

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 Masses 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 churches¹ 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 the Basilica of Sts. Peter and Paul), 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.

¹ 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 anti-dote 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 more free 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. Looks 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: Notable among them are: The Cathedral of the Holy Family in Tulsa, OK; The Cathedral of the Risen Christ in Lincoln, NE; St. Mary's in Greenville, SC; Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows in Nashville, TN; and many others.

At the Basilica of Sts. Peter & Paul, Mass is normally celebrated *ad orientem*, whereby the priest and people together face liturgical east, the symbol of the Church awaiting Christ's return in glory.



(Pope Francis celebrating Mass in the Sistine Chapel *ad orientem* on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord)