

What is “Ad Orientem”?

Why is the priest celebrating with his back to us? He isn't. He could only 'have his back to us', if we were the center of his attention at Mass. But we aren't, God is. The priest is celebrating looking east, in anticipation of the coming of Jesus. Remember the words of the Advent hymn, People Look East? “People, look East. The time is near of the crowning of the year. Make your house fair as you are able, trim the hearth and set the table. People, look East and sing today: Love, the guest, is on the way.”

We have become so familiar to Mass celebrated with the priest facing us that we have forgotten that this is a relatively new innovation both historically and liturgically and actually something that happens only in the modern-day Latin Rite. From early times in the Church and all the way until Vatican II, Mass was celebrated *ad orientem* (towards the east). All of the Eastern Catholic churches still celebrate their Mass (or Divine Liturgy) this way.

The reason is that tradition instructs us that when Jesus comes again, He will be like the rising sun which comes to us from the east. Celebrating while looking in that direction is just another way Catholics worship with our whole bodies, not just with our minds and hearts.

Even in places where the Church is not physically 'oriented' to the East (like here at St. Mark), the common direction of 'liturgical east' (or, everyone facing towards the altar), continues this same experience. It's another way that the liturgy acts as our catechist (teacher), reminding us that we are there in expectation of Jesus' coming to the altar in the Sacrament, in our hearts in prayer and into our bodies in Holy Communion. We are body, mind and soul and Catholic liturgy helps us use all three of these in worshipping God.

For people raised on the Mass celebrated versus *populum* (facing the people), facing east can feel awkward. Some people object that it seems impersonal. Others think it's old fashioned and limits the participation of the people. Still others experience it as being aloof or too formal. Understanding the reasons and symbolism can help us enter more fully into the experience of celebrating facing East. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

When we all celebrate facing East, the priest is part of the people, not separated from them. He is their leader and representative before God and we are all one, together in our posture. Think about all those battle images of generals on horseback—they are facing with their troops, not facing against them. Just so, the priest is visibly part of the people and clearly acts in persona Christi capitis, “in the person of Christ the head,” when we all face the same direction. The Roman/Latin rite is only one of twenty-three different Catholic rites, each with its own particular culture, liturgy and customs, but all in full communion with Rome.

Facing East, the direction of worship is upward and outward to God. We are tempted to be closed in on ourselves as a circle closes in on itself. We are already far too tempted to think that Mass is about us and meeting our own needs. Making a deliberate change to direct ourselves outward and towards God can be a healthy spiritual practice and an antidote to our self-centered tendencies.

But I can't see the priest's face! Facing the same direction helps us focus our attention on God rather than on the priest. So often in a versus *populum* orientation the priest feels that he has to 'perform' like an actor on the stage and the people are often distracted by the priest's personality, for good or for ill. The *ad orientem* direction makes the Mass less about the personality of the priest and more about the mystery that he stands, “in the Person of Christ the High Priest”. The man who is the priest disappears within the vestments (that's a part of their purpose) and when we do not see his face, we are freer to concentrate on God before us. Worship is about attending to God; *ad orientem* worship reduces the distraction of personality and focuses us on Jesus. Think of it this way: if someone points out a beautiful flower or a star in the night sky to you, do you look at him or what he's pointing to? Just so with *ad orientem* worship. The priest is pointing

us to God. Look where he's pointing, not at the one pointing.

Facing East reinforces the mystery of the Mass. We have become so familiar with the actions of the priest;

we sometimes forget the great mystery at the heart of it: that the priest exercises his priesthood in Jesus Himself and it is Jesus really and truly present both standing as the priest and on the altar as the sacrifice. When the priest bends low over the elements and then elevates, first the host and then chalice, we see, for the first time, our Eucharistic Lord emerge from the



priest who is clothed in vestments and mystery. Letting that image settle in can be a profoundly spiritual moment—as it should be.

The priest isn't always turned towards the altar. Notice how there is movement in the liturgy. At times the priest turns to God, at other times he turns towards the people. There is a dialogue and the priest stands between. Whenever the priest is addressing God, he is turned towards the altar (most especially at the Eucharist Prayer). Whenever the priest is addressing the people, he is turned towards them (most especially at the Liturgy of the Word and the Homily).

Didn't Vatican II change all that? This is a common point of confusion. While versus *populum* liturgy was popularized after the Council, *ad orientem* worship still remains the norm for Latin Rite (Roman Catholic) liturgy. The rubrics (instructions) for the Mass still talk about the priest, 'turning towards the people,' because the assumption is that at certain points during the Mass, he is facing the altar. The rubrics are very clear that this is a legitimate and time-honored way of offering even the *novus ordo* (new order of Mass).

Is anyone else doing this? Yes. In fact, many parishes, including some Cathedrals, have taken up this position for regular or seasonal worship. In our own diocese there are several parishes who celebrate Mass *ad orientem*. And by the way, Pope Francis celebrates Mass *ad orientem* at times as well.

What St. Mark Parishioners are saying...

“When we return to Mass, please lead us to Jesus. Please talk about Jesus. Please warn the faithful of hell because of sin and the joys of heaven because of God’s grace. Please teach about reverence. Please don’t assume we know what you wish we did or think we do. Please encourage God’s people to be humble before Him and to kneel at the reception of communion and receive on the tongue. Please don’t be deceived that the Council required you to face us - instead, please turn and lead us to Jesus - help us focus on Him. Please be bold regardless of the cost. The faithful will rise and support you and God will be with you. We will gladly follow you to Him - lets both look at Him and go together to Him.”

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“O, how I love the Mass! When I learned of your plan last year to celebrate Mass in this fashion, I was thrilled. “Ad orientem” literally means “to the east,” which is totally appropriate, for we always fix our gaze in the direction of our returning Lord. And when the celebrant is offering up the Mass, when addressing the Lord, it is only fitting that the celebrant would turn toward Him!

As Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) wrote in *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, “...a common turning to the east during the Eucharistic Prayer remains essential... Looking at the priest has no importance. What matters is looking to the Lord. It is now a question, not of dialogue, but of common worship, of setting off toward the One who is to come.” And a bit later in the chapter, “...what is at issue is not a romantic escape into antiquity, but a rediscovery of something essential, in which Christian liturgy expresses its permanent orientation.”

For me, that is what matters the most: that our worship always be oriented toward the person and work of Jesus Christ. Ad orientem worship down through the ages captures this essence! And what is needed now more than ever is a return to the worship of the Church in all of history - a liturgy that is permanently oriented toward our soon coming King!”

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“I love My Lord and My God with my whole heart and soul. I feel the ad orientem Mass gives me the opportunity to focus all my love and attention on God.

It’s amazing to see my St Mark “family”, including you, Father, together facing Our Lord and giving Him all of our Praise, Honor and Glory! Thank you, Father Bierbaum, for offering this beautiful and reverent Mass at St. Mark Church!

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“Thank you for treating our Lord and Savior with deep respect and honor. It means everything to us that your focus is on God, the sacrifice, and leading us. We absolutely love that you are doing ad orientem now, it helps us in many ways:

We know that the sacrifice of the Mass is to offer Christ to God on behalf of the people. We participate with you in this, but God is the focus, not us.

When you are facing God, we can focus more on God, but also as parents when we have to help our kids, we know you

have it handled up there.

It feels so peaceful to know we are all in this together with you as our father and captain, facing God offering the sacrifice. No worries about “entertaining” us or us “entertaining” you.

“Growing up as a Catholic in the Church post-Vatican II, I had never seen a Mass celebrated ad orientem until a few years ago. I was immediately struck by the beauty and appropriateness of our prayers being lifted directly up to God. My

eyes have always naturally focused on the tabernacle and crucifix at Mass so it seemed so natural and appropriate that the entire congregation would join the priest in lifting our hearts and minds to God. When you have celebrated Mass ad orientem, it makes so clear the sacrificial nature of the Mass as an offering of not only Christ present in the Holy Eucharist to the Father, but also the offering of all of our prayers and lives to God. It has also made the dialogue of the Mass clearer and more evident: when you talk to God, you face Him and when you talk to us, you face us. Celebrating ad orientem has just made the Mass come so much more alive for me and our family. Thank you for your leadership and your pastoral care in faithfully handing on to us the beautiful traditions and teachings of the Church that lead us to a deeper relationship with Christ.”

