

Tridentine Community News

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Ad Oriëntem Celebration of the Holy Mass

If there is one visual feature of the Traditional Latin Mass that distinguishes it from the vast majority of Novus Ordo Masses, it is the *ad oriëntem* posture of the priest. For almost the entire length of the Mass, the priest faces the same direction as the congregation.

Interestingly, this arrangement is not novel to our area. The Archdiocese of Detroit might very well have more *ad oriëntem* Novus Ordo Masses than any other North American diocese. Consider that St. Joseph, Holy Family, and Assumption Grotto parishes offer most if not all of their Masses in this fashion. Other local parishes and monasteries offer Holy Mass in this manner on occasion.

The rubrics of the Novus Ordo Mass explicitly permit this orientation. Indeed, they make the distinction between “facing the altar” and “facing the people.” At St. Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican, every morning, countless side altars are occupied by priests saying Mass *ad oriëntem*. Nevertheless, certain bishops in other dioceses convey the impression that this practice is not to be done. Rather famously, the Bishop of Birmingham, Alabama has banned *ad oriëntem* celebration in any public and televised Masses, evidently a policy aimed at EWTN, based in his diocese. This raises the question of what other Vatican rubrics a bishop may overrule, a slippery slope for sure. Might the use of Latin (in a Novus Ordo Mass) be prohibited, in defiance of numerous documents issued since Vatican II?

When one considers what the posture represents, it is hard to imagine why it is so controversial. Literally, *ad oriëntem* means “facing East.” East is the land of the rising sun, the new day, the promised land. Facing that way is consistent with thinking about our worship helping us to become a new person, oriented more closely with our God. Our celebrant is our leader in prayer, but we are all facing God.

A common misconception is that churches themselves were to be built so that the altars faced East. In fact, directional East is an option and not actually related to the concept of Liturgical East. Witness St. Josaphat Church, whose altar faces North, and Assumption Church, which faces South.

When the celebrant addresses God, he faces Liturgical East. When he addresses the people, as at *Dóminus vobíscum*, he turns toward

the congregation. This is a clearer delineation of purpose than in the *versus pópulum* (facing the people) posture, in which it is all too tempting for a priest to turn a Holy Mass in to a sort of performance, since the people see his face almost all of the time.

In the Tridentine Mass, when the Holy Gospel is read, the celebrant moves to the left side of the altar. The missal stand is angled inward towards him, whereas it is parallel with the front of the altar when it is on the right (Epistle) side of the altar. This is because the Gospel is to be read while facing Liturgical North, as it was the Northern Lands of Europe who originally were in need of evangelization. For the same reason, in a Solemn High Mass, the Deacon sings the Gospel while facing Liturgical North, standing in front of the altar steps.

The rubrics of the Novus Ordo Mass, even when celebrated *ad oriëntem*, have dropped this symbolism. The missal stand is to be placed at the center of the altar, to the left of the celebrant, for the entire duration of the Mass. In the Tridentine order, the center-left position is only used from the Credo to the ablutions after Holy Communion.



Eastern Rite Catholics, the Orthodox, traditional Anglicans, and other denominations see value in *ad oriëntem* services, as did the Latin Rite Catholic Church for some 1500 years. A priest praying the Holy Mass in this manner is talking to God,

undistracted by any sights from the congregation and less prone to performance anxiety. The Mass is not a performance anyway, but priests are humans, and facing a crowd can make one self-conscious, nervous, egotistical, or non-prayerful in other ways.

Even the most avant garde parish still has vestiges of *ad oriëntem* celebrations: Think about Benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament. What way is the celebrant facing before the blessing? Why? Because our Lord is really present in the monstrance. Is our Lord not equally present in the Blessed Sacrament that is reserved in the tabernacle? Our Lord who can see through that solid tabernacle door? To take this line of thinking further, what theological statement is made when a priest celebrates Holy Mass, facing the people, but with his back to the tabernacle?

One could argue that too much is being read into a situation where nothing is actually meant. But it is clear that the consistent use of the *ad oriëntem* posture as employed in the Tridentine Mass respects our Lord in the tabernacle, presents the priest as the leader of prayer, keeps his mind focused on the Mass, and avoids the ambiguous message of having one’s back to the Holy of Holies. This is hardly controversial; it is logical.