

INSTRUCTION #6 – *Ad Orientem*

Last week I talked about the use of Latin. It may be the most obvious difference between the Traditional Latin Mass and the Mass of Paul VI, at least when the New Mass is said in the vernacular. Still, another very obvious difference is the orientation of the priest when he says Mass.

What direction are you now facing? Within the building, you are facing the tabernacle where the Real Presence is reserved. As far as the compass is concerned, you are facing east, because the tabernacle wall is the eastern wall of this building. As it turns out, this is a very fortunate physical orientation for our church.

Before he was Pope Benedict XVI, Cardinal Ratzinger wrote a book in 2001 entitled The Spirit of the Liturgy. In it he addresses this question as follows:

In what direction should we pray during the Eucharistic liturgy? (p.76) ... Because of topographical circumstances, it turned out that St. Peters faced west. Thus, if the celebrating priest wanted - as the Christian tradition of prayer demands - to face east, he had to stand behind the altar and look - this is the logical conclusion - toward the people... The liturgical renewal in our own century took up this alleged model... (p.77) This is, of course, a misunderstanding of the significance of the Roman basilica and of the positioning of its altar,

End quote. So, Cardinal Ratzinger said that, traditionally, the Sacrifice of the Mass was always celebrated facing the East. The priest and congregation would turn: one, the other, or both, in order to face east. The Latin word for east is “oriens” - not unlike English where we speak of the East as the Orient. When we say “to the east” in Latin, we say *ad orientem*, and that is what this posture for the Mass is usually called. Facing toward the people, as is usually done in the Mass of Paul VI, is called *versus populum*. He says that the “liturgical renewal” which gave us the Mass of Paul VI and only later this *versus populum* orientation did so because of a “misunderstanding”. He then goes on to say, quote:

and the representation of the Last Supper is also, to say the least, inaccurate. In the earliest days of Christianity, the head of table never took his place facing the other participants. Everyone sat or lay on the convex side of a C-shaped table, or of a table having the approximate shape of a horseshoe. The other side was always left empty for the service. Nowhere in Christian antiquity could anyone have come up with the idea that the man presiding at the meal had to take his place *versus populum*. The communal character of a meal was emphasized by precisely the opposite arrangement, namely, by the fact that everyone at the meal found himself on the same side of the table....(p.78)

End quote. In the Traditional Latin Mass, I spend almost all of my time facing the same direction that you face. Accurate pictures of the Last Supper will show Christ, the High Priest, on the same side of the table as the Apostles. This is because the servers who brought the food, served everyone from the opposite side – the open side – of the table. So, if the Mass is representing the Last Supper and I offer the Sacrifice in the person of Christ, or in the place of Christ, it is fitting that I should be facing the same direction as you.

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Now let's examine the prayers that I say:

- Psalm 42 at the beginning of Mass starts with “Judge me, O God.”
- When I go up to the altar, I say “Lord have mercy” and “Christ have mercy.”
- Then, I say “Glory to God in the highest.”
- After the sermon I say “I believe in one God, the Father Almighty.”
- All the prayers of the Offertory and the Canon are directed to God the Father.
- After the Canon, I say “Our Father who art in heaven.”

You see where this is going? Nearly every prayer I say is addressed to the first Person of the Trinity. And you join me in some of them. Why would I face you when I address God the Father? Why would you face me when you address God the Father? So, if we are all praying to the same Person, it is again fitting that we all face the same direction.

There is still an option in the Mass of Paul VI, which is not commonly employed, that allows the priest to turn in the same direction as the people. In fact, that was originally the expected orientation by the designers of that Mass. It's called *versus Deum* or “toward God.” The consequences of not facing the same direction can be awkward. Consider that, **unless** I am *versus Deum* in the Mass of Paul VI, you make the response – “for thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, now and forever” - while looking at me! Cardinal Ratzinger proclaims this rather forcefully as follows:

... Now the priest ...becomes the real point of reference for the whole liturgy....Less and less is God in the picture. More and more important is what is done by the human beings who meet here and do not like to subject themselves to a “pre-determined pattern”. The turning of the priest toward the people has turned the community into a self-enclosed circle. In its outward form, it no longer opens out on what lies ahead and above, but is locked into itself. The common turning toward the East was not a ‘celebration towards a wall’; it did not mean that the priest ‘had his back to the people’; For just as the congregation in the synagogue looked together toward Jerusalem, so in the Christian liturgy, the congregation looked together ‘toward the Lord’....They did not lock 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 that comes to meet us ...(p.80).

End quote. So, why do we, as Christians, look to the east “for the Christ that comes to meet us”? St. Matthew tells us:

"For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man." (Mt 24:27)

A closing quote from The Spirit of the Liturgy:

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 dialog, 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.” (p.81)