

### ***What does “ad orientem” mean?***

*Ad orientem* is Latin for “toward the East.” It refers to the direction that the priest faces during particular moments in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Historically, Catholic churches have always been built along an East-West axis whenever possible, the East being the direction from which the early Christians believed the Lord would come in His glory (specifically the Mount of Olives, the site of His Ascension). This practice later evolved into the general custom of facing Jerusalem during prayer, and as the Church spread through the Mediterranean world, this notion further changed into a connection between the light of the rising sun and the glory of the returning Son. The seeds of this idea are planted throughout Scripture (e.g. Wisdom 16.28, Zechariah 14.4, Malachi 3.2, Matthew 24.27, Luke 1.78, and

Revelation 7.2), and the early Church placed great emphasis on this point. St Justin Martyr wrote in the second century “For the word of His truth and wisdom is more ardent and more light-giving than the rays of the sun, and sinks down into the depths of heart and mind. Hence also the Scripture said, ‘His name shall rise up above the sun.’ And again, Zechariah says, ‘His name is the East.’” And St Clement of Alexandria was even more emphatic: “In correspondence with the manner of the sun’s rising, prayers are made toward the sunrise in the East.”

### ***It seems like the priest is facing the wrong way. What’s going on?***

During those portions of the Mass that are addressed to the people, the priest faces the people. However, because the Eucharistic prayer is

addressed to God the Father, the normal posture of the priest has always been to face *with* the people *toward* the Lord while the priest, acting *in persona Christi capitis* (“in the Person of Christ the Head”), represents Christ’s saving sacrifice to the Father in an unbloody manner through the power of the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, it is a simple category mistake to think of the priest as having his back to the people when they stand together on the same side of the altar; rather, the priest and people by their common “orientation” show that they are together turning towards the Lord, a physical metaphor for the interior work of conversion which can be thought of as the “re-orientation” of our lives. This is why in nearly every place and for almost all of Christian history, the priest has stood with his people on the same side of the altar so that, together facing the East of the

sacred liturgy, they could offer the pleasing sacrifice of their lives (*cf.* Romans 12.1) in union with the priest offering the sacrifice of Christ.

### ***Didn't Vatican II get rid of this?***

Actually, no. Nowhere in the documents of Vatican II (nor in any other magisterial documents before or since) has the Church ever directed the priest to face *versus populum* (Latin, "toward the people") for the entire duration of the sacred liturgy. In fact, the current edition of the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* presumes the *ad orientem* posture because it directs the priest to turn and face the people at certain points, implying that he had not been facing them beforehand.

### ***What does this mean for me?***

While the priest's *ad orientem* posture may seem unusual at first, with repeated exposure many people find that the *ad orientem* celebration allows them to enter more deeply into the prayer of the Mass and to focus less on the person of the priest, and more intently on the mystery of Christ's Real Presence – Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity – in the Most Holy Eucharist.

### ***Turning Together Towards the Lord***



*Pope Francis celebrating Mass  
ad orientem in the Sistine Chapel*