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At the Table of the Lord

Further work is needed to truly implement the deep liturgical renewal mandated by the Second Vatican Council



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The great Jesuit philosopher and theologian Bernard Lonergan once described those nostalgic for the pre-1970 liturgy as a group "that is determined to live in a world that no longer exists".

The phrase came back to me recently when I read of another Jesuit, Pope Francis, who [spoke](#) about finding "new languages for handing on the gospel".

But this is not an easy task.

The pope – and the fact that it is clear to anyone who looks around at the age-profile on any gathering in the developed world – is clear that we need new language.

Each generation, in a rapidly changing world, is like a new continent. We have to learn the new language – and such learning is always difficult.

I often tell young theological students that learning the language of a new generation is harder than learning all the parts of the Greek verb, but they think I am exaggerating.

Sadly, many like to imagine that they do not need to learn a new language but simply need to shout out louder in the old language. It is an easy mistake: more noise equals more communication.

Going backwards

This was brought home to me this week when I saw numerous diocesan websites (mostly in the United States) where the bishops believe having both presider and people facing in the same direction during the Eucharistic Prayer – the pattern before the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) – is the way forward.

This shows a deep misunderstanding of Vatican II, as well as a replacement with nostalgia of the challenge of learning new languages to proclaim the gospel.

As we draw closer to the 60th anniversary of the start of the Council, it is worth revisiting this fundamental physical change in the liturgy to see how well it has been "received" in the theological sense of being understood as part of the teaching of the Church.

Is it about communications?

The new shape of the liturgical arena, the president (presider) facing the rest of the assembly, was presented at the time *and is still most often presented today* in terms of communications.

The president could now be seen and heard (we forget that the Eucharistic Prayer was, until the reform, in silence, while most of the rest of the prayers, such as the *Orate fratres*, were said in a voice that could be heard only a few meters away), and this was perceived as a welcome development because it fostered understanding and comprehension (which it does).

This, in turn, was expected to lead to a deeper appreciation of the **Eucharist** – as it has, to an extent that is not often acknowledged.

Since everyone could now see, there was consequent emphasis on everyone being able to see: so clear sight-lines – again a valuable element in communication such as one would have in any other arena where the focus is on an individual and his words and actions (and other things being equal: a good thing) – were desired in every church building.

This was often difficult when long, narrow buildings were being adapted to the reformed liturgy, or in buildings with transepts, ambulatories or side aisles where pillars became the great blockages to the re-orderers' aims.

Solutions varied from moving the community's table forward so as to be free of such obstructions to vision, to roping off areas where there was no view of the president, to mirrors, or even CCTV screens. In every case, the rationale was presented by analogy with an auditorium or theatre.

Lastly, it was often suggested at the time – though I cannot locate this in print – that being able to see what was happening would destroy the false mystique that equated the actions of the priest with "hocus pocus", "priestcraft", and pseudo-reverence.

Again, the rationale for the change was presented in terms of interpersonal or group communication.

And I suspect critics of the reform are now quietly rubbing their hands for appeals to such values as communications' theory is precisely the kind of "utilitarian", "pragmatic", "anthropocentric" and "ethical" values they assert have corrupted the true values of the liturgy.

However, this emphasis on being able to see the priest made him and his role in the liturgy central to the whole event. And this dynamic (one actor with an audience) is actually a hangover from the eucharistic spirituality that Vatican II set out to challenge.

More than good communications

But did those who implemented the reform in parishes sell it short? Was it simply a matter of communications?

Perhaps it was something far more fundamental. Indeed, was it so fundamental an aspect of the reform that neither they nor their congregations could take on-board the rationale of the shift in one move? Therefore, they "explained it" by simplification – and in the process traduced it?

I believe that this is exactly what happened: in well-intentioned attempts to communicate "the changes" in the liturgy, they opted to use "communication" as the rationale for the new physical arrangements.

And once that road was embarked upon, then every arrangement had to be explained in a similar fashion: it must be seen by all, all the time.

The ecclesiastical jumble

The result is, primarily, a lack of awareness of the deeper demands of the reforms that led to the change in orientation, and, accidentally, the creation of sanctuary areas that are scenes of clutter resembling ecclesiastical suppliers' showrooms.

We have the altar, the chair (and maybe a few extras for others who want to be close to the action or an old *sedilia* for servers), a lectern in front of the chair (sometimes), an ambo (often squeezed up beside the altar, a baptismal font (usually of minimal proportions but still prominent and distracting), a Paschal Candle, a tabernacle, a cross, with often another one on the altar and yet another processional cross, and a couple of tables just to hold odds and ends.

This does not include the extra jumble needed for children's Masses, nor the Christmas arrangements when there is a crib in front of the altar with a little star-shaped electric light and a Christmas Tree.

Nor does it mention the need to get musicians into a close-to-the-center location, organ consoles, or additional points with microphones for music directors.

And we should not forget the various flags, banners, posters and "symbols" that are located there; nor, of course, the apparatus for taking up the collection that clutter around the Table of the Lord.

Meanwhile, all this is still explained by the need "to communicate", despite the fact that what we all see is a classic case of information overload!

The ancient basilican arrangement

So why did Vatican II want the president facing others in the assembly and every building to have the ancient basilican arrangement?

The fundamental rationale of the reform was the renewed awareness of the early and patristic understanding of the assembly as gathered around the Table of the Lord.

The Eucharist is many things, but in its fundamental form it is a meal of eating and drinking, a banquet, a *sacrum convivium*. And its visible focus is the visible focus of a meal: a table.

We may interpret that table theologically as an altar – the table is "our altar" as distinct from the altar in the Jerusalem temple or the many altars found in ordinary homes of non-Jews in antiquity – but it is, in its own reality, first and last, a table.



Our vocation is to the table: "And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom of God" (Lk 13,29)

The Lord gathers us at his table: there we discover his presence and bless the Father.

The table is at once in unity with our own tables – for a table is a reality of the ordinary world – and in union with the table of the heavenly banquet.

The table transcends the dichotomy, which is a false dichotomy for Christians, of the sacred and the profane: the domestic is the locus of the sacred.

The Lord has come to our table, we gather at his.

We can interpret the table in many ways. Interpreting it as "an altar" has been the most common, but our eucharistic thinking must start with what it is.

This use of the word "table" did, of course, produce allergic reactions to Catholics of an older generation.

Protestants had the "holy table" or brought out a table for a "communion service". We Catholics had "an altar" – and the physical object in a church-building was never referred to by any other name: it was an altar, and altars were for sacrifice!

Sadly, we assumed we knew what sacrifice meant: usually we just borrowed a pagan notion of something that could be seen as a down-payment to the gods. In this we traduced the

Eucharist.



On this pre-Vatican II mensa, the four vestigial legs of the table – now only decoration – are identified by arrows.

Despite the confusions over what we were thinking about when we used the words "altar" and "sacrifice", we still referred to "the *mensa*" in many of the rubrics.

More importantly, the shape never took on that of either an Old Testament nor a pagan altar; and it was expected that a vestigial four legs (just like the table I am writing upon) should appear as four columns or pilasters on the front of 'the altar.'

The problem with tables

There is only one problem with tables: you cannot just use them in any old way, they create their own space for us as dining animals!

Let us imagine the smallest possible table gathering: two people meeting for a cup of coffee in a café.

Unless they are not focused on their own meeting – i.e. they want to watch a TV or computer screen rather than talk to one another – they will take up positions opposite one another across the table.

The table creates a common space, a space of eating and talking, and of sharing a common reality in a way that cannot take place when people sit side-by-side at a bar.

If you are alone it is as easy to sit at a bar and eat, drink, read the paper or play with your phone as at table (and you do not risk having a stranger sit opposite you).

But if two people go to drink instant coffee or have a magnificent meal together, then they will face one another. We watch each other eating, and around the table we become a community – however transient – and not just two individuals.



This is also a space of deep communication between us as people: we can share our thoughts with our food, we can pick up all the richness of facial expression, tone, body language – and really communicate.

This is the communication we long for as human beings, not "the communications" of the media or of communications' theory that is better described as information transfer.

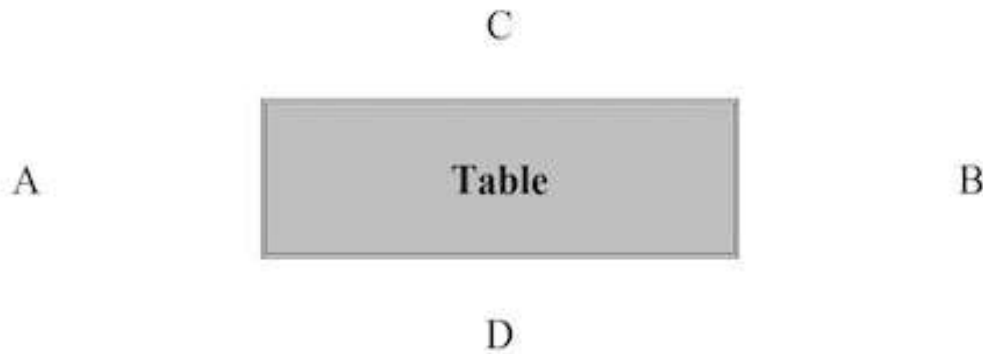
The table is an intimate place. Yet, curiously, it is also a public space, a place of respect for one another (hence "table manners") and a place where our humanity and our relations with other humans are enhanced.

The importance of the table is written as deep in our humanity as anything else. It is studied by behavioral scientists, anthropologists, and psychologists. But it suffices here to remind

ourselves of the references to tables in the psalms (e.g.: Ps 23,5; 79,19; or 123,3) or the gospels (e.g.: Mt 8,11; 9,10; 15,27; 26,7; 26,20).

The table is at the heart of our humanity, and, consequently, at the heart of our liturgy.

But what of a table with more than two people? The fundamental logic continues:



We arrange ourselves around the table and create roughly equal spaces between each other.

This continues until we have used up all the space around the table. And then, traditionally, we extend the table into the longer form we find at banquets, in refectories and mess halls, and even in domestic dining rooms where the table "pulls out" for those occasions when we have extra guests.

Our common table

The Eucharist is our common table as Christians and our sacred table as guests of the Lord. It was to re-establish this fundamental table-logic that stood behind the changes of Vatican II.

The move in the president's direction was not that "he could face the people" in serried ranks of pews, nor be visible as a science teacher's bench must be visible to her class, nor as a lecturer on a podium – but so that if he stood at the Lord's Table, everyone else could arrange themselves around that table *as human beings do*.

But is this not simply impossible? How does one put hundreds of people at a packed Sunday Mass around a table? People need to be in pews, which means that only the president can be at the table!

Well, first, the shift in the position of the table has been done in most buildings in a minimal way. It was just "pulled out from the wall", rather than made the center of a space for the assembled banqueting community.

Second, in many places it has been found possible to create a long table in an otherwise uncluttered space and arrange well over hundred people to stand around it such that all could see they were gathered around the Lord's Table.

And third, the Eucharist is a human-sized event. Gatherings of over a hundred should be considered very exceptional, as, indeed, they were for most of Christian history.

However, it is important to note just how deeply set this reality of "being around the table" is within our tradition.

First of all, in the directions for gathering at meals, which come from Jewish sources contemporaneous with the earliest Christian meals, we find that when the guests assembled, they had a cup of wine ("the first cup") and each said the blessing individually.

Then they went to the table and there was another cup ("the second cup") and now one person blessed for all. The reason for the shift is explicitly spelled out: only when they were at table were they a community, and so only then could one bless for all.

Now think again about the Last Supper, the other meals of Jesus, the blessing of the cup in 1 Corinthians, or the ritual instructions for the community meals in the *Didache*.

Second, consider the words of the traditional Roman Eucharistic Prayer ("the Roman Canon" = Eucharistic Prayer I in the reformed rite):

Memento, Domine,

famulorum famularumque tuarum

et omnium circumstantium, ...

A literal rendering (still too daring for the supposedly literalist translation of 2011 sought by Pope Benedict) supposes the "sanctuary" arrangement that existed when the text was created but which would find little favor with that prayer's greatest modern enthusiasts:

Remember, O Lord,

your male servants and your female servants,

indeed all who are standing around...

Could it be that the venerable Roman Canon assumes that the community, both men and women, are standing around the Table of the Lord?

And third, we have from the late patristic and early medieval periods directions for how the broken parts of the loaf are to be arranged on the paten, and these often assume that the arrangement around the paten's rim reflect the people around the table.

A secular import?

So, once again, table gathering is not a new "secular" or imported idea as many of the opponents of the liturgical reform of the Second Vatican Council argue. Rather, it is a return to the depths of our own tradition.

If we start thinking about the reformed, Vatican II orientation not as "priest facing people" or "people looking at priest", but as *the whole community gathered around an actual table* we have the following:

- a more authentic expression of the Eucharist;
- a deeper appreciation of the many prayers of the liturgy that suppose this physical arrangement;
- an awareness that the Eucharist is the action of the whole community; and
- a help in seeing the links between this central liturgy and the rest of our lives.

We also see how shallow has been our taking up of the reforms of Vatican II over the last half-century.

There is a basic theological truth at stake here: the Lord has come to our table, we gather, as a priestly people, at his.

A fuller renewal, with a deeper appreciation of its inherent logic, is going to mean more shifting around in buildings, a gradual exposure of the ideas so that people feel comfortable with them and see why we are abandoning the "theatre-and-stage" arrangements.

We should note that it will run into cultural problems in that many modern households do not eat together at a table at home and so lack a basic human experience upon which grace might build the community of the Lord's Table.

But both the present arrangements of the expert being visible at his bench, and pre-reformed notion of only one person at the table – in effect not facing the same way as the people but turning his back on them and keeping them away from the table behind him and railings – are fundamentally flawed as being neither true to Christian tradition nor human nature.

The table is our destiny.

When Jesus heard him, he marveled, and said to those who followed him, "Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 8,10-11).

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