



Ad Orientem for Lent

Turn back to me with your whole your heart.

(Joel 2:12)

The English word 'conversion' has as its roots the Latin words 'con' which means 'with' and 'vertere' which means 'to turn'. Together they form the word 'convertere' which means to 'turn with' or 'turn around'. In Lent we speak of conversion when we hear Jesus' call to turn away from sin and believe in the Gospel (Mark 1:15). We turn with Jesus away from the things of this world, good as they are, toward something even better - the vision of God, for which we were ultimately made.

Here at the Basilica of Sts. Peter and Paul, we will offer Mass *ad orientem* during Lent to express our hearts turned towards the Lord even as our bodies turn towards him in prayer and fasting.

"In the liturgy of the ancient Church, after the homily, . . . the main celebrant said, "*Conversi ad Dominum*". Then he and all [others] stood up and turned towards the East. All wished to face towards Christ. Only if converted, only in this conversion towards Christ, in this common facing of Christ, we may find the gift of unity." (Pope Benedict XVI)

We do this ... to help us remember to turn our mind towards a higher order, that is, to God

From early times in the Church and all the way through Vatican II, Mass was celebrated *ad orientem* (towards the east). "What in the early Church and during the Middle Ages determined the position of the altar was that it faced East. To quote St. Augustine: "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." This quotation shows that the

Christians of those early days, after listening to the homily, would rise for the prayer which followed, and turn towards the East. St. Augustine always refers to this turning to the East in prayer at the end of his homilies, using a set formula, *Conversi ad Dominum* ("turn to face the Lord")" (Msgr. Klaus Gamber)

The Church, both East and West, has inherited this rich symbolic way of celebrating the Divine Mysteries. The reason is that tradition instructs us that when Jesus comes again He will be like the rising sun that comes to us from the East. Just as the sun surely rises every day in the east, so too Christ has truly risen from the dead and will come again in glory. Celebrating while looking in that direction is just another way Catholics worship the Risen Christ 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.

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For people raised on the Mass celebrated *versus populum* (facing the people), the ancient way can feel awkward. Understanding the reasons and symbolism can help us enter more fully into the experience of celebrating facing east. In addition, 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 in our posture. The priest is visibly part of the people and clearly acts “in the person of Christ the head” when we all face the same direction.

When facing east, just as when we celebrate *versus populum*, 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. “It would be a grave error to imagine that the principal orientation of the sacrificial action is [toward] the community. If the priest celebrates *versus populum*, which is a legitimate and often advisable option, his spiritual attitude ought always to be *versus Deum per Jesus Christum* [towards God through Jesus Christ], as representative of the entire Church. The Church as well, which takes concrete form in the assembly which participates, is entirely turned *versus Deum* [towards God] as its first spiritual movement.” (Congregation for Divine Worship, 2000) 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.

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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, with us and for 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.

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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 new order of the Mass.



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