

which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever.

Amen.

FACING THE PEOPLE IN THE PATRISTIC PERIOD: THE MYTH AND THE REALITY

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The myth that in the Patristic period, particularly in the early Patristic period, the celebrant at the eucharist generally faced the people across the altar is a myth that needs finally putting asleep. It is a myth that has been fanned by the desires of liturgical reformers rather than by the desire for historical accuracy. It is a myth which, at least in the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches, has caused the celebration of the eucharist to look silly, when a Westward facing altar has been erected in a Church building which was demonstrably constructed in such a way that Eastward facing celebration conforms with the architectural design of the building. So many celebrants have allowed the myth to convert them into what appears to be either a fish and chips sales-assistant, or a victim of a bank robbery. The myth is a myth in the primary sense that it is a set of beliefs or assumptions which have little or no basis in historical fact. Certainly, the claim that in the early Church the eucharist was generally celebrated facing the people, is hard to sustain.

The myth, nonetheless, has been widely advocated, despite its lack of any serious historical justification. To quote two examples:

Firstly, the venerable Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church states under the entry Westward position: "The practice of the celebrant of the eucharist standing on the east side of the altar facing the people appears to have been customary until about the 8th or the 9th Century when the Eastward position was generally adopted."¹

Secondly, Rev. Michael Rear in the Church Literature Association Pamphlet entitled "Facing the people" writes:- "The new position of the altar (i.e. so that the celebrant faces the people) is actually a return to a more ancient custom, when Christians had to maintain their solidarity in a non-Christian environment."²

The Patristic period, which I will for the purposes of this paper confine to its traditional and shorter span between the first and the eighth centuries, was not one in which the practice of facing the congregation at the eucharist was common or universal.

It is important to note that the fundamental issue was not whether the celebrant faced the people, but whether both the celebrant and the congregation faced East during prayer.

The practice of facing East during prayer was a practice which the Church took over from the Greeks and the Romans, and was practised by many peoples of the ancient world. For it is in the East that the sun rises, and so men regard this as a place of happiness, life and power. For this reason the rising sun was made a symbol of divinity, and soon the sun itself became a god.

The Jews, in contrast, prayed towards Jerusalem. The Elchasi, a sect of Jewish Christians, continued to pray towards Jerusalem, and forbade their adherents to follow the practice of other Christians of praying towards the East. The evidence that Christians prayed toward the East in the early period is overwhelming. For example, in second century Syria, the room where prayer was offered had a cross painted on the East wall, and it was to this which the worshippers turned.³ Indeed, as early as 230 Tertullian stated:- "We shall be counted Persians perhaps, though we do not worship the orb of day painted on a piece of linen cloth ----- The idea no doubt originated from our being known to turn to the East in prayer".⁴

Or again he wrote: "Of our dove however, how simple is the very house, always in high and open places and facing the light. As the symbol of the Holy Spirit, it loves the East, and the figure of Christ."⁵ Later still Augustine wrote: "And for the purpose of showing this we turn to the East where the heaven rises"⁶ Finally, the Didascalia states: "Let the laymen sit in another part of the house towards the east. For it so should be that in the eastern part of the house, the Presbyters sit with the Bishops, and next the laymen, and then the women also. For it is required that you pray toward the East, as knowing that which is written: Give ye glory to God, who rideth upon the heaven of heavens toward the east."⁷

Christianity converted the symbolism of facing East which it took from Greek and Roman religion to its own use. It was believed that Jesus Christ had ascended into heaven East of Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. In a similar way they believed that his second coming would be from the East. Since according to contemporary cosmographical beliefs, heaven is only just above us in the sky, so the dwellings of the blessed are placed somewhere in the Eastern sky where the sun rises. Again, the paradise of Genesis was situated in the East: God planted the garden of Eden facing the rising sun.⁸ Yet again, the angel of the Lord in the Revelation also comes from the direction of the rising sun.

Thus for the early Christians, to turn towards the East meant turning towards Christ glorified, who by his cross and resurrection has conquered sin and death, and who at the head of the Church lives in heaven. It also represents the hope and desire that he will come again to redeem his people. This symbolism was reinforced in the last quarter of the third century when the Emperor Aurelian imported the sun cult from the orient to Rome, and declared Sol Invictus as the God of the Empire.

In reaction Christians stressed forcefully: "Christ is our Sun: Who is so invincible as our Lord who has conquered death?"

St. John of Damascus neatly summarises the points: "When he was received again into heaven he was borne towards the East, and thus the apostles worship him, and thus will he come again in a way in which they beheld him going towards heaven. As the Lord said, As the lightening cometh from the East and shineth even unto the West, so also shall the coming of the son of man be. So, then in expectation of his coming, we worship toward the East."⁹

The primary concern therefore, in public and private worship in the Patristic period was to face the East. I wish to argue further that the general custom was for the celebrant and the people at the eucharist to face the East. This usually meant that the Priest and people both faced the altar. It was only in Rome, and some parts of North Africa, that the celebrant sometimes faced the people, but this was for special reasons.

In North Syria, for example, there was a house Church at Qirk Bizze. Midway down the nave was an inverted horse shoe, like a chancel, which had no gap in the middle. During the first part of the liturgy, the Bishop and his assistants sat or stood inside this horseshoe with their backs to the congregation facing East. At the offertory, the Bishop and his assistants advanced to the altar which stood at the East wall. They conducted the Eucharistic prayer with their backs to the congregation, facing East.

It is true that in Rome, the celebrant sometimes faced the people. This occurred when the altar was built over a tomb or a reliquary. This enabled people to insert cloths or other objects through a grille to gain healing value from the relics.¹⁰

Where there were no relics the celebrant does not seem to have faced the people. Hence in the Basilica of Castel Sant Elia, near Nepi, in central Italy, there is an ancient altar complete with its ciborium, but there is no grille, and thus the foot pace is on the nave side of the altar, and the celebrant stood with his back to the people.

There is one other case in Rome where the celebrant seemingly faced the people. The Roman basilicas of the Christians followed the orientation of the Greek and Roman temples. The latter were built in such a way that they faced East so that the rays of the rising sun fell upon the idol when the doors of the temples were opened. This therefore meant that the Churches were built with the facade towards the East e.g. St. Peter's, or the Basilica of the Lateran. This had a distinct disadvantage that the congregation wishing to look East during prayers would turn with the Priest towards the door of the Church. This was not inconvenient to the Priest, as he faced East when looking towards the people; but the people were forced to turn away from the Priest, and from the altar. In these churches the altar was placed facing the people. The celebrant was never face to face with the people however. There were only two possibilities:- either the throne of the celebrant in the apse was or was not turned to the East. If it faced the East, the Bishop or the Priest did not have to turn around

when he came to the altar. But once the congregation started to pray with him, it also turned its back to the altar to face the East. If the throne did not in fact face East, when the celebrant prayed at his throne, he had to turn around, and when he came to the altar he had to go around it. This was customary in the great majority of Christian Churches.

It is true that the Basilican style of Church was introduced almost everywhere in the West, but its internal arrangement owed more to Syria than to Rome. The Western Church as we know it with its altar in the apse at the East, is merely a Syrian Church where the bema has been pushed forward to meet the apse.

The rites of Eastern Christendom have never permitted the priest to face the people, although the altar has no reredos, and is free standing in the Eastern Orthodox rite. While the Bishop's synthronos is in the apse, he comes round the altar to take the Eastward position, as all the Churches are orientated. As John of Damascus put it: "It is not without reason, or by chance that we worship towards the East ----- since God is spiritual light, and Christ is called in the scriptures "Sun of righteousness" and "Dayspring", the East is the direction that must be assigned to worship."¹¹

We can therefore, safely draw the conclusion that in the Patristic period the normal practice was for the celebrant of the eucharist to face the East, usually facing the same direction as the congregation, and not towards them.

If this conclusion is correct, it has established only what the normal practice was in the early Church. This does not answer the question whether today we should follow either the practice of the early Church, or the symbolism with which it invested it. It does however, demonstrate that the claim that priests should face the people because this was a practice in the early Church cannot constitute a good reason for celebrating the eucharist in this posture: for the historical claim is simply false. Perhaps, indeed, the movement for Liturgical reform itself needs a new reformation in the direction of historical accuracy.

FOOTNOTES.

1. Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church 2nd. ed.
Ed. F.L. Cross and E. Livingstone. p. 1437.
2. Michael Rear, Facing the People. Church Literature
Association, p. 7.
3. E. Peterson. Eph. Liturgy. 49. 1945. pp.52-68.
4. Tertullian, Apology.
5. Tertullian, Against the Valentinians.
6. Augustine. De sermone Domini in Monte. Bk. 2. Ch. 5.
7. R.H. Connally. Didascalia Apostolorum. pp. 119-120.

8. Genesis 2: 8.
9. St. John of Damascus: Exposition of the Orthodox Faith.
10. J.G. Davies. Early Christian Architecture.
J.A. Jungmann. The Mass of the Roman Rite.
Vol. 1 p. 255.
11. St. John of Damascus. Exposition of the Orthodox Faith.

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FORTHCOMING ISSUES OF 'THE RECORD'

We have now received the script of Bill Cant's PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS to the Annual Meeting last May: "THE MOST URGENT CALL TO THE KIRK: THE CELEBRATION OF CHRIST IN THE LITURGY OF WORD AND SACRAMENT" . Professor Geoffrey Wainwright has been furnished with a transcription of his CENTENARY LECTURE, as delivered in Glasgow last November. These substantial and painstakingly researched studies will occupy most of the space in the next two issues.

The Editor's plea for humorous anecdotes etc. has elicited quite a response, but more would still be welcome.

Dr Young has contributed a major article on Christmas Services, and Gerald Jones has submitted a number of prayers for special occasions. We have another Candlemas Order from South Leith and a lengthy article on Liturgical Revision in Iceland. (Yes, Iceland, not that other island nearer home!)

All these should see us through 1985, but the Editor is largely dependent upon the effort and imagination of our membership for fresh material. Not being in any sense a liturgical specialist, and not being actively involved in liturgical circles beyond this Society, he is little more than a willing receiver of other people's ideas and efforts. 'The Record' stands or falls by the quality of that which is submitted, and at present it is a publication of which the Society has reason to be proud.