

AD ORIENTEM

Offering the Mass toward liturgical East



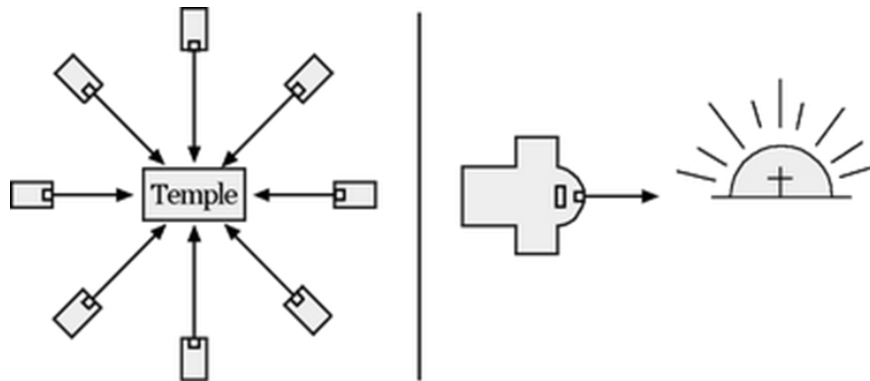
An explanation of why the priest has the option of celebrating Mass according to the ancient practice of facing the altar.

The History

Before Christ

The Jews saw the synagogue in relation to the Temple. The synagogue was never just a place for instruction, a kind of religious classroom. No, its orientation was always toward the presence of God. Now, for the Jews, this presence of God was (and is) indissolubly connected with the Temple. Consequently, the synagogue was characterized by two focal points. The first is the “seat of Moses” . . . The seat of Moses does not stand for itself and by itself, nor is it simply turned toward the people. No, the rabbi looks--as does everyone else in the synagogue--toward the Ark of the Covenant, or rather the shrine of the Torah, which represents the lost Ark. [64]

The Ark points beyond itself to the one place of its presence that God chose for himself--the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem... The rabbi and the people gaze at the “Ark of the Covenant”, and in so doing, they orient themselves toward Jerusalem, turn themselves toward the Holy of Holies in the Temple as the place of God’s presence for his people. [66]



After Christ

The worshipper no longer looks toward Jerusalem . . . Christians look toward the east, the rising sun. [68]

In the early Church, prayer toward the east . . . was always regarded as an essential characteristic of Christian liturgy (and indeed of private prayer). This “orientation” of Christian prayer has several different meanings. Orientation is, first and foremost, a simple expression of looking to Christ as the meeting place between God and man. The word “orientation” comes from *oriens*, “the East”. “Orientation” means “east-ing”, turning toward the east. [68-69]

The sign of the Son of Man, of the Pierced One, is the Cross, which has now become the sign of victory of the Risen One. Thus the symbolism of the Cross merges with that of the east. [69]

On the altar, what the Temple had in the past foreshadowed is now present in a new way . . . it takes that community beyond itself into the communion of saints of all times and places . . . the altar is the place where heaven is opened up. It does not close off the church, but opens it up--and leads it into the eternal liturgy. [71]

The cosmic symbol of the rising sun expresses the universality of God above all particular places and yet maintains the concreteness of divine revelation. [76]

The Confusion

Despite all the variations in practice that have taken place far into the second millennium, one thing has remained clear for the whole of Christendom: praying toward the east is a tradition that goes back to the beginning. [75]

The controversy in our own century was triggered by another innovation. Because of topographical circumstances, it turned out that St. Peter's faced west. Thus, if the celebrating priest wanted--as the Christian tradition of prayer demands--to face east, he had to stand behind the people and look--this is the logical conclusion--toward the people. For whatever reason it was done, one can also see this arrangement in a whole series of church buildings within St. Peter's direct sphere of influence. The liturgical renewal in our century took up this alleged model and developed from it a new idea



Pope Benedict XVI has celebrated Mass *ad orientem* several times at the Sistine Chapel (above) and the Pauline Chapel (below).





Pope Francis celebrated Mass *ad orientem* at the tomb of Pope Saint John Paul II on October 31, 2013.





Pope Saint John Paul II celebrating Mass *ad orientem*
at the private chapel in Castel Gandolfo
in the presence of the icon of Our Lady of Kazan.





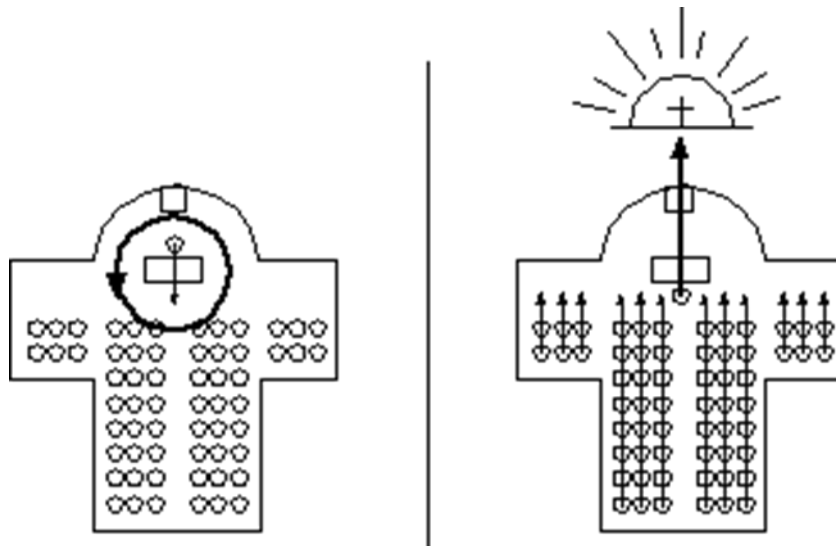
Pope Francis has celebrated Mass ad orientem on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord in the Sistine Chapel on January 12, 2014 and on January 11, 2015.



for the form of liturgy. The Eucharist--so it was said--had to be celebrated *versus populum* (toward the people). The altar--as can be seen in the normative model of St. Peter's--had to be positioned in such a way that priest and people looked at each other and formed together the circle of the celebrating community [But] the Council [Vatican II] said nothing about "turning toward the people." [77]

Quoting Vogel: "Even when the orientation of the church enabled the celebrant to pray turned toward the people, when at the altar, we must not forget that it was not the priest alone who, then, turned East: it was the whole congregation, together with him." [79]

The common turning toward the east was not a "celebration toward the wall". It did not mean that the priest "had his back to the people": the priest himself was not regarded as so important. For just as the congregation in the synagogue looked together toward Jerusalem, so in the Christian liturgy the congregation looked together "toward the Lord." As one of the fathers of Vatican II's Constitution on the Liturgy, J.A. Jungmann, put it, it was much more a question of priest and people facing in the same direction, knowing that together they were in a procession toward the Lord. They did not close themselves into a circle; they did not gaze at one another; but as the pilgrim People of God they set off for the Oriens, for the Christ who comes to meet us. [80]



Solution

Everyone joins with the celebrant in facing east, toward the Lord who is to come. [72]

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. [81]

Wherever possible, we should definitely take up again the apostolic tradition of facing the east, both in the building of churches and in the celebration of the liturgy. [70]

It must be plainly evident that the *oratio* [the Eucharistic Prayer] is the heart of the matter, but that it is important

precisely because it provides a space for the *actio* of God. Anyone who grasps this will easily see that it is not now a matter of looking at or toward the priest, but of looking together toward the Lord and going out to meet him. [174]



Pope Saint John Paul II celebrating Mass *ad orientem* before the tomb of St. Stanislaus in Wawel Cathedral during his pilgrimage to Poland in 1999.

Numbers in brackets refer to pages from the book

The Spirit of the Liturgy,
by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger,
now Pope emeritus Benedict XVI

Further reading:
*Turning Towards the Lord:
Orientation in Liturgical Prayer*
by Uwe Michael Lang

Listen to Bishop Morlino's catechetical homily on
ad orientem worship:

<http://blog.yankehome.com/index.php/bishop-morlino-again/>

Source material for this booklet: <http://procaritateveritatis.blogspot.com/2010/11/ad-orientem-offering-mass-toward.html>

Front cover photo:
Pope Benedict XVI celebrating Mass *ad orientem*
in the Sistine Chapel on the Feast of the Baptism
of the Lord.



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