

Ordinary Form of the Mass – Ad Orientem (to the East) Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is the significance of the east for us, Christians?

In Matthew 24:27, Jesus spoke to us of his second coming, *“For just as lightning comes from the east and is seen as far as the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be.”* The east is from where Jesus will return to us. Jesus continued the Old Testament tradition of attributing importance to the east: in Genesis 2:8, the Garden of Eden is situated in the east, and in Zechariah 14:4, the Mount of Olives from where shall come is east of Jerusalem.



According to Zech 14:4, the Jews believe that when the Lord comes, God will set foot on the Mount of Olives.

Inspired by Luke 1:78-79, *“In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace,”* In his prophecy, Zechariah associated the Christ with the dawn, the rising sun in the east.

Justin Martyr (100-165 AD), in his Dialogue with Trypho, presented a list of names attributed to Jesus, including east: *““But if you knew, Trypho,” continued I, “who He is that is called at one time the Angel of great counsel, and a Man by Ezekiel, and like the Son of Man by Daniel, and a Child by Isaiah, and Christ and God to be worshipped by David, and Christ and a Stone by many, and Wisdom by Solomon, and Joseph and Judah and a Star by Moses, and the East by Zechariah.”*

With such associations between Jesus and the east, the early and succeeding Christians, not only waited for Jesus’ second coming in the east, they

also oriented themselves in prayer and worship toward the east.

2. Where can we find the Christian practice of prayer and worship *ad orientem*?

Among the writings of the early Church Fathers, as follows:

Clement of Alexandria (150-215 AD), in his Miscellanies, observed some similarities between Christian prayer and Gnostic prayer, *“And since the dawn is an image of the day of birth, and from that point the light which has shone forth at first from the darkness increases, there has also dawned on those involved in darkness a day of the knowledge of truth. In correspondence with the manner of the sun’s rising, prayers are made looking towards the sunrise in the east.”*

Tertullian (155-240 AD), in his Apology, sought to differentiate Christian worship from pagan worship, *“The idea no doubt has originated from our being known to turn to the east in prayer. But you, many of you, also under pretense sometimes of worshipping the heavenly bodies, move your lips in the direction of the sunrise.”*

Origen (185-253 AD), in his Homily on Numbers 2:1-34, talked about the necessity to explain the tenets of our faith, *“The fact that we kneel to pray, for instance, and that of all the quarters of the heavens, the east is the only direction we turn to when we pour out prayer, the reasons for this, I think, are not easily discovered by anyone.”*

One can continue finding similar references from succeeding Church Fathers like St Basil the Great (330-379 AD), St. Augustine (354-430 AD), St. John Damascene (675-749 AD), and St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 AD).

3. Is celebrating the Mass *ad orientem* the same as the Tridentine or Latin Mass?

No, the Christian practice of prayer and worship *ad orientem* as attested in the writings of Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Origen, among others, indicate that the *ad orientem* posture came before, and is, therefore, distinct from the Tridentine or Latin Mass. The Tridentine or Latin Mass appeared at a much later time, as attested in the Roman Missals from 1570 until 1962.

The *ad orientem* posture, however, became a prominent element in the Tridentine or Latin Mass.

Although some Christian communities forgot the meaning and symbolism of praying eastward, there continued in other Christian communities the tradition of prayer and worship *ad orientem* throughout the centuries. Pope Benedict, in his book, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, remarked, “*a common turning to the East during the Eucharistic Prayer remains essential. This is not a case of something accidental, but of what is essential. 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 towards 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.*”

4. What does Vatican II say about celebrating Mass *ad orientem*?

In paragraph 299 of the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM), we read, “*The altar should be built separate from the wall, in such a way that it is possible to walk around it easily and that Mass can be celebrated at it facing the people, which is desirable wherever possible.*”¹ This

¹ Translated from the 2000 (2002) Latin, “*Altare exstruatur a pariete seiunctum, ut facile circumiri et in eo celebratio versus populum peragi possit, quod expedit ubicumque possibile sit.* It has been pointed out that “*quod*” (*that*, neuter in Latin) cannot refer to “*celebratio versus populum*” (*celebration of the Mass facing the people*, celebration is feminine in Latin) but refers to “*altare*” (*altar*, neuter in Latin). The modifier “*quod expedit ubicumque possibile sit*” (*whenever possible to do so*) was added to the paragraph to stop people from damaging or destroying altars that had already been

paragraph promotes the celebration of the Mass *versus populum*, that is, towards the people.

However, the rubrics of the Roman Missal specifically instruct priest, when to turn and face the people. Careful observation of when the priest is instructed to face the people indicates that the Mass could be celebrated *ad orientem*.

In 2000, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments responded to the question as to whether paragraph 299 of the GIRM excluded the position of the priest *ad apsidem*, (towards the apse – the part of the church that houses the Sanctuary, where the altar is) during the Eucharistic Prayer. The response was “*negative*,”² thereby allowing the option.



The apse of the 5th century AD Byzantine Church of Saint Simeon Stylites in Aleppo, Syria.

Although it became normative in the fifth century AD to situate the apse in the east, not all churches are oriented according to the east-west axis. In modern churches, that are not oriented, where Mass is celebrated *ad orientem*, the reference point is the liturgical east and not the geographical east. By liturgical east, we refer to Christ in symbols associated to him – the Altar and the Sanctuary Cross. At Saint Patrick’s, we are blessed to have the church oriented in the east-west axis,

constructed. Reverend J.W. Hunwicke offered the following translation: “*The [High] Altar [not, be it observed, every altar] should be constructed away from the wall, so that the option is open [possit] of walking easily around it and using it for Mass facing the people. This [i.e., having the altar free-standing so that the options are open] is desirable wherever possible.*” Refer to Corpus Christi Watershed online post, *The Vatican has already responded to Cardinal Nichols regarding “ad orientem”*.

² Refer to Adoremus online post, *Letter on the Position of the Priest during Eucharistic Liturgy*.

where we have the apse in the east, and so are the Altar, the Sanctuary Cross as well as the tabernacle.

5. Which parts of the Mass is the priest instructed to face the people?

Here is a list based on the Roman Missal -

- During the Sign of the Cross (The Order of the Mass, 1) and Greeting (GIRM, 124), at the Introductory Rites,
- When inviting the people to pray during the Preparation of the Gifts (GIRM, 146),
- When the priest announces the Greeting of Peace (GIRM, 154),
- When the priest presents the consecrated Host (GIRM, 157),
- When the priest invites the people to pray before the Prayer after Communion (GIRM, 165),
- During the Dismissal (The Order of the Mass, 141).

These instances clearly indicate the priest communicating the beginning and the ending of Mass, giving an instruction, presenting the consecrated Host, and extending invitations to the people to pray. None of these involve instances when prayers are offered to God. There is an implicit understanding that during prayer, the priest and the people are facing God together.

The General Instructions expresses the value of common bodily posture, GIRM, 42, *“The gestures and bodily posture of both the Priest, the Deacon, and the ministers, and also of the people, must be conducive to making the entire celebration resplendent with beauty and noble simplicity, to making clear the true and full meaning of its different parts, and to fostering the participation of all. Attention must therefore be paid to what is determined by this General Instruction and by the traditional practice of the Roman Rite and to what serves the common spiritual good of the People of God, rather than private inclination or arbitrary choice.*

A common bodily posture, to be observed by all those taking part, is a sign of the unity of the members of the Christian community gathered together for the Sacred Liturgy, for it expresses the

intentions and spiritual attitude of the participants and also fosters them.”

The Roman Missal challenges us to understand the parts of the Mass so that we know when it is appropriate for the priest to face the people and when it is appropriate for the priest and the people to face God together.

6. Is not the Altar the center of focus of the whole Liturgy of the Eucharist?



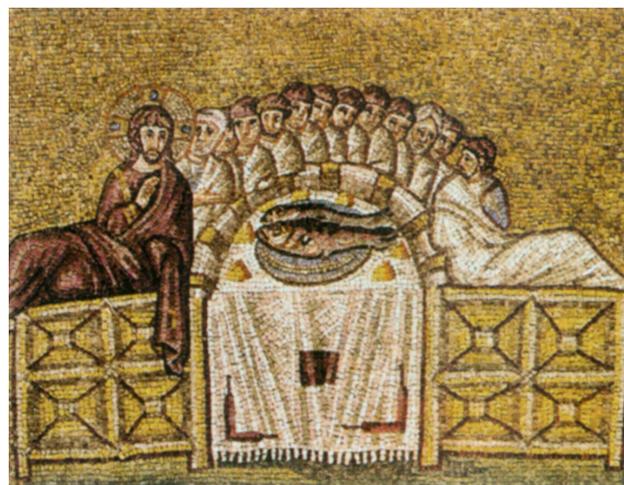
To remember is to make present the once-for-all sacrifice of the Mass. To ‘go’ to Mass is to be brought back to the Upper Room, to Calvary, and to the empty tomb.

It is. The Altar reminds us of the Last Supper, and it further leads us to the Sacrifice of the Cross on Calvary. Here it is important to ask, *“What was Jesus doing at the table?”* and *“What was Jesus doing on Cross?”*

At the Last Supper, Jesus was offering a prayer to God: *“While they were eating, Jesus took bread, said the blessing,*

broke it, and giving it to his disciples said...” (Matthew 26:26).

On the Cross at Calvary, Jesus was offering himself to the Father as the sacrifice: *“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”* (Luke 23:46).



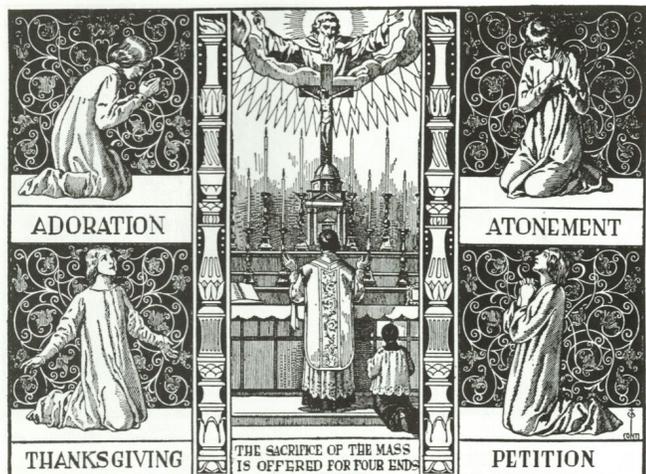
Without the prayer and sacrifice of Jesus, the Altar is just another table. It is the prayer and sacrifice of Jesus that make the Altar.

The theologian Louis Bouyer commented that at the time of Jesus, the host seated his guests on his side of the table. Leaving the other side of the table empty allows for its use by the servants. With the *ad orientem* during the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the priest and the people are on the same side of the Altar.

7. Should I feel excluded because the priest's back is towards me?

Hopefully, no. The people in the pews in front of you have their backs towards you. They are so oriented not to exclude you from worship. Your own back is towards the people seated in the pews behind you. You are so oriented not to exclude them from worship. Among the people in the pews, there is already an unspoken understanding about sitting, standing, and kneeling in the same direction – we face God in prayer together.

During the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the priest, by virtue of his ordination, stands and offers the prayer and sacrifice *in persona Christi capitis* (in the person of Christ the head), and through him, the people, by virtue of common baptismal priesthood, offer their prayer and sacrifice, (as members of the body of Christ) into the one sacrifice of Christ. Notice the beautiful Trinitarian dimension of worship: *in the Spirit* (who guides the Church), *through the Son* (who offers the one sacrifice), *to the Father* (who receives the only acceptable sacrifice). In the act of worship, the priest and the



people are not closed in to themselves; the Church in true worship cannot but be open to God.

When we, as citizens, turn to the flag during the singing of the national anthem or the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, our posture fosters a sense of unity and community, not of exclusion.

Please be careful with the use of terms like “*the priest facing the people*” and “*the priest's back to the people*” because these terms might give the impression that worship is just about the priest and the people, more than about God.

8. Are we only celebrating the Mass at Saint Patrick's *ad orientem*?

No. At this point, it is only at the morning Mass on Fridays that the Mass is celebrated *ad orientem*.

Please note that the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments issued a notification last April 10, 2000, stating, “(1) This Dicastery [i.e. the Congregation] wishes to state that Holy Mass may be celebrated *versus populum* or *versus apsidem*. Both positions are in accord with liturgical law; both are to be considered correct. (2) It should be borne in mind that there is no preference expressed in the liturgical legislation for either position. As both positions enjoy the favor of law, the legislation may not be invoked to say that one position or the other accords more closely with the mind of the Church.”

9. Resources.

Book

- Uwe Michael Lang, *Turning toward the Lord: Orientation in Liturgical Prayer*.

Internet Posts

- Catholicculture.org – Rev. Joseph Fessio, SJ, “Which Way to Turn?”
- Ascensionpress.com – Nicholas LaBanca, “The Case for Ad Orientem”
- Dioceseofgallup.org – Bishop James S. Wall, “Turning toward God: Celebrating the Mass Ad Orientem”

YouTube Videos

- Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe Channel: Explanation of Ad Orientem
- Star of the Sea Church SF: Together Facing God