

A Letter from the Pastor

God and Mary be with you!

I am writing this letter to convey a decision regarding the orientation of Mass at the Proto-Cathedral. I am sure that many of you are aware that it has been our practice the last two years to say Mass *ad orientem* (facing the Liturgical East) during the season of Advent and on all Solemnities throughout the year. At this time, after much prayer, research, and discussion, I have decided that all Masses at the Proto-Cathedral will be celebrated indefinitely *ad orientem*. This decision is based on three important points:

- 1) The instruction of the Roman Missal and the recent urge to return to this practice by Pope Francis' Prefect for the Congregation of Divine Worship, Cardinal Robert Sarah.
- 2) The need to more fully enter into the Mass as a worship of God centered around Christ and not a self-celebration.
- 3) The theology of architecture in which the Proto-Cathedral was built.

This week, we will focus on the first point regarding the words by the Prefect for the Congregation of Divine Worship. I think it is important to first understand the role of Cardinal Sarah within the Church before reading his words. As Prefect of the Congregation of Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Cardinal Sarah is responsible for the following tasks (*Pastor Bonus*, Apostolic Constitution promulgated by Pope Saint John Paul II on 28 June 1988 on the Roman Curia):

- Regulation and promotion of the liturgy, primarily of the sacraments
- Regulation of the administration of the sacraments, especially regarding their valid and licit celebration
- Promoting liturgical pastoral activity, especially regarding the celebration of the Eucharist
- Drawing up and revision of liturgical texts
- Granting the *recognitio* to translations of liturgical books and their adaptations
- Promoting the liturgical apostolate or sacred music, song or art
- Ensuring that liturgical norms are accurately observed, and that abuses are avoided and eliminated where they are found to exist.

Therefore, the Holy Father has appointed Cardinal Sarah to help the universal Church more deeply enter into the Sacred Liturgy by instructing the faithful with authority on the liturgical norms. In the past year, the Prefect has spoken numerous times on the importance of celebrating Mass *ad orientem*. In a document published June 12, 2015, Cardinal Sarah made a very important statement on a misunderstanding within our liturgy today:

Contrary to what has sometimes been maintained, it is in full conformity with the conciliar Constitution—indeed, it is entirely fitting—for everyone, priest and congregation, to turn together to the (Liturgical) East during the penitential rite, the singing of the Gloria, the orations, and the Eucharistic prayer, in order to express the desire to participate in the work of worship and redemption accomplished by Christ. This practice could well be established in cathedrals, where liturgical life must be exemplary (cf. §41).

Cardinal Sarah has made clear over and over that the Mass must become a place in which we must be totally focused on God, not on ourselves or the celebrant. In the Prefect's most recent statement entitled *How to Put God Back at the Center of the Liturgy*, Cardinal Sarah is asked how to concretely accomplish this task. He responded by saying:

To convert is to turn towards God. I am profoundly convinced that our bodies must participate in this conversion. The best way is certainly to celebrate — priests and faithful — turned together in the same direction: toward the Lord who comes. It isn't, as one hears sometimes, to celebrate with the back turned toward the faithful or facing them. That isn't the problem. It's to turn together toward the apse, which symbolizes the East, where the cross of the risen Lord is enthroned.

After the Second Vatican Council many Catholics considered Mass being said *ad orientem* as “the priest turning his back on the people.” However, if we more closely look at the oral and body language of the priest, it makes perfect sense for all to face the same direction. If I was speaking to someone while I was turned away from them, it would be accurate to say “I have turned my back on you.” But, if I am saying the prayers of the Mass in which the text is addressing God (e.g. the Collect, Prayers of the Faithful, Eucharistic Prayer) and facing the same direction as the congregation, we are all praying towards God and my back is no more turned to you than your back is turned to the person behind you. However, when the celebrant speaks or sings the words of the Mass which are directed towards God while visibly facing and engaging the people, he has turned his attention away from praying towards God. Rather, the priest becomes a presenter or an entertainer to retain the attention of the people. I firmly believe that Cardinal Sarah’s recommendations help us as Catholics to more deeply enter into the primary purpose of the Mass:

By this manner of celebrating, we experience, even in our bodies, the primacy of God and of adoration. **We understand that the liturgy is first our participation at the perfect sacrifice of the cross.** I have personally had this experience: In celebrating thus, with the priest at its head, the assembly is almost physically drawn up by the mystery of the cross at the moment of the elevation.

Lastly, there is some concern that the Second Vatican Council mandated or even recommended that all points of the Mass should be said by the priest facing the people, and that no priest has the authority to celebrate the Mass *ad orientem*. When asked about this, Cardinal Sarah responded last week in his authority as the Prefect for the Congregation of Divine Worship by saying:

It is legitimate and conforms to the letter and the spirit of the Council. In my capacity as the Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, I continue to remind all that the celebration toward the (Liturgical) East is authorized by the rubrics of the missal, which specify the moments when the celebrant must turn toward the people.

It is therefore not necessary to have special permission to celebrate facing the Lord.

More than 50 years after the closure of Vatican II, it becomes urgent that we read these texts! The Council never required the celebration facing the people! **This question is not even brought up by the Constitution** [on Sacred Liturgy], *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. What’s more, the Council Fathers wanted to emphasize the necessity for all to enter into participation of the celebrated mystery. In the years that have followed Vatican II, the Church has searched for the means of putting this intuition into practice.

Thus, to celebrate facing the people became a possibility, but not an obligation. The Liturgy of the Word justifies the face-to-face [orientation] of the lector and the listeners, the dialogue and the teaching between the priest and his people. But from the moment that we begin to address God — starting with the Offertory — it is essential that the priest and the faithful turn together toward the East. This corresponds completely with that which was willed by the Council Fathers.

I pray that this letter furthers your understanding that the Mass is primarily intended to be the worship of God, and this, I agree with Cardinal Sarah, is more clearly made visible when Mass is celebrated *ad orientem* rather than *versus populum*. We will continue the examination and education about this decision over the next couple of weeks.

In Jesus and Mary,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Fr. Harris".

Father W.R. Harris, Pastor