Ad Orientem – Common Direction of Prayer

What is *Ad Orientem*?

Ad Orientem simply means "to the East" and refers to the priest celebrant facing the same direction as the people during the Mass (specifically during the Eucharistic Prayer). This beautiful expression of our Catholic faith is sometimes misunderstood today. There are some who label the "old Mass" (the "Tridentine Mass" or "Latin Mass") as the one where the priest has his "back to the people" and the "new Mass" ("Novus Ordo") as the one where the priest "turns toward the people." But praying *Ad Orientem* is less focused on which side of the priest is visible than it is in ushering all of us—priest and congregation—into deeper prayer to the Father as one Church. Contrary to popular belief, when Mass celebrated with the priest facing the people (*versus populum*) was introduced roughly 50 years ago, it was not considered the primary option. Then, as in the current version of the Roman Missal, the default posture of the priest and people is facing the same direction when praying, while it simply *permits* Mass to be celebrated with the priest facing the people. Why is this so?

Spiritual Orientation in the Liturgy

The Liturgy is not our own creation. It has been handed down to us through Apostolic Tradition and is a gift from God—*He teaches us how to worship*. This is not so much a question of whether the clergy face the people as to *Whom* liturgical prayer is oriented. Liturgical prayer, regardless if it is the "Tridentine Mass" or the "Novus Ordo" is directed to the Father, through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. Christ is the "Rising Sun," and we look to the spiritual "East" as the meeting place between God and man. This was the practice from the earliest days, as numerous writings attest:

> "And now we must add a few remarks on the direction in which we should face while praying—north, south, east, and west. It should be immediately clear that the direction of the rising sun obviously indicates that we ought to pray inclining in that direction, an act which symbolizes the soul looking towards where *the true light* rises." — *On Prayer*, Origen (ca. A.D. 231)

Regardless of which physical direction the presider is facing, <u>all</u> of those participating in the Mass should have

their hearts facing “to the East”—that is, towards Christ with whom they pray and offer themselves to the Father.

Sacrificial Nature of the Mass

The Sacrifice of Jesus to the Father is the central Truth of the Liturgy—in fact, it is Jesus Himself who offers true worship of the Father through His perfect self-gift of sacrificial love on Calvary. We are made spiritually present to this sacrifice at each Mass and partake of its fruit in the Eucharist. The Congregation of Divine Worship states, “It would be a grave error to imagine that the principal orientation of the sacrificial action is towards the community.” The priest, acting in *Persona Christi*, offers the One, True, Living Sacrifice of the God-Man to the Father and, as such, stands at the head of the body of believers (that is, the Church) with them and for them. Our participation is to be primarily internal. Cardinal Sarah, prefect emeritus of the Congregation for Divine Worship, notes,

> “The inner life, the life immersed in God and intimately inhabited by God is the indispensable condition for a successful and fruitful participation in the Holy Mysteries... we go to be connected with Christ’s action through an internalization of the external liturgical rites, prayers, signs and symbols.”
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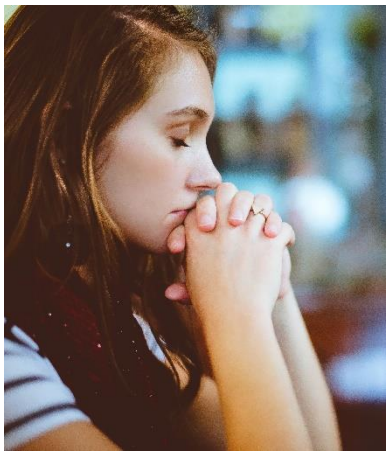
> — Address by Cardinal Sarah, July 2016

Incarnated Spirits—What We Do With Our Bodies Matters

The Liturgy is ripe with rich symbolism, action, movement and gestures, all of which have as a goal to properly prepare and usher our hearts into true worship with Christ. The reality of praying “to the east” has found expression over the years with churches being built such that geographically/physically the celebrant, and the people, would face the same direction—East. A basic truth is that what we do with our body leads our hearts, as St. Augustine makes clear:



> "when we rise to pray, we turn East, where heaven begins. And we do this not because God is there, as if He had moved away from the other directions on earth . . . but rather to help us remember to turn our mind towards a higher order, that is, to God." — St. Augustine (354-430 A.D.)

Face to Face Conversation

We face the person to whom we are speaking; the priest should face the congregation when speaking to them and he faces God when speaking (praying) to Him. He does this through an interior orientation. The rubrics of the current *Missal* presuppose that the celebrant and the people both face towards the altar during the Eucharistic prayer, because in several instances, the priest is directed to face the people for specific dialogue (such as "The Lord be with you." "And with your spirit." "Lift up your hearts.", etc.). The physical orientation of the congregation and the celebrant is not the goal—spiritual orientation of the congregation with the priest leading them towards the Father in Christ is our collective purpose. Physical orientation aids us in participating in this spiritual worship. Celebrating the "Novus Ordo" Mass *Ad Orientem* is not a requirement, but is a beautiful physical expression of the spiritual reality that every Mass entails. Praying *Ad Orientem* allows for the exterior, physical posture to line up with the internal, spiritual posture.

Celebrating Mass *Ad Orientem* at Saint John's

At Saint John's, for June, July and August, on the first Friday of the Month, the 8:00 AM Mass will be celebrated *Ad Orientem.* Mass will follow this format:

- The Liturgy of the Word will be celebrated facing towards the congregation (this is how we currently celebrate) with the exception of the collect prayer as it is directed to God
- The Liturgy of the Eucharist will be celebrated with the congregation and the celebrant facing the altar together (with the exception of those dialogue parts which are directed from the celebrant towards the congregation)

All are invited to pray the Mass together in this beautiful expression of our Catholic faith. At the end of the summer, Father Tom will discern if this practice will continue and, if so, in which way. Any and all feedback is welcomed and encouraged—please let Father Tom know what you think!

"Looking at the priest has no importance. What matters is looking together at the Lord. It is not now a question of dialogue but of common worship, of setting off toward the One who is to come. What corresponds with the reality of what is happening is not the closed circle but the common movement forward, expressed in a common direction for prayer"

— *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, Cardinal Ratzinger, 2000

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