

Holy Eucharist: *Ad Orientem*

In light of our Sunday journey in John 6 and our Wednesday evening study series on the Eucharist, I thought I would take some time to speak to one of the topics du jour at St. Andrew's: *Ad Orientem*.

I will acknowledge that I unintentionally put the cart before the horse with unexpectedly reimplementing *ad orientem* into our regular worship life. I put off this decision for many months as we made our way through the pandemic, though I did not anticipate the strong feelings on the subject by some. I recognize that change is often perceived as loss, at least initially. We are creatures of habit, and we associate emotion and meaning in those things which we have seen and done with great repetition. It can feel very personal when those patterns are altered, and I'm sorry for any angst or frustration caused to some among us.

What is *ad orientem*, and what's it about? There has long been the practice of prayer facing east or towards the Orient, *ad orientem*. For Christians, just as we look for the rising of the sun, we search the horizon for the coming Lord at his return (Matthew 24:27). The physical orientation of churches has regularly been on that oriental axis because of this connection that as people enter and worship together, they so order their minds and hearts towards that end as well.

There are cases though where a church is not able to be situated in such a fashion, as is my understanding of the original layout of St. Andrew's. When that happens, the church is physically situated as is convenient. Liturgically though, that is within the space and time of worship, it orients itself upon the cross and the altar. These central pieces of our traditional architecture mark a liturgical east for us with which to guide our prayer and action.

Additionally, the axial orientation of churches serves as a reminder that we are on a pilgrimage as Christians, both in the life of faith and in the context of the Eucharist. Coupled with stairs in the quire and sanctuary, it is a physical reminder that as we come to the altar together, so too are we moving by God's grace toward a common end of perfect communion with our Lord among the blessed of the Church Triumphant.

I will turn now to the practice itself. Where more than one has commented that the priest is turning their back on the people, I would suggest considering this from a different perspective: the priest is one of the people. The priest, whoever they may be, is not ordained as one who is separated to minister apart from the people but as one who is called to lead from within and among the congregation. To overly divide the priest and the people is to run the risk of estranging them from one another in the common prayer and worship of the church.

The priest stands at the head of the procession, on the same side of the altar, in solidarity with and among people. When acclamations, biddings, declarations, and such are directed to the people (e.g. "The Lord be with you..."), the celebrant is in fact facing them and speaking to them at those times. When the priest turns to face the altar, it is a physical representation of the change in direct object as they are addressing the Lord with and on behalf of the people, offering the prayers and praises of the congregation.

As we make our way together unto the altar of the Lord, I doubt that anyone would argue that the person in the pew in front of us or in line for Communion ahead of us is turning their backs on us. Neither is the priest. That is because we are collectively gathering on this side of the veil to humbly receive and share in the ministrations of Word and Sacrament. *Ad orientem* is an outward demonstration of that aim as we look in the same direction with eyes fixed upon the cross and hearts reaching forth to God.

Here, I will address some well-intentioned inquiries. First, “What about Vatican 2?” In short, and with all due respect, we are not Roman Catholic. We share much of the western Christian tradition, hence the great similarities in our churches. We may peer over the fence from time to time, where I might add we would see an ongoing and, in some cases, increasing use of *ad orientem* by them. Even so, our life and worship are not directed by their councils and have not been since the Reformation.

Secondly, “Why are we going backwards?” This assumes, perhaps unintentionally, that in some sense we are right, and that those who came before us were wrong or at least less right. Yet, it was those who came before who passed on the tradition to us, including the Scriptures, liturgy, theology, and more. We care for and cultivate what we have received, and that which sustained and nourished generations of Christians ought to give us pause to consider what we might learn from it and from them. Otherwise, we run the risk of breaking with the faith once delivered so that anything and everything might be up for grabs, including even the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and that is simply not an option.

Part of the calling of a priest, of my call here at St. Andrew’s, is to bring something of themselves, of that which they find lifegiving in the history and practices of the church, into the life of the parish by virtue of personal piety and, in this case, liturgical expression. So it is with my preference for *ad orientem*. I seek, like one who brings out of their treasure, from the storehouse of our tradition, that which is old that it may speak to us anew (Matthew 13:52).

Finally, and on a more personal note, I find that *ad orientem* is a more prayerful orientation for me as I seek to lead others in the prayers of the liturgy. As mentioned in a recent sermon, our physical actions and expressions are rooted in our inward dispositions. Though there may seem to be something of a performative aspect in many things within the sacred drama, at no point in the liturgy am I or the congregation at the center of what we do. The priest offers their service as one leading the cast of the congregation, a local gathering of the priesthood of all believers, pointing our collective attention towards the one, true center of our worship, Christ truly and mystically present in the Sacrament by the power of the Holy Spirit to the praise and glory of the Father.

Ad orientem assists me with that reminder, and I hope, through greater understanding of this practice and perspective, that it might assist others as well.

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