

Chapter vi: *Not facing the altar.*

EVERYTHING'S LEAPT AHEAD since our last chapter, and everything's become, in various ways, darker.

These notes are trudging through the rites of the Mass so deliberately and slowly we're lapped every chapter by Mass itself. Now we've been outpaced even by the year. When we began it was bright early autumn, and the liturgical season was Trinity, greener than the leaves. Now, with some of the leaves still hanging on, the Church has already swept on into Advent, suddenly putting on her purple. For the coming of Christ at Bethlehem is at hand, which puts her in mind of His coming again, when Heaven and earth will flee away at the blaze of His Face, unhidden. As the year dims toward its extinction, the Church stares beyond all years to the end of Time. From now until Christmass she'll be in a mood not exactly penitential, as in Lent, but sober and abstracted.

Today we mark the start of the Advent season with the Litany, with a procession, with a harangue of a sermon by a visiting preacher famous throughout the Anglican Communion for his profound and magnificent gloom. Now and for the rest of Advent we omit the great anthem of *Gloria in excelsis* from Mass – just at the moment our freeze-frames were, with jerky motion, about to *reach* the *Gloria*. The normal shape of Mass is transformed by the approaching birth.

Instead of trying to describe in detail the extraordinary pattern of Advent Sunday worship – which would take longer than Advent! – *The Freeze-frame Mass* breaks off this chapter to rage against a quite different dimming of light: an unnecessary, unscheduled but (thank God)

reversible darkening. I refer (roll of kettle-drum, please; immense minor chord on the organ) to the radical liturgical reforms that began in the 1960s: most importantly, most catastrophically, the quirk of putting the priest on the far side of the altar, facing in the opposite direction to everyone else.

Orientation

IN OUR SUCCESSION OF FROZEN MOMENTS we're up to the Collect for Purity. The priest stands facing the altar to speak *to* God *for* mankind.

In our last chapter we discussed how this orientated prayer, prayer offered in the direction of the altar at the east end of the church, prayer offered in a straight line in the direction of the rising sun, is the essence of liturgical order. But you won't find in many places outside Ascension and St Agnes; we are gazing, in this freeze-frame, at what most of the Church regards as quaint. Orientation was lost almost everywhere else in the disjunction of the 1960s, and this loss was enough to derange everything else. The 'Westward Position' is the essence of liturgical disorder.

The rite you see celebrated here every week, the rite celebrated throughout the West for over a thousand years, has been twisted inside out and shattered. What we describe in these notes is true of very few churches. The Eastward Position is so fundamental to liturgy that almost every detail of our devotion at Ascension and St Agnes, and thus all twenty chapters of *The Freeze-frame Mass*, are irrelevant to what most of the contemporary, Westward-Positioned Church is up to. Or, alternatively: the liturgical quirks of the contemporary Church are irrelevant to these notes, and could be ignored – except that I do want to say exactly why I believe the rite described in these notes, and enjoyed for fourteen or fifteen centuries of Christian triumph, are life and hope, and Westward innovation perverse. For by perverting that gesture of Eastwardness, the Church has muddied her worship and lost her way. She has chosen to cloud her lights, and is stumbling about. The whole shape of the Mass buckles, so the wounded rite drifts off uncertainly into dimmer and dimmer spaces

I have no doubt that she will find her way out eventually, back out of her *cul de sac*, and reorient herself. She'll recover the classic shape of worship, lined up eastward towards a high altar, and she'll recover all (or most) of what goes with the eastward gaze. These notes describe pretty much what the Mass will be like in A.D. 2100 – and I hope in 2020. But they do not describe what Masses are generally like in 2001, and before we go on with our freeze frames, we ought to reflect *how* the fashionable way of celebrating the Christian Mysteries is so calamitously different.

Digression: an experiment in social history

WHY THIS CALAMITY happened is no doubt too huge a question to answer properly – but I'm going to sound off for the length of a section anyway.

(Yes, do skip on if you don't like this sort of thing.)

The cultural revolution of the 1960s was a weird aberration of the sort that afflicts our civilisation every so often. It's hard to read the history of the heretic 1520s, deist 1720s, Jacobin 1790s, Bolshevik 1930s or hippie 1960s without thinking of hysteria. There's something in the West's bloodstream that makes for occasional bouts of frantic auto-vandalism. For as long as these bouts last, almost everyone (anyway, everyone who is, or wants to be, young) loses his head, and rants in slogans which are unquestioned, although the ink is still wet on them, and these slogans are in a sense unanswerable, because they are too silly to refute. It's impossible to *argue* with "Salvation through faith alone"; "Whatever is, is right"; "We hold these truths to be self-evident"; "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity"; "No enemies on the Left"; "Make love not war". They're not mistaken ideas because they're not actually ideas. But for a while everyone cries *After millennia of oppression we have discovered the self-evident truth!*, and smashes up the eternal verities; while everyone who is not sucked into these earnest excitements gets denounced as square, Tory, obscurantist, monk or fogey.

These anarchic bouts do not last long. In the 1960s soap was abolished, in the 1790s the month of May, in the 1720s evil; well, these

abolitions soon came unstuck. Indeed reaction, when it comes, can itself be unhealthily swift and grumpy.

Thus the worst characteristics of the Age of Aquarius (messianic politics, interventionist economics, pacifism, the arrogant alienation of youth, pseudo-Eastern pseudo-mysticism) have already been so thoroughly obliterated that 'liberal' itself is a term of abuse. We might suspect that in this reaction is overdone. In some aspects of our civilisation, to be fair, we may have seen permanent changes (sexual mores, soft drugs). But in most (painting, literature, sexual taste, the cult of plastic, social manners, even popular music) we are well on the way to recovering pre-psychedelic balance, or blandness: the 1960s may as well not have happened. We're all fogies now, so remote from flower-power daydreams that we can detect in, say, Lyndon Johnson's legislation, or Bob Dylan's lyrics, or Brutalist architecture, a certain quirky period charm.

But a few corners of Western culture – universities, the Church, diet – remain weirdly trapped in the 1960s, and in these corners there is no period charm. (Is it simply that academe and religion and nutritional 'science' are so hierarchical that late middle-age always dominates, regardless of sense? We have to endure the quirks of badly-corked bishops, professors and food gurus – now *there's* a Sixties word – because they were born in the '30s and '40s, and thus youths in the epoch of long hair.) For whatever reason, the yippies are as noxious as ever in English Departments, and beatnik bishops are not mellow antiques. For whatever reason, the Church has let herself become, in terms of cultural history, a joke. And it is no fun being a fogey, which is to say normal, within the contemporary Church, where the ruling party still appeals to the spirit of the collectivist Sixties with the grim relish of Brezhnevite *apparatchiks* on the eve of *glasnost*.

If anyone under forty enters a church nowadays – and, unsurprisingly, fewer and fewer of us do – he is startled by a museum-perfect recreation of the spirit of 1968, exact down to such details as slang, sub-Jefferson Airship music, infantile slogans sewn onto day-glo hangings, strident informality, nylon costumes, strained glee. Good God! we say: hippiedom! it's a 'happening'! it's a 'pray in'! – all good for a

laugh, unless we see through the nonsense to the eternal sense, and regret with a pang what we have missed. And the spectacle is worst for those old enough to remember the Church before her fit of modernism: for them –

it's as though ... one's revered, dignified and darling old mother had slapped on a mini-skirt and fishnet tights and started ogling strangers. A kind of menopausal madness, a sudden yearning to be attractive to all. It is tragic and hilarious and awfully embarrassing. And of course, those who knew her before feel a great sense of betrayal and can't bring themselves to go and see her any more.¹

So remarks Rose, an alarming lapsed Roman Catholic character in a rare, acidic novel by Alice Thomas Ellis.

The Church's modernist mania will not last. We can be so certain it won't last that the issue becomes how to manage the inevitable reaction. For it would be tragic if ecclesial counter-revolution, when it comes, not only recovers liturgical order, but hurries us into theological and moral fundamentalism

But that issue's too vast for these notes, which are only meant as an account of the Mass as it was, and as it will be – and still is at Ascension, even in these last dim years when the tide of psychedelic idiocy, long ebbed everywhere else, lingers in the rock-pool of the Church Catholic. *On this rock I will build My Church, and the gates of Hell, promises Our Lord, shall not prevail against it* (Matthew xvi¹⁸); nor will the shabby impulses behind Rite II.

So much for social history.

The rightness of the Eastward Position.

LAST CHAPTER WE WERE REFLECTING on how the people – or, to give you your more honorable and correct title, the Faithful – witness the sacrifice being made. The old word for this work was assist: the Faithful assist at the Mysteries by watching them and through faith perceiving, with awe, joy and love, what occurs. This outward work done

¹ Alice Thomas Ellis, *The Sin Eater* (1998), pp. 98-99 in the Moyer Bell hardback.

is by looking hard at the altar, not by disappearing into introspection. Mass is about God, not about clerical performers or audiences. Awe is self-forgetful.

The corollary is that even the priest who offers the sacrifice of Christ's Body and Blood is primarily offering it to God, not just presiding over a family meal. His gaze ought to be Godward – which is to say, eastward – not toward his people. Hence the figure in the dance of the Mass with which we finished last chapter, with the altar party leading mankind's march up toward God.

Were things always like this in church? Not quite. In the Roman Empire a basilica was a public building with a large nave and a road, semi-circular apse where the magistrate or governor sat, surrounded by his officers, facing the people. Early Christian basilicas inherited this pattern, which on the whole worked well enough. The bishop and lesser clergy sat in a semi-circle well behind the elevated altar, facing the Faithful. But as the idea of sacrifice became clearer, and as Christian clergy became more aware of offering to God, for themselves and all mankind living and dead, the one acceptable 'oblation', the clergy naturally became uncomfortable about facing a different way from everyone else. Fourteen centuries ago the celebrant came round and stood on the same side of the altar as the Faithful (and when the clergy sat, they sat on sedilla, facing sideways).

This custom is called the Eastward Position: the celebrant and his ministers, when they stand, position themselves, like everyone else, east.

Every Mass in the mediæval Church was offered like this. In England there was a quirk after the Reformation. Such frequent changes and reactions afflicted the English Church throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that the rubrics, or liturgical instructions, couldn't keep pace with history. Through a misunderstanding of an outmoded rubric, English priests found themselves for more than a century perched at the thin north end of their altars, awkwardly celebrating Mass sideways, on the extreme brink of the Holy Table. But this bizarre procedure disappeared in the nineteenth century, when liturgical scholarship and taste revived, and most priests of our Communion went

back to their proper place at the head of the Faithful, in the face of God's board.

Now, in our present freeze-frame, we can see our celebrant standing at the altar, uttering the Collect for Purity to God on behalf of us all; and of course he faces east. His deacon stands immediately behind him, his subdeacon behind the deacon. They are at the head of a cavalcade of humanity mounting up to God, and soon the celebrant will be offering up – for us, to God – the sacrifice itself. It is not that he is rudely showing his back to the Faithful, any more than the Faithful have their backs to each other. God in a Christian church is not diffuse. We align ourselves toward Him by facing the altar. Our clergy are facing God with us.

This is a classic shape you see this moment in our freeze-frame. It makes the essential Catholic Christian concept of physical presence and sacrifice visible. As long as we obey the thousand-year old practice of the Church and celebrate Mass like this, facing the altar, we cannot go far wrong in our theology. To understand this present freeze-frame thoroughly is to understand the Faith. The pattern we see in this frozen instant, with celebrant, deacon and subdeacon leading our procession up to God at the altar, is perfect. How could anyone want to twist or invert this pattern? – Ah! –

The wrongness of the Westward Position

THE MEN WHO ORGANISE CRICKET, eager for the game to keep pace with the Space Age, rescinded in 1964 one little rule of the game, the one that decreed wooden bats. Now bats may be clad in ferro-concrete. It is remarkable how much inverting this one tradition has disintegrated the ancient sport of cricket. Since almost every blow shatters a ball, only rich boys can afford to play. The weight of the new bats wrecks most players' elbows before they're thirty. Since almost every ball is knocked out of the stadiums, the crowds are almost gone. To make the remaining crowds feel more comfortable, team uniforms have been abandoned and players wear imaginative *mardi gras* costumes: but the crowds get thinner still. So the Marylebone Cricket Club further

simplified the rules, abolishing the idea of winning or losing games: strangely, even fewer people came. As a more desperate gesture, tennis balls have been allowed to replace

That's a lie. Or rather it's a parable: this is what has happened to the liturgy of the Church. Just having the celebrant go round to the opposite side of the altar and stand gaping at us is enough to wreck the whole high sport of eucharist. All sorts of things that worked in the Western rites suddenly don't work because the priest is facing the wrong way.

Of course there have been other drastic changes changes to the Mass, especially for our Roman Catholic cousins. But even for them it is the violent reversal of orientation that matters, even more than the violent transition from Latin to substandard vernacular. As Rose sternly reports:

The last time I went to Mass – and it *was* the last time – there was the P.P. [parish priest] facing the congregation, standing behind his table and joining in the singing of the negro spirituals and the pop songs and Shall-we-gather-at-the-river. There has always been a hint of catering about the Mass, but previously the priest had the dignity of a master chef busying himself with his *specialité*. Now he seems like a singing waiter in charge of an inadequate buffet. One is tempted to stroll up and ask for a double martini and enquire who on earth forgot to put the doings on the canapés. I wonder why they didn't keep the real Mass for me and just bring in this one for the kiddies and the mentally subnormal?²

I quote Alice Thomas Ellis for her pungent prose; these notes would not themselves be so severe or flippant. But if the disruption in worship is great as Rose says, might it not be – like the Reformation that afflicted the Church of England four centuries ago – a perilous brush with heresy?

Origins of the Westward Position: a heretic sensibility

HERESIES CAN BEGIN IN THE MIND, but more often in the bowels: through intellectual error, but more commonly through skewed sensibility. There's been a certain religious sensibility over the

² Ellis, pp. 97-98.

last few centuries, subjective and shallowly optimistic, which is pleased by no dogma and no rites, and worships only what it calls the spirit of love within man. *For me, God is about reaching out to others. For me, God is I can pray just as well in my heart as in those big hard stone churches O why must you present me with all these hard, controversial, worrying doctrines: why can't you just speak to me of Love? Don't all the churches and all the religions come down to that in the end – love and fellowship?*

To which nonsense we reply in terrible voices: *caro mea vera est cibus, My flesh is meat indeed* – which is to say, the definitive coming of God is in flesh and in bread, things as external and objective as they can be (and therefore complicated and subtle, as all real things are). Christianity concerns material and external things: for

*God's own descent
Into flesh was meant
As a demonstration
That the supreme merit
Lay in risking spirit
In substantiation.
Westerners inherit
A design for living
Deeper into matter –*

my thanks to Donald Keener for drawing our attention to the long poem *Kitty Hawk*, by Robert Frost, a Massachusetts Protestant, but also a poet intrepid of metre and not afraid of thinking. This is indeed exactly the genius of Western civilisation. Our *design for living*, in religion as in science, is progress *deeper into matter*. Our Faith becomes not vague and vaguer, not more and more 'spiritual' (which generally means *vapid*), but more material, more exact, more tangible. *God becomes flesh*. At the focus of our church lies, not a nebulous sense of fellowship, but a massive stone block, 39 inches high. At the core of our faith is God present as a Near Eastern artisan, in a flake of bread, at the east end of a church.

It's hard not to think that skewed sensibility, heresy of feeling, lies behind the unravelling of Christian liturgy over the last forty years. Classic liturgy – the way the Church has spoken to God and been spoken

to by God for fifteen centuries, the Catholic tradition of worship – flouts the silly idea that God exists mainly inside us. We walk into church and we bow our bodies down before a stone oblong. We spend Mass gazing toward that. Our priest stands at that oblong visibly offering a God beyond us actual bread and wine. Our present freeze-frame of Mass has the celebrant praying *for* us all; and therefore he faces *away* from us, facing into the mystery of God.

There: this traditional pattern of Eucharistic worship defies any possible of misunderstanding. Grasp this choreography and you've grasped Catholicism. The traditional pattern and the heretical sensibility, foolish, sentimental, internalising, which I have tried to describe, contradict each other, and have clashed against each other for two centuries.

And in the 1960s it was the traditional pattern that gave way.

Topsyturvydom

SINCE THE 1960s – decade rich in dignity and taste! – it has been the custom for Christian bishops to express their humility, their self-abasing love of God's earth (ground too holy to tread), their horror of being merely stiff-necked, their sacramental distinction from the rest of mankind, their pious horror of looking mere laics in the eye, by going about upside-down. You may have seen the wheeled cages they employ at Mass and other such public functions, with rubber halters, hanging from the top bars, bound round their gaitered legs. Immense silken ropes hold their copes as perfectly upright as the wings of sleeping bats; on the floors of these cage are affixed metallic mitres, modified into amply padded head-holders (not unlike enamelled egg-cups fit for the eggs of the fabled Roc); atop their croziers, after the manner of inverted pogo-sticks, are disks of india-runner, allowing their lordships to shove themselves along the ground at some speed. It is true a certain awkward dexterity is required to get one's head between the bars, that one may with safety reverence the episcopal ring; tragic mishaps have befallen confirmation candidates, who must now dive from trampolines so their heads can brush an outstretched apostolic palm; indeed, intractable

reactionaries have dared to carp about the ramps, garage doors, industrial lifts and cranes that have had to be inserted into churches to accommodate this innovation. But all modern-minded churchmen continue to applaud the ritual naturalness and ease of the new Headward Position. Indeed, it is a melancholy thought that throughout the Age of Superstition, thousands of years long as it was, Christians failed to hit on such an obvious reform as the Headward Position, enduring all that while the oppressive eyesore of bishops standing upright –.

That's also a lie, but not an exaggeration. My fantasy's no more grotesque than the truth. The Headward Position for bishops, which doesn't exist, is no weirder than the Westward Position, which unhappily is now the almost universal rule at Mass all over the planet. The Second Vatican Council imposed it on the Roman Catholic Communion at the same time as the almost equally momentous change from Latin to the vernacular. Most Anglican churches hastened to ape the novelty. The catastrophe's global.

Now I know how wearing it is to hear clergymen bitch about each other's ritual habits. His children having hanged themselves in a wardrobe, gloomy Thomas Hardy's gloomy hero Jude, feeling particularly low, spies two clergymen whom he assumes are murmuring about his troubles. Jude is vexed, listening more closely, to find that they're not: "No – they're not talking of us. . . . They are two clergymen of different views, arguing about the eastward position. Good God – the eastward position, and all creation groaning!"³ Well, I don't care, I think the Eastward Position matters enormously (and would matter even more if creation were as grim as Hardy thought). The loss of it is a heartblow not only to our Faith but to our civilisation. Here's why.

The result: actual heresy?

MASS IS DINNER. Dinner requires a dining table, so that God may give to man. Mass is sacrifice. Sacrifice requires an altar, so that man may offer to God. The traditional rites tried to make it

³ Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, chapter xlv; downloaded from <http://elf.chaoscafe.com/hardy/jude/>

clear that Mass was dinner and sacrifice, offered on a table that was also an altar and an altar that was nonetheless a dining table. – Of course any good thing can be overdone, and there was a *rococo* taste for altars that were merely ledges in a huge vertical edifice designed primarily for exposing the Blessed Sacrament; thus the notion of a table was rather blurred. But almost always, until Vatican II and its imitators wrecked it, the Eastward Position made it clear what Mass was about.

The superficial logic of the Westward reform was that it was more chummy, more democratic and better acoustically to have the priest face the Faithful while he was talking to them (that he was talking *for* them *to* God dropped out of sight). The theological impulse was to emphasise Mass as a fellowship meal. The archæological fact of basilicas with back-to-front altars, fourteen centuries ago, was presented as justification. Then the hammer blows began. For all churches, for fourteen centuries, have been built eastward. To accomodate this freakish westward their shape has to be smashed up, in one of three ways.

Altars have sometimes been prised off the east wall, so the priest can slide in behind, between altar and altarpiece. When he genuflects he tends to disappear from sight, which is comic, but at least a real altar remains at the east end, and when the priest is not clambering about behind it, orientated prayer remains possible. – This is generally what has happened in Anglican churches.

Or, a slightly worse option: the real altar is abandoned to dust, and stands forlorn, with the priest's back to it, while an unrelated second, smaller altar's rigged up well to the west, in what used to be the chancel. – This is the usual Roman Catholic pattern.

Or else (following the ghastly logic to its conclusion) the whole idea of direction is lost, and the church is rearranged in a circle (much like an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, and not much more reverent in appearance): the congregation appears to be worshipping itself.

All three options look awkward, but that's not so important as the slide into sub-Christian ways of thought which they provoke. Really, there is no such thing as a westard-facing *altar*. For once they are swivelled, and placed between priest and people, altars shrink. Nave altars are almost always flimsy affairs, stone dwindling to wood, wood

dwindling to plastic-coated pasteboard. They become horribly like buffet trollies, bird-baths, card-tables. no one could conceivably reverence such a card-table, with the priest's feet visible under it. Such things do not appear to function as altars at all. They are merely tables. Therefore Mass is not a meal and a sacrifice, it feels merely like a meal.

What has happened? Mass is, among many other things, a fellowship meal, but by crudely seizing on this one aspect and turning the Rite upside-down to emphasis the reformers have ruined the harmonies, and Mass comes to look like *merely* a club dinner. And once it looks like that, that's how we come to think of it. There's an ancient saying in the Church: *lex orandi, lex credendi*: the law of worship is the law of belief. The pattern of rites works itself into the mind as the pattern of faith. That's one reason the Church always paid such detailed attention to preserving and developing the exact words of her liturgies. One misstep, and the rite is dimmed, the appearance is blurred, the imagination of the Church starts listing, then her faith drifts off course, and what began as a heresy of sensibility has become a full-blown loss of the Faith.

The Westward Position, breaking with more than a millennium of Christian teaching and prayer, was such a misstep. I *defy* anyone to produce a liturgy produced since the Sixties reforms which does not slight the doctrines of objective action in the Mass: real presence, sacrifice, and indeed communion of the saints and absolution. Of course: if God is not honoured on a stone altar, outside ourselves, beyond us, off to the east, but on some makeshift trestle, of course we're going to lose our grip on the idea of His objective, revealed, physical presence. How can a sacramental Faith not be eclipsed when the sacramental rite is drastically recast to be so informal it hardly look like a rite at all?

Before the Church had finished composing the New Testament, she was struck with the insight that that the simple ceremony of Mass – it was still simple then – was as much a sacrifice to Heaven as any elaborate hetacomb of garlanded oxen felled with silver axes. Realising this, she elaborated the rites of Mass to make the sacrifice apparent, and Christians boasted, when they were still meetign secretly in houses, *Habemus altare, We have an altar*. Mass was offered, said Tertullian, in *High and open places, and facing the light*. The contemporary 'nave altar' is a low place,

facing away from the light. *Habemus altare?* Not visibly. We can hardly doubt what such visual absence does to the Christian imagination.

There was the P.P. facing the congregation, standing behind his table, complains the ominous Rose; and she sees (p. 96) where this is heading: *they're creeping up on transubstantiation, circling it with a net. It'll be the next to go, and then heigh ho for the gates of Hell.*

A few more things

WHEN OUR PRIEST FACES GOD from the same side of the altar as us is that he is not facing us. That was a coincidental benefit of the Eastward Position. Clerical personality is kept in check, first by the cloaking anonymous chasuble, then by having his face turned toward God, as our faces are. He was patently a servant of the Church, speaking to God for the Church, occasionally turning round to speak for God to us – announcing the words of absolution, for instance. No one could possibly think the Mass was about *him*.

But according to the Sixties reform, the celebrant stands behind the altar, at the focus of attention, in the opposite direction to everyone else, and celebrates *toward* us. Again awkward echoes awake in the mind: of newsreaders, of television chefs: *Now he seems like a singing waiter in charge of an inadequate buffet.* And once we *begin* flaunting our celebrant (by having him ignore the God direction, the east, and gaze west at us) it is hard to stop. He becomes a more and more prominent presence.

One of the results of the liturgical reforms which has surprised its proponents most is the increase of clerical egotism and self-indulgence. Would anyone deny that these are faults that have increased in the last few decades? And it is strange that anyone should be surprised, when the celebrant is now shunted into the visual apex of the church.

Catholicism is not some arbitrary code. The Catholic Faith is so rational and tightly knit that you can find a door into the core of Catholicism from anything at all, and a quick route in from any part of our rites – from the very flames, for instance, the little shaking fire on the candles on the altar. For those flames playing on candles of pure beeswax,

gathered by bees from flowers, are said to be like Christ's divinity, dancing on His pure Flesh, gathered mysteriously from that lily Our Lady. Grasp what the very altar candles are like, and you are near the core of the Catholic Faith.

The Protestant creed is deadly error; the first Protestants were dead wrong, but they were not idiots, and they applied their wrongness accurately. The first thing the Reformation did to each English parish church was smash up its altar, suppress the word *altar* (which is still taboo with some Protestants), and place a plain wooden table in the middle of the church. The recovery of Catholic truth was signalled, under St Charles and again at the Restoration, by the restoring of the word and thing *altar*., restored to its rightful place at the East End.

Thus, as it happens, the Anglican communion has been here before Understanding these monumental tables is thus a fine, provocative password into the heart of Catholic Christian faith. Having them in the right place anchors the Faith. We know what happened when, under Edward VI and then under the tyrant Cromwell, altars were moved and turned into mere tables. It seems extraordinary that we should follow our Roman Catholic brothers into disorientation when we know what it's like!

W HAVE OBSERVED IN THESE NOTES – gloomy as they have been – how, during a weird truant decade in our social history, the Nineteen-Sixties, a certain destructive impulse was loosed in the Church as elsewhere, and had done more lasting mischief in the Church than in most aspects of human life. Particularly, by discarding over a thousand years of development in the eucharistic rites, the reformers have impoverished our liturgy, and left it looking like a mere ritualised club meal, designed to inculcate human fellowship. Thus the Mass is no longer defended by its appearance from a heretical sensibility that has been around for some centuries, and imagines the divine to exist only *inside* humanity, and indeed inside human emotions.

That is not to say the Church has slid into heresy. An upside-down bishop could, by heroic efforts, perform all the duties of apostolic office, although the fun would certainly have gone out of it. Cricket of a sort could be played with concrete bats, by fanatic loyalists, always wittingly or unwittingly nostalgic for the real game. Occasionally, and in necessity, Mass is said with reverence on a bedside table in hospital. So yes, it is even possible for a priest habitually to celebrate Mass confronting his people over (and under) a wobbly plywood card-table covered with laminated nylon, and to celebrate it with the doctrines of real Presence and sacrifice. On this ignoble and ridiculous 'altar' he may ardently offer the unspeakable gift for the living and of the dead – I've done so, and millions of faithful priests do so every day. It is possible, but it is very hard work.

The Church can survive the quirk of the Westward Position so long as we cling to the truth of God's position outside our selves, outside the shrilly self-congratulatory huddle of many contemporary churchgoers, in the species of Bread (even if it is now an ignoble bun), on the altar (even if the altar looks like nothing of the sort, and is in absolutely the wrong place). We can keep the faith in such weird circumstances, but it is hard, and so may Christ soon shake His dizzy Bride back to her senses!