

Looking East

Ad Orientem



We are in the latter days of Ordinary Time, and Advent is fast upon us. As Advent approaches we begin to consider “looking east”. When the Church turns to the east, we are looking for the return of the Lord. Many these days are praying for our Lord’s immanent return. “Come soon Lord!” We have made a total mess of things!” Turning towards the Lord is to focus not so much on the reality of our moment, but rather to look with greater anticipation for the coming Christ. Even our Advent hymns hint of these, as “People Look East, the Time is Near” comes to mind.

Cardinal Robert Sarah is the Prefect of the Congregation of Divine Worship in Rome. His African parents had been born into paganism, but they became Catholic before Cardinal Sarah was born. The beloved Cardinal Sarah is one of the great minds of the Church today, and one of the clearest voices of our times. A few years ago, Cardinal Sarah urged priests to implement the practice of ad orientem worship whenever possible, based on their own pastoral judgment, perhaps during Advent.

Most American priests did not jump to make this change. Too many of our people were too accustomed, by now, to having the altars facing the congregations, and they might have found it initially strange to return to the practice of their forefathers. Some Catholics had been

conditioned to see ad orientem worship as a snub, as if the priest was just turning his back on them. Still, many Catholics want to return to ad orientem worship with Cardinal Sarah, and the generation of seminarians coming up through seminary these days are almost unanimous in their desire to return to ad orientem worship. Still, just because one generation may have acted imprudently and too quickly didn't mean we should act too quickly now. There needed to be catechesis to help folks understand their tradition of praying towards the east. And besides, now all the old altars were gone or moved. So how could this even be possible? What is ad orientem worship? Why is it so important to Cardinal Sarah? Well, in short to worship ad orientem means that the priest prays WITH the people, towards God for those prayers that the priest is offering up to the Lord with and for the people, whereas the priest turns towards the people to address them directly whenever the priest is in dialogue with his fellow Catholics.

Please keep in mind that the practice of offering the Mass ad orientem remains codified in our liturgical books, but as we know, in the early 1970's almost every church in America had torn out their venerable altars and replaced them with one wooden table brought down closer to the congregation. It was a great loss of art, but it was thought by that generation that Vatican II had dictated this, though it had not. Many of the Churches in Rome had venerable altars that were already facing the people, but pretty much all of the altars in America faced liturgical east, orientem. In many new churches these days pastors are careful to build altars that can be used on either side, and some historic churches are starting to restore their sanctuaries as well. This is a grassroots effort all around the world, and Cardinal Sarah, as Prefect of Divine Worship, has encouraged Catholics not to lose sight of what it means in our prayer to "turn to the east".

The Jew turns towards Jerusalem to pray and the Arab turns towards Mecca to pray. Christians have traditionally turned 'east' in our anticipation of the Lord's return. Most churches of old faced east, and even in our older graveyards, our ancestors were buried facing eastward, anticipating the resurrection and Second Coming. It gives us something to think about, doesn't it? How might we prepare more for Advent? In what ways can we make Advent stand out and turn away from the worldly worries of our day, looking more attentively towards Christ? How might we focus more upon the Lord and less upon ourselves in this upcoming season of Advent? As we countdown these last weeks of Ordinary Time, let us begin to prepare for Advent and consider ways that we might set the season apart so that we can look with greater anticipation for the awesome Day of the Lord.

So at Our Lady of the Mountains, we're going to try something new this year for the season of Advent (**and only for this season**). We want to take Cardinal Sarah's recommendations to heart, and turn eastward in our prayer for these four weeks of Advent, as a way of making our Advent more distinct from the rest of the year. This will demonstrate the uniqueness of this season. We know this will take some adjusting, but please look at this with an open mind. **We are not proposing doing this forever, but only during the season of Advent**, when we shall, together, look east towards the coming Christ of Christmas.