

New and Corrected Translation of the Mass – Part 8

The Collect

After the *Gloria*, the opening prayer of the Mass is said or sung. This is known as the *Collect*. The stress is put on the first syllable: 'COL-lect'. Its peculiar name implies what this prayer is doing. The priest begins, exhorting us, 'Let us pray.' Then there follows a moment's silence while the people silently form their prayers and intentions for this Mass. Only then does the priest pray the *Collect*, which 'collects' the people's prayers and offers them all to the Father, through the Holy Spirit, in the name of Jesus Christ.

Through most of the Church's history, the priest and the people faced the same direction in prayer: to the East, because Christ is our Rising Sun (cf. *Ezekiel 43.2; Isaiah 9.2; Psalm 84.11; Zechariah 3.8; Malachi 4.2; Matthew 24.27; Ephesians 5.14; 1 John 1.5*). The community, as a body, oriented itself to its Head, the Lord. The *Collect* is about the congregation praying with and through its priest, as he 'collects' their prayers and offers them.

The priest facing Christ with the congregation makes sense when understood properly. However, it has been misunderstood as the priest praying 'with his back to the people'. But this is no more strange than the fact that the people in the front row have their backs to the rest of the people, and the people in the first two rows have their backs to people in the third row and further back, and so on.

Orientation is not about who you have your back to. It's about who you face; to whom you are oriented. The danger inherent in the priest saying Mass facing the people is this: the tendency to assume that *he* is focal point of the liturgy. The temptation is as real for the priest as it is for the congregation. The priest appears to be the 'star of the show'. He is not. It is *Christ* who is and must remain in the centre.

To correct this, Pope Benedict has asked for standing crucifixes to be placed on the altar. Then it should be clearer that the priest also is facing Christ, just as the people should be. This cannot be a barrier, because the priest is not the one the people should look at anyway. (Rather, the priest – usually through an exaggerated emphasis on his personality – must be careful not to become a barrier between the people and Christ!) The priest 'collects' the prayers of the people because he is chosen from the people and, more than that, chosen by ordination to offer them in the person of Christ himself. That is why our 'Amen' at the end of the priest's prayers should be a resounding one. We are saying 'Amen' to the prayer of all of us – the prayer of the Body of Christ made through its Head, Christ himself. The early Christians exhorted, '*Let us turn to the Lord.*'