

Latin Catholics can learn from their eastern brothers and sisters

This Advent marks the 50th anniversary of the liturgical reform – the “novus ordo” or “new order” of Mass – after the Second Vatican Council.

We get used to what becomes routine, but there was nothing routine about a new order of Mass. To the contrary, it was the greatest act of sheer papal power in the long history of the Church. St. Paul VI, on his own authority, prescribed a new order of Mass, with significant changes, for the entire Church, to be adopted all at once.

Never before had a pope thought that he had the power to change the worship of the whole Church so dramatically and so quickly. For all the merits of the reform, it was also destabilizing and inaugurated at least two decades of liturgical turmoil, with related consequences for doctrine and discipline.

But here in Kerala, in the south of India, one is reminded that the Latin rite is not the “entire Church.” Kerala is home to the Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara Churches, Eastern Churches fully in communion with Rome.

While many people identify the Catholic Church with being Roman Catholic (Latin rite), there are actually 23 Eastern Catholic Churches which are also part of the Catholic Church. They are small, to be sure, amounting together to perhaps some 25 million out of 1.2 billion Catholics, but they are equal in status and dignity.

Latin Catholics have something to learn from them, especially when it comes to matters liturgical.

The chief experience of the “new Mass” of 1969 was that it was in the vernacular and that the priest, instead of facing the altar, turned his back to the high altar (and often the tabernacle) to face the people.

Vatican II (the 1962-1965 meeting that addressed the relations between the Church and the modern world) never mandated that Mass be celebrated facing the people, and even today the Roman Missal envisages Mass with the priest facing in the same direction as the people: toward the altar. However, the option of the priest facing the people became the dominant reality.

The Eastern Churches, for the most part, did not follow that but have maintained the practice from the first centuries of Mass celebrated *ad orientem*, literally “toward the east.”



Eastern Catholic Churches have maintained the practice of the priest and congregation facing the altar together. Patricia Guilfoyle, Catholic News Service

Churches were traditionally built facing the east, toward the coming of Christ like the rising sun, and so if the priest and people were facing the altar together, they were facing east.

Having celebrated Mass often in both arrangements – facing the people and *ad orientem* – I have become convinced that, while there are many ways in which the new Mass is an improvement, the change in the priest's orientation has been a major factor in losing a sense of the sacred in our worship at Holy Mass.

“The strength of the Syro-Malabar liturgy is that it is a true dialogue; the priest and the people are in constant dialogue with God, it's not the priest and people in dialogue with each other,” Major Archbishop George Cardinal Alencherry, head of the Syro-Malabar Church, told me.

That dialogue – priest and people together with God – is made clear when the priest and people face the altar together. When they face each other, it is easy to think that the dialogue is between the priest and the people. God is never left out of the liturgy, but His presence can be diminished as we speak to each other.

The principal prayers of the Holy Mass are addressed to God the Father, by the priest on behalf of the people. When the priest faces the altar, it is more clear that he is speaking to God.

That experience was made beautifully manifest last month, when the 'personal ordinariate' for former Anglicans had a solemn Mass at Toronto's St. Michael's Cathedral.

The following day there was a Syro-Malankara priestly ordination held at St. Francis Xavier Parish in Mississauga, Ont. Both traditions offer the Holy Mass *ad orientem*. I was at both Masses, and the primacy of God and the right worship of Him was gloriously affirmed.

The priestly ordination of Rev. Jobin Thomas might have been the most profound liturgical experience I have had. The theological depth of the prayers, the magnificent ornamentation, the rising incense, the intonations in ancient Syriac, all of it worked together, and the *ad orientem* posture was the indispensable setting for it all. To God alone was the glory.

To be present for the Syro-Malankara liturgy is to realize that we have a lot of work remaining on liturgical reform in the Latin Church. Here in Thiruvananthapuram, the seat of the Syro-Malankara Church, the splendour of their churches and liturgy is abundantly evident.

The head of the Church, Major Archbishop-Catholicos Baselios Cardinal Cleemis, explains that the very identity and tradition of his Church has a liturgical shape.

That's true for the Church universal. Our identity has a liturgical shape, one might even say a liturgical orientation. Fifty years after that shape and orientation were changed, it is essential to ask whether that identity has suffered and whether there are lessons to be learned from the east.

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