

An End to the North End

In the Michaelmass 2016 edition of *The Prayer Book Today* the Reverend Nick Bundock wrote a moving account of the reintroduction of the *Book of Common Prayer* Holy Communion Service into his parish of Saint James, Didsbury. He originally presented details of this development to Prayer Book Society members at their Annual Conference and their hearts must surely have been gladdened by his news. However, one small detail of the Reverend Bundock's account puzzled me. In an attempt, as he explained, 'to make the experience as authentic as possible', he began the service, 'at the north end of the altar table'.

There was a similar reference in a report by Father John Hunwicke in the Advent 2008 edition of the *Prayer Book Society Journal* in which he told of a visit he had made to a small country parish as a locum priest to celebrate the Holy Eucharist. Before his visit he had been asked by the incumbent to use the *Book of Common Prayer*, 'word for word, *absolutely* word for word!' Father John reported that, after the service, some of the members of the congregation asked him, 'why did you stand at the left hand end of the altar?'

The third introductory rubric in the Prayer Book Order for Holy Communion states:

The Table at the Communion time having a fair white linen cloth upon it, shall stand in the body of the Church, or in the Chancel, where Morning and Evening Prayer are appointed to be said. And the Priest standing at the north side of the Table shall say the Lord's Prayer with the Collect following, the people kneeling.

Historically altars were constructed of stone, generally built adjacent to the east wall of the church. Puritan and evangelical churchmen in the seventeenth century did everything in their power to remove from the liturgy everything which they considered to be sinister (= not scripturally authenticated) rituals, introduced by the Church of Rome. Among these were the so-called manual acts wherein the celebrant, standing with his back to the congregation, broke the Bread, and laid hands on the Bread and on the chalice(s), all in accordance with practices that went back to the Middle Ages and beyond. In his First English Prayer Book of 1549 Archbishop Thomas Cranmer included a set of manual acts which he adapted and

simplified from the complex rubrics of the Sarum Rite. However, he removed these from his 1552 Revised Prayer Book.

To ensure that no actions taken by the priest could be hidden from the congregation, altars were dismantled and replaced with wooden tables which, certainly for Eucharistic celebrations, were positioned, as the Prayer Book rubric quoted above demanded, in the chancel, or in the body of the church. Space constraints dictated that these would almost certainly have been placed on an east/west axis. This significant change, demanded by more radical reformers, began with Nicholas Ridley, Bishop of London (1500–1555), who ordered that all altars had to be removed and replaced by communion tables. He argued that this was in line with the teaching of John Calvin and his Genevan Church. Parallel instruction from other bishops quickly followed.

It should be clearly noted that, in the rubric associated with this table realignment, the priest is instructed to stand at, ‘the north side of the table’; there is no mention of the word ‘end’.

With the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660, and with the reintroduction of less rigorously Puritan churchmanship by the Laudian authorities, stone altars were restored to their original positions, against the east wall, placed, as hitherto, on a north-south axis. Instead of standing at the **north** side of the table, the priest would now stand at the **west** side of the altar.

It is unclear from Father John Hunwick’s report whether he stood at the north end of the altar for the whole of the service. The Reverend Nick Bundock clearly stated that he ‘began the service’ there. Presumably this infers that he moved to a central position for the consecration.

Standing at the ‘end’ of the table or altar surely cannot be what the subsequent revisers of the *Book of Common Prayer* demanded. The original, simplified 1549 manual acts, which stated:

Here the priest must take the bread into his handes.

Here the priest shall take the Cuppe into his handes.

were expanded and reintroduced into the 1662 Prayer Book, as:

- a Here the Priest is to take the Paten into his hands:
- b And here to break the Bread:
- c And here to lay his hand upon all the Bread:
- d Here he is to take the Cup into his hand:
- e And here to lay his hand upon every vessel (be it Chalice or Flagon) in which there is any Wine to be consecrated.

To fulfil these requirements the celebrant would need to stand before the altar. Nowhere, it seems, have there been any rubrics to suggest that the priest should stand at the end of an altar/table for the consecration, and standing at the end for any other part of the rite seems meaningless and an unnecessary affectation. Congregational members may be assured that there is no mystery associated with any of the priests' actions. Our clergy are only doing what Jesus Christ demanded of them at the Last Supper.

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Brief biographical note:

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