale* said one idea being studied by the worship congregation was a return to celebrating Mass with the priest facing *ad orientem*

The Vatican sources told CNS that this issue, however, was not discussed by the congregation at its plenary.

Writing to Oklahoma Catholics, Slattery said his reverting to *ad orientem* "ought not to be misconstrued as the bishop 'turning his back on the faithful,' as if I am being inconsiderate or hostile. Such an interpretation misses the point that, by facing in the same direction, the posture of the celebrant and the congregation make explicit the fact that we journey together to God."

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Read the bishop's column: *ad orientem*: Revival of ancient rite brings multiple advantages, some misperceptions.

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