

People, Look East

by Gary W. Kriss

There is an Advent carol that says, “People, look East, and sing to-day:/ Love the Lord is on the way.” The carol reminds us that, from ancient times, the Church has faced east to pray. For example, writing in the third century, Origen says, “the direction of the rising sun obviously indicates that we ought to pray inclining in that direction, an act which symbolizes the soul looking towards where the true light rises.” His words are echoed in a popular Afro-American spiritual which says, “when I fall on my knees, with my face to the rising sun, O Lord, have mercy on me.” Furthermore, for many centuries, whenever possible, church buildings were laid out on an east-west axis. And, in later times, even when an actual eastward orientation of the building was not possible, it became the custom to refer to the end of the church in which the altar stands as the “east end.”

Whether literally or symbolically, the Church has generally faced east to pray, in anticipation of the coming of the Lord, who says, in Matthew 24:27, “as the lightning comes from the east and flashes as far as the West, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.” This has been true particularly at the Eucharist, when priest and people together have faced east “looking for his coming again with power and great glory.” (BCP, Eucharistic Prayer II)

As much as the words themselves, the posture and movement of the participants express the meaning of what we do. However, the liturgical movement of the 20th century sought to alter this central understanding of the Eucharist. Free-standing altars with the priest facing the people were not a new idea. In the 16th century, in the Church of England, altars were ripped out and tables were placed lengthwise in the center of the choir or church so that priest and people could gather around them. The purpose then was to counter the idea that the Eucharist was a sacrifice and to insist that it was simply a meal—the Lord’s Supper.

The 20th century liturgical movement has seen free-standing altars become virtually universal in the Roman Catholic Church and the accepted norm in the majority of other liturgically-oriented churches of the West, including our own. However, this is not a denial of the idea of Eucharistic sacrifice. The reorientation of liturgy and architecture in the modern Church has had more to do with a desire to recover the full participation of the laity in the liturgy. In particular, the practice of the priest standing with his “back to the people” has been identified as form of clericalism, which excludes the people from their proper participation in the liturgy. The eastward position, it is said, makes liturgy into something the priest does alone, while the congregation waits passively, unable even to see what it happening.

Free-standing altars, with the priest facing the people throughout the liturgy, have become so much the norm that many people would wonder why anyone would bother questioning it. With many other issues dividing the Church, why raise one that no one seems to think much about any more? In fact, I would argue that many of the supposedly more important issues are symptoms of what has become a more fundamental misdirection closely related to this liturgical change.

First of all, it is laughable to suggest that the direction the priest faces has anything at all to do with the participation of the people in the liturgy. Only a priest may do the things that the priest

does at the altar itself, no matter what direction the priest faces. This does not prevent the laity from full participation in their proper order: everything from corporate activities such as singing hymns, to individual roles for readers, cantors, intercessors, acolytes, greeters, ushers, oblation bearers, musicians, etc., not to mention the fundamental role of praying as a member of the Body. None of these roles depend on seeing what the priest is doing.

Seeing *is* important in liturgy. But what we should be aiming for in liturgy is to focus our vision on the One who is coming, not on the people who are doing their particular jobs in the *service*. We are all there to *serve*, not to be the focus of anyone else's attention.

In one congregation I have served, a previous rector convinced the congregation to remodel the sanctuary of the church. The old immovable high altar remained as a bit of redundant furniture, but a wooden table was placed in front of it for the celebration of the Eucharist. To do this, it was necessary to remove the choir stalls from the rather small sanctuary but, instead of removing the choir, as well, chairs were set for them on either side of the old high altar, facing the congregation. When I arrived, I began to push for the choir to be relocated to the rear gallery. This change met with much resistance because some members of the congregation wanted to be able to see the choir, as well as the priest, face to face.

An old story, told I believe by the Curé d'Ars, tells how the parish priest observed an elderly man going into the church every day, sitting quietly for a while, and then leaving. One day the priest asked him what he was doing. The old man replied, "I look at God, and he looks at me, and we enjoy one another."

It would seem that we no longer go to church to look at God. Apparently, we now go to church to look at one another. It is not a bad thing to look at one another. We are certainly taught to love our neighbors as ourselves. But to do this properly, we must first look to God and love him. We do not love our neighbor simply because she is our neighbor, we love her because God loves us, and to practice such love we must first learn it from "Love the Lord [who] is on the way."

This does not mean that free-standing altars must be uprooted and moved. It does not matter where the altar stands: priest and people may still face east at a free-standing altar. In ancient basilicas the altar was free-standing, but the priest came from his seat in the apse, around the altar, to face east for the Eucharistic prayer. In fact, to restore such a movement to the modern liturgy would provide a striking symbol of the unity of priest and people making their common offering of themselves, their souls and bodies, to God. We do not come to church to look at one another: we come to look for the Lord who is coming to us. If that had been our focus all along, perhaps we would not be so divided now and heading in so many different directions *away*, not only from one another, but also, I fear, from him.