



In Advent, our parish looks towards the Liturgical East together. It is a season when our pastor will turn with his congregation and offer the holy sacrifice of the Mass from the front side of the altar. This is our way of setting the liturgical season of Advent apart, and reminding ourselves that in Advent, in particular, we are looking 'eastward' for the Lord's return. Those who recently arrived at the parish may be a bit 'disoriented' by this, when ironically this is actually 're-orientating' our prayer. Here is what you should know about 'ad orientem'.

First, praying towards 'the east' is an ancient practice for Catholics. Even in the word 'orientation' we can see 'orient' meaning the east. This is not something new. In fact, it is the ancient Christian practice.

Secondly, praying 'ad orientem' is not the priest turning his back to his people, but rather the priest turning with his people, as one of them, while they all together pray. When the priest prays in the direction towards his congregation (or 'pro populum') it can sometimes feel like the priest is speaking to the people, when in fact the priest is leading us in prayer to God. Facing together as a people makes it clear the priest is one of us, and that we are all praying together.

Third, the Second Vatican Council (that some of our older Catholics might remember) never dictated a change in the direction of priestly prayer for the Mass. There are countless altars in Rome that are built into walls, and that the priest can only stand in front of. Pictured above is

one in the Vatican, with Pope Francis offering the Mass. But there are also some ancient altars in Rome where the priest stands behind. The modern liturgical books of the Roman rite seem to presume that the priest is standing in front of an altar, as these books will now and then tell the priest to turn towards the people.

Fourth, Catholics traditionally prayed towards the east (and the rising sun, anticipating the Lord's return), in part because we Christians first prayed in Jerusalem, and tradition foretold that just as the Lord had come riding upon an ass on Palm Sunday from the east, so would the Lord return in Glory from the east. For centuries, Catholics would build our churches facing eastward, though of course not every side altar in these old churches faced eastward. So 'ad orientem' can be about facing 'liturgical east' more so than it is about, facing true east.

Fifth, many of our younger, more traditionally minded and/or better liturgically formed parishioners in the parish (as well as many of our younger seminarians and priests) might be happy if everyone prayed 'ad orientem' all the time, but for others praying this way for these four weekends of Advent may be something new, and challenging. It stretches them (if you will). So, for this reason, we pray 'ad orientem' seasonally, not because it is bad, but because it is good, and it is so in keeping with the themes of Advent (when People Look East). By doing this seasonally, we want to help inform everyone about this great tradition of our Church. Being opened minded about something that our ancestors would have seen as so very normative helps to make us better Catholics and understand our tradition of prayer all the more.

Lastly, for 48 weekends of the year we pray the Mass 'pro populum' (or facing the people). Clearly, we don't reject this newer way of offering the Mass, just as we would never argue that it is 'wrong' to pray in the old traditional way of 'ad orientem'. What we want to demonstrate is that both ways work, and while we might all have preferences, both ways are firmly Catholic. What is important is that we see each point of view, and that we get a deeper sense of our tradition. We want to open our minds and our hearts in charity, but also to stress, all the more, during this upcoming great season of Advent, that we are a people looking for the Lord's coming!