

TRINITY NEWS

WEEK 39.
September 24, 2023
Proper 20

Changing Liturgies (2)

Ad Orientem or Versus populum?

One of the most significant changes made to the liturgies of the Western churches in the 60's and 70's, involved the positioning of the Celebrant/Presider at the Eucharist. For over 1000 years the priest had led the service standing in front of the altar with his back to the people, facing east* (*ad orientem*.) It was only in the late 60's that the present position, behind the altar, facing the people (*versus populum*) was almost universally adopted. As usual, the change began in the Roman Catholic Church, but it quickly spread to other Western Churches as well.

So, what's so significant about this change, you may ask. What's so important about where the priest stands? In fact, it has a significant impact on how we understand what is going on – it gives the service a very different 'feel,' it conveys a different message.

In the '*ad orientem*' case, the priest and the people are facing the same direction, and the whole focus is on one thing, the cross on the wall behind the altar, which can be anything from a stark, simple, rather stern cross, like ours at Holy Trinity to an elaborate crucifix set in an exuberant reredos, full of colorful images of saints and martyrs, archangels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim – the whole host of heaven. In either case, it is overwhelming: it emphasizes the power of God, a wildly beautiful but also a potentially threatening power. We feel small.

The priest here is very definitely playing the role of the community's voice, its intercessor, who prays on our behalf. The priest also performs the sacrifice, or the commemoration of the one and only sacrifice of Christ, on our behalf: we don't see exactly what s/he's doing at the altar, we don't see his/her face, but it doesn't really matter, because our focus is elsewhere.

The '*versus populum*' position has a totally different feel to it. The focus is not what's behind the priest, but the altar and what the priest is doing. Instead of distance, there's a sense of intimacy; we are gathered round a table as a family, with the 'father' (or 'mother') at the head.

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God is in our midst, not towering over us. What the priest does at the altar is no longer hidden from us, by the priest's body: it becomes the center of our attention, The sacrificial and penitential elements are deemphasized, the theme of communal sharing solidarity brought to the fore.

Here at Holy Trinity we actually use both positions: *versus populum* on Sundays in the church proper, and *ad orientem* weekdays in the chapel. It's rather ironic, as it is obvious that the church was originally built with the *ad orientem* position in mind, while the smaller chapel is more conducive to the intimacy of *versus populum*, but that's a common problem since facing east had been the norm for over 1000 years when the change was made in the late 60's.

All of which goes to show how so much of the liturgy's meaning and impact depends on how it is done rather than on what is said. That shouldn't be surprising though since it's basically a question of 'body language,' isn't it, and we all are aware of the role that plays in determining the meaning of what we communicate.

SAINTS OF THE WEEK:

Lancelot Andrewes, Bishop of Winchester, 25 September. Born in 1555 in Barking, Lancelot Andrewes studied at Merchant Taylors' School and then Pembroke Hall, Cambridge. After ordination, he held several posts before accepting appointment as bishop, first of Chichester, then of Ely and finally of Winchester in 1619. Andrewes was present at the Hampton Court Conference in 1604, which furthered the reform of the Church of England, and he was also a translator of much of the Old Testament of what is known as the 'Authorised Version' of the Bible. His preaching and his writings proved highly influential and his holiness of life and gentle nature endeared him to all who met him. He died on this day in the year 1626 and his remains lie in a church which was then in his diocese of Winchester but now is the cathedral for the diocese of Southwark.

Michael & All Angels, 29 September. Michael, Gabriel and Raphael are the three named biblical angels, depicted as the beloved messengers of God. Michael, which means 'who is like God?', is described as protector of Israel and leader of the armies of God and is perhaps best known as the slayer of the dragon in the Revelation to John. He is thus regarded as the protector of Christians from the devil, particularly those at the hour of death. A basilica near Rome was dedicated in the fifth century in honour of Michael on 30 September, beginning with celebrations on the eve of that day, and 29 September is now kept in honour of Michael and all Angels throughout the western Church.

The Christian ideally loves as high as God and as widely as the boundaries of humanity. [*Charles Henry Brent, Adventure for God, 1920*]



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