



## *Ad Orientem*

### *Part 1 of 4*

At St. Mary Magdalen we will celebrate Mass *ad orientem* on November 2<sup>nd</sup> at 7 PM for the Feast of All Souls. In preparation for this, we are providing several bulletin inserts to explain the theological, historical, and spiritual aspects of this prayer orientation.

#### **What is *ad orientem*?**

*Ad orientem* is Latin for “toward the orient,” or “toward the East.” Mass *ad orientem*, then, refers to Mass celebrated with all the people (including the priest celebrant) facing East.

#### **Why east?**

East is the direction of the rising sun, a symbol of the resurrection of our Lord. East is also the direction, according to Scripture, from which the Lord will return at His Second Coming. A common orientation for both priest and people at Holy Mass directs them toward the Lord, the focus of the celebration.

#### **Why is the priest's back toward us?**

When the priest turns toward the altar and tabernacle during the Liturgy of the Eucharist, he is actually turning toward the Lord with us! We are all facing the Lord together! The priest isn't “turning his back on the people,” as if they aren't good enough to participate in what only he is able to do. This orientation takes the focus off the personality of the individual priest and places it firmly on Christ the High Priest, in whose person the priest acts at every Mass.

### **The importance of bodily orientation**

If I were to sing our National Anthem or lead the Pledge of Allegiance, I would turn toward the flag and begin. If you happened to be standing behind me, you would naturally sense that all of us, leader and people, were honoring the flag together. If I led the Pledge or the National Anthem facing you, on the other hand, it would seem more like a performance. Mass is not a performance; it is the highest form of prayer, by which we worship Almighty God together as one community.

Consider an army as another example. If an army general leading troops into war would march backward as his troops marched forward, it would seem odd. The general properly marches facing forward, so he can lead the troops into battle and hopefully on to victory. A priest is also like the general of an army. He stands as a leader and a mediator, but is also engaged in the same battle and headed in the same direction.

### **Theology**

Before he was elected pope, Joseph Ratzinger was one of most thoughtful and respected commentators on the celebration of the Mass. He reflected that facing the people had turned the congregation and the priest into a circle closed in upon itself rather than allowing the congregation and celebrant as a pilgrim people to turn “together” towards the Lord. And this closed circle, in turn, too easily made Holy Mass more of a horizontal celebration of the gathered congregation than a vertical offering of the sacrifice of Christ to the Eternal Father. This flattening of divine worship (horizontal effect) into a self-referential celebration is, in part, what has made it more difficult for many Catholics to experience Mass as the source and summit of the Church’s life. This opening of the closed circle and experiencing the power of turning together towards the Lord lends, potentially, to a broader dimension of the Mass.

The people of God at Mass are not mere passive spectators as in the case of a concert or a sporting event. They are actively, fully, and consciously joining in the action of Jesus offering Himself to the Father for our salvation. This constitutes, as Venerable Pius XII expressed, “that supreme worship by which the principal Offerer himself, who is Christ, and, in union with Him and through Him, all the members of the Mystical Body pay God the honor and reverence that are due to Him.” (Encyclical Letter, *Mediator Dei* November 20<sup>th</sup> 1947)

**In the next bulletin insert on *ad orientem*:**

**History**

**What about the Last Supper?**

# *Ad Orientem*

## *Part 2 of 4*

At St. Mary Magdalen we will be celebrating the Feast of All Souls, November 2<sup>nd</sup>, at 7 PM with Mass *ad orientem*. We cordially invite you to come and experience, as a parish, this broader expression of the Mass.

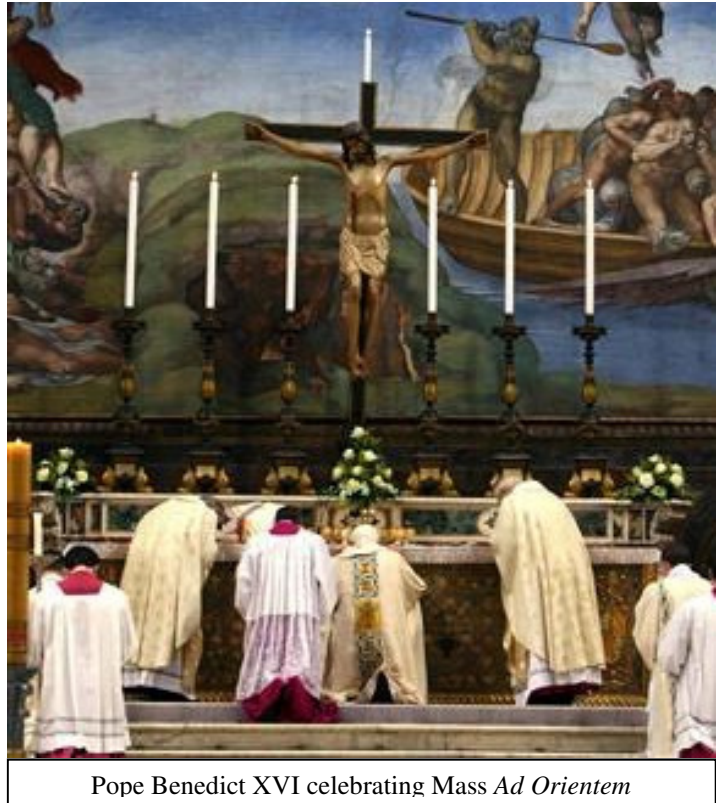
### **History**

From the earliest days of Christianity, priests and people have celebrated Holy Mass facing together towards the Lord or towards the East. Only in the last forty years has Mass “facing the people” become the “norm.” The Second Vatican Council proposed Mass facing the people as an option, but it became standard in almost every parish and church around the globe. After forty years of theological reflection, many cardinals, bishops and priests are thinking more about the practice.

Praying with everyone facing in the same direction has a long history. Facing a “sacred direction” features prominently in many religions.

Muslims pray facing Mecca and Jews often turn toward Jerusalem. The first Christians expected the glorious return of Christ to occur at the Mount of Olives, from where He ascended to His Father. Thus, these early Christians often turned towards the Mount of Olives during prayer. This custom later evolved into facing Jerusalem during prayer, and as the Church spread through the Mediterranean world, there further developed the connection between the light of the rising sun and the glory of the returning Son. The Messiah coming from the East is rooted in Scripture (Wisdom 16:28, Zechariah 14:4, Matthew 24:27, Luke 1:78, and Revelation 7:2), and the early Church emphasized it. In the second century, St. Clement of Alexandria wrote, “In correspondence with the manner of the sun’s rising, prayers are made toward the sunrise in the East.”

For these reasons, since the building of Christian churches began on a large scale in the fourth century (Christianity was legalized in 313AD), they have been oriented to the East whenever



Pope Benedict XVI celebrating Mass *Ad Orientem*

possible, just as St. Mary Magdalen Church is. Even when the orientation of the church enabled the celebrant to pray facing the people, when the priest was at the altar, the whole congregation, together with him, turned toward the East. When priest and people face the same way, the priest does not “have his back to the people”; rather, the priest and people, by their common orientation, are turning towards the Lord together.

### **What about the Last Supper?**

Theological scholar Louis Boyer had this to say:

In no meal of the early Christian era, did the president of the banqueting assembly ever face the other participants. They were all sitting, or reclining, on the convex side of a C-shaped table, or of a table having approximately the shape of a horse shoe. The other side was always left empty for the service. Nowhere in Christian antiquity could have arisen the idea of having to ‘face the people’ to preside at a meal. The communal character of a meal was emphasized just by the opposite disposition: the fact that all the participants were on the same side of the table (Liturgy and Architecture 1967).



“Then he led me to the gate which faces East, and there I saw the glory of Israel coming from the East. I heard a sound like the roaring of many waters, and the earth shone with his glory...I fell prone as the glory of the Lord entered the temple by way of the gate which faces the East.” (Ezekiel 43:1-4)

“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. Moreover, it is a fundamental expression of the Christian synthesis of cosmos and history, of being rooted in the once-for-all events of salvation history while going out to meet the Lord who is to come again.” –Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI)

**In the next bulletin insert on *ad orientem*:**

**Does the Church still allow this?**

# *Ad Orientem*

## *Part 3 of 4*

At St. Mary Magdalen we will be celebrating the Feast of All Souls, November 2<sup>nd</sup>, at 7 PM with Mass *ad orientem*. We cordially invite you to come and experience, as a parish, this broader expression of the Mass.

### **Does the Church still allow this?**

When priest and people face the same direction during Mass, they are following precisely what the Roman Missal expects of us. The Roman Missal is the red book the altar server holds, which contains all the prayers of the Mass. It gives instructions on the actions of the priest, the color of vestments, when incense is used, and so forth. The Roman Missal, though recently re-translated, still tells the priest at certain times to “face the people.” Why would it ask the priest to face the people if the priest were already facing the people the entire time? Thus, the Roman Missal presumes the priest is celebrating Mass *ad orientem*. During the following times at Mass the priest is directed to turn and face the people: 1. After the

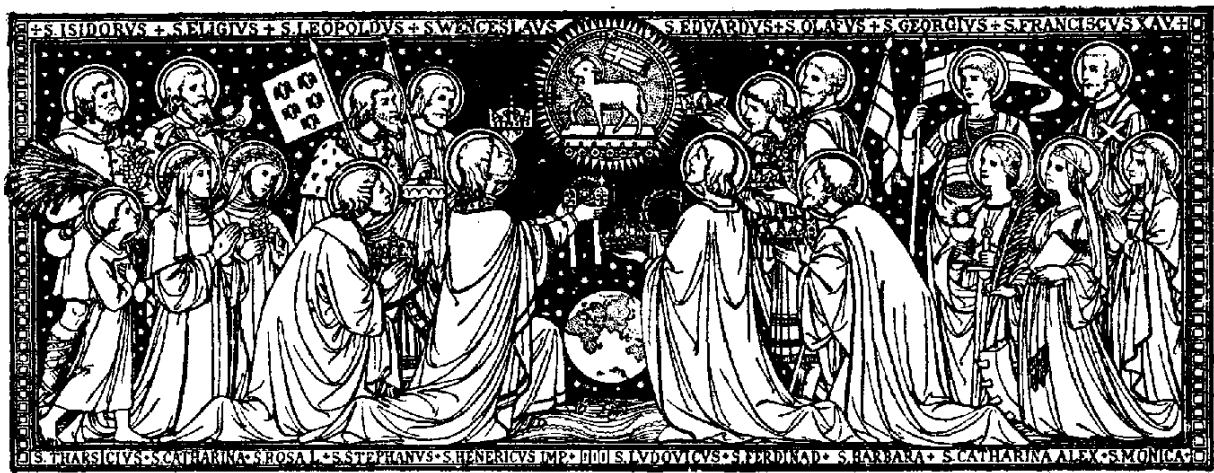


Offertory and Preparation of the Gifts: “Pray brothers and sisters that my sacrifice and yours...” 2. Prior to the Sign of Peace: “The peace of the Lord be with you always.” 3. At the showing of the Host prior to communion: “Behold the Lamb of God, behold Him who takes away the sins of the world...” Notice how all three of these occur during the Liturgy of the Eucharist. **Celebrating Mass *ad orientem* affects the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The rest of Mass (the opening, readings, creed, homily, petitions, and concluding rite) will look exactly the same.**

The Second Vatican Council had as one of its goals a renewal of the Liturgy. Prior to the Council, far more than just the Liturgy of the Eucharist of the Mass was celebrated *ad orientem*. Following the Council, when the Mass was revised, the union of posture between the priest and people facing the same direction was maintained during the Liturgy of the Eucharist, according to the rubrics in the Roman Missal. The option was given to celebrate Mass facing the people and many mistakenly

interpreted this as a rule and never promoted nor preserved the beauty and tradition of celebrating the Liturgy of the Eucharist *ad orientem*.

The Congregation for Divine Worship affirmed in 2000 that both ways of celebrating Mass, *versus populum* (facing the people) and *ad orientem*, are in accord with current liturgical law. By participating in Mass *ad orientem* we can grow in our understanding and appreciation of the Mass. It helps us follow the current Roman Missal and experience the richness of our faith. This remains, of course, an option, not a mandate. Please realize that what you see at St. Mary Magdalen may not be what your neighbors or relatives experience in a different parish. Nevertheless, a number of priests in our own diocese, and throughout the world, celebrate Mass *ad orientem*.



“What earlier generations held as sacred, remains sacred and great for us too, and cannot be all of a sudden entirely forbidden or even considered harmful. It behoves all of us to preserve the riches which have developed in the Church’s faith and prayer, and to give them their proper place.” (Pope Benedict XVI, 2007)

**In the next bulletin insert on *ad orientem*:**

**What can we learn from celebrating Mass *ad orientem*?**



## *Ad Orientem*

### *Part 4 of 4*

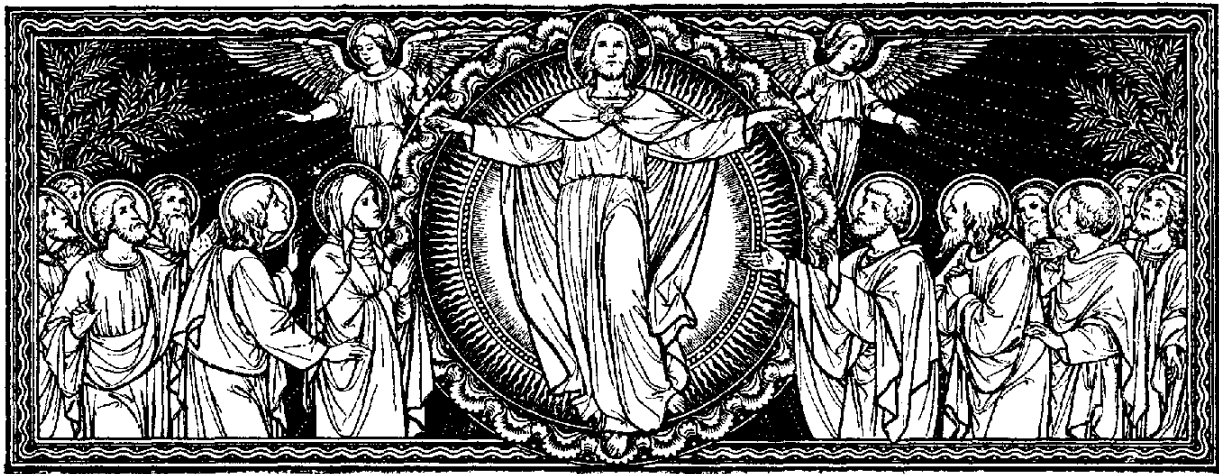
#### **What can we learn from celebrating Mass *ad orientem*?**

Catholic author George Weigel shared some of the benefits of celebrating Mass *ad orientem*. He noted the following advantages in an article entitled, “He’s Not Turning His Back to the People”:

- 1) **Worship is not about us.** The common orientation of priest and people during the Liturgy of the Eucharist symbolizes—or perhaps better, lives out—the Church’s conviction that the Mass is an act of worship offered to the Thrice-Holy God, in which we the baptized are privileged to participate. Yes, the liturgy builds the Christian community and its solidarity, but that is one of its effects, not its primary purpose. Priest and people praying together “toward the Lord” can thus be a helpful antidote to the temptation to think of Mass as a ritual of communal self-affirmation—a temptation all too common in the contemporary “Culture of Me.”
- 2) **Mass leads us upward toward heaven.** If properly prepared by thoughtful pastors and liturgists, the re-orientation of the Liturgy of the Eucharist would help Catholics deepen our appreciation of the Kingdom dimension of the Mass. The Mass is a foretaste of the Wedding Feast of the Lamb in the New Jerusalem, described by that apostolic visionary, St. John, in Revelation 21. By turning together toward the Lord—who comes—now, under the forms of bread and wine; later, as the Risen Lord who will hand everything over to the Father so that “God may be all in all” (1 Cor. 15-28)—the praying Church would be regularly reminded that Christians are the people who know how the world’s story is going to turn out. That assurance of God’s victory over sin, suffering, and death should both comfort us and energize us for our mission.

3) **The priest is not a performer; Mass is not a show.** The practice of a common orientation during the Liturgy of the Eucharist would help mitigate the continuing problem of the priest-celebrant who imposes his own personality on the liturgy, a problem that has been exacerbated in recent decades by the celebration of the Mass *versus populum*—“toward the people.”

In addition, *ad orientem* worship respects the integrity of the human person as both physical and spiritual. Both body and soul are involved in conversion and worship. “To Me every knee shall bend; by Me every tongue shall swear” (Isaiah 45:23). How important then that our bodily worship harmonize with these invisible realities.



“By this manner of celebrating, we experience, even in our bodies, the primacy of God and of adoration. We understand that the liturgy is first our participation at the perfect sacrifice of the cross. I have personally had this experience: In celebrating thus, with the priest at its head, the assembly is almost physically drawn up by the mystery of the cross at the moment of the elevation.” (Cardinal Robert Sarah, prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship & the Discipline of the Sacraments)

**With these points in mind, while we are not changing the Sunday or weekday Masses, we will be celebrating Mass *ad orientem* at St. Mary Magdalen on the Feast of All Souls, November 2<sup>nd</sup>, at 7 PM. We cordially invite you to come and experience, as a parish, this broader expression of the Mass.**