# Body-Language: Post Vatican II Liturgy

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During the last decades of the 20th Century very important parts of the body-language of Catholicism drastically changed. Let us focus on the body-language of the liturgy. This is the dance-rhythm of the church. This is the church's pace, its orientation, its choreography, its steps, its balletic presentation of meaning through action, revealing the promenade of the mysteries of faith to the public gaze. For many the reforms of Vatican II have been read as a change of symbolism. The liturgy reform was aimed explicitly at re-orientating the celebration of Mass. However, the profoundest change is often overlooked.

From a form which had priest and people in an Eastward facing monolithic pose, the mysteries of Catholic faith were now to be presented differently. This new expression of an apparently reciprocal relationship between celebrant and congregation brought about profound change. The priest was no longer to have his back to the congregation for worship. This orientation of the church's body in its worship signified something. This is probably the least understood of the Vatican II reforms, even forty years after its implementation. Many miss the point. It is the focus of the place of sacrifice which was to change first, redressing the move of the altar into the apse of the church which had taken place in so many churches and cathedrals many centuries before. It was meant to address a piece of medieval decay, and along with it went the re-orientation of the presiding priest. The congregation was to be *gathered around* the altar. Orientation was to be towards the sacrifice at the altar, not the God of the universe, somehow "beyond". The real God was at the altar in his real presence.

The body-language of prayer is crucial to any religion. Pagans had prayed facing the East, and Christians had consecrated this pose by the reign of Constantine, certainly from the 6th Century. Honouring Christ the "Rising Sun" replaced the worship of the star of the galaxy. At the same time the function of the *praeses* for the liturgy was to literally overlook and oversee the worship of the people, something derived from the office of bishop as *overseer*, which was not to be easily forgone. In Rome the tradition had arisen that the priest faced the East, and the congregation faced Westwards, so that when the priest faced East he faced the people. As the principal worshipper, so to speak, he was properly orientated. The people, by

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contrast "had their back to God". This changed in due course. In the time of the Frankish domination of the Roman church – from the time of Charlemagne onwards – the people were restored to their proper orientation, they faced East. The presider faced them for the liturgy of the word. Then he turned his back on the people and faced East, with them, for the *Gloria*, and the principal Collect and Communion prayers, and the Eucharistic prayer.

The priest having his back to the people for *all* of the Mass, except when seated, dates from the time when the altar was placed in the apse of the church rather than in its body. *Restoring the altar to the body of the church*, siting it in the midst of the people is the significant change of body-language called for by Vatican II. It is not the mere fact that the priest *faces* the people which is the truly significant change. But because of the dramatic impact of the presider's relationship to the congregation many thought in the 1960's that his act of facing them was a more important liturgical reform than relocating the altar in their midst. This is an example of how unexplained body-language may transmit only part of the message.

This Vatican II reform of orientation and posture, for all its being misunderstood, was probably more far-reaching than any other. It was way beyond a change from one textual language, of Latin, into any other, the vernacular. It seemed to many to be changing the body-language of worship – from a single mass of people with a spokesman at their head all facing the same way, into a tempting dialogue or dialectic between presider and congregation, to be carried out in the face of the still-hidden deity. Such misunderstood reforms have their spin-off consequences.

By consequence, then, the reform of altar position, in its turn, influenced the other body-language of the church, which comes literally to be set in stone. Art and architecture needed to be revised and re-stated in forms which acknowledged the ways in which reforms drastically altered the altar. It also altered the nave of the church, and the placing of the people. The gathering of the people *around* the Eucharistic table, rather than *attending to* the remote offering of the sacrifice also made its impact. Ironically, for some this was not a reform harking back to more ancient times (which it undoubtedly is). Rather they read it as an acknowledgement that the body-language of the Mediaeval age was somehow wrong, and indeed in need of reform. What appeared to have been resisted to the point of martyrdom for other reasons in the Reformation of the 16th Century (a mere three hundred or so years), now seemed acceptable. Some bitterly viewed this as consent to the Reformation's mistaken theology. Enormous hurt resulted, and significant disaffection.

The *re-sourcing* (in the French sense of *resourcement*, going back to ancient origins) of this reform was not appreciated for its delving into

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the riches of the ancient church. Only when care has been taken to reeducate people about more ancient rites and practices has it become more acceptable. The meddle and muddle involved in liturgical reform, in this basic sign-language of the church, has had a devastating effect, not because it is inappropriate or inaccurate, but because when it was imposed there was insufficient skill to understand *how to translate this important sign-language of liturgy*.

The really competent readers of the sign-languages of the Church will be those who are properly educated and instructed. It has to do with belief. The role of belief, explained and understood, in the process of learning the sign-languages of the Church cannot be overemphasised. What the church is saying to itself and the world needs to be *both* understood *and* interpreted. Liturgy-language, which is a sign-language as well as a spoken language, should also be regarded as something containing a warning to those who do not understand it. The church's body-language is not something which can be understood by osmosis. It has to be imparted. We need to be instructed. There are specific conventions responsible for delivering its correct meaning. Fundamentally, of course, this is why the ancient church insisted on a Catechumenate before admitting anyone to sacramental discourse by participating in the sign-language of liturgy.

We do not understand the body-language of the Mass because we do not know its history well enough. Yet the Mass itself has become a kind of "touchstone" of Catholic authenticity. Let us take an example. How many ordinary Catholics are aware that the preparatory prayers of a sorrowful and downcast nature – now known as the The Penitential Rite – were not originally part of the celebration, but prayers of unworthiness recited by the ministerial party as they walked in procession to the sanctuary? For this reason the *Confiteor* is said in the first person singular, "I confess"; it is not a communal prayer. Examine the Roman Rite, even in Vatican II dress, and you will find it punctuated by 'personal' prayers. These things have become "liturgised".

Nor would many people realise that these penitential rites were largely Irish and Anglo-Saxon in origin, and were introduced into the European Catholic liturgy via Frankish-German churchmen, largely through monastic influences. They came into the Roman liturgy "by the back door". But they were incorporated into the body-language of the Mass. It gave the Mass a sombre and penitential opening atmosphere. By the time the Missal received its solid state, after the Council of Trent, it had set the tone for worship, and a spirituality of unworthiness to participate grew around it. Significantly, of course, the Northerners who brought such practices into being, whose piety was eventually recognised, were actually reacting to a Roman liturgy of their times – which had become pompous, triumphalist, and bedecked with courtly ritual. The *rubrics* which indicate the posture and attitude of the celebrating priest are indeed part of the

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sign-language. It *is* about body-language, in more senses than one. Ritual is sign-bearing stuff, for it points to something beyond itself We need not stand and condemn authentic church reforms, but only our lack of understanding the need for them.

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