



# Catechesis For the Masses

Basic Teachings on Liturgy and Participation in the Mass in Both Forms.

## Part 14: Worshipping “Ad Orientem”: Basic Principles

“Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11).

These words from Acts of the Apostles come from the immediate moment after the Ascension of Jesus into heaven. Jesus and the eleven remaining apostles were walking along on Mount Olivet, which is near (*to the east*) of Jerusalem, when Jesus was lifted upward from their sight. Having just witnessed Jesus’ Ascension, perhaps without fully understanding what had just happened, these apostles stood incredulously looking upward in the direction that Jesus had departed from them. Acts of the Apostles then tells us that “two men in white robes” stood nearby and asked them “why” they looked as they did, as Jesus’ return would be “in the same way as you saw him go.”

The story of Jesus’ Ascension provides us with a foundation for considering why the Church for most of her history has offered the Mass with the priest facing *ad orientem* or “toward the east.” That is to say that in offering the Mass, the priest has stood at the head of the faithful, facing *with them* toward the altar - in a visible gesture of leading and joining the people in looking toward the direction from where the Lord will come - understood to be the east. Yet, in most offerings of the Mass according to the reforms of the liturgy since the mid 1960s, such a common posture has been not been utilized. Rather, it has been perhaps forgotten or definitively abandoned by labeling it as “pre-Vatican II” and thus no longer viewed as useful or applicable. In this column, it will be shown

that this *ad orientem* directional posture is both still fitting and truly very powerful in its meaning and symbolism. As always with these columns, it will be necessary to keep in mind the often repeated words that *the meaning of worship has always remained the same, even though the manner of the worship may have changed.*

In explaining the *ad orientem* direction of offering the Mass, it is easiest to appeal to some basic principles and examples that show “why” facing a common direction by the priest and people is both symbolic and practical toward upholding and furthering true and sincere worship. In the introduction of this column, we already saw how the posture is reflective of a looking toward the direction from which Jesus will return. As our worship is focused upon receiving from the Lord Jesus what He offered for us and in offering ourselves to the Lord in return, it is clear that our primary focus and attention should be on Jesus Himself - where He is and from where He will come. Thus, it is plain that the facing of a common direction by both the priest who offers and the people who participate visibly embodies such a common focus. Likewise, as the Mass is an offering *to the Father* who is in heaven, that the priest faces toward the crucifix, looking upward toward heaven visibly (and audibly) directs the words of prayers upward toward heaven, on behalf of and in union with the people who accompany him in this singular direction. Finally, as this directional posture is described as *ad orientem*, or a looking *toward the east*, the singularity of the direction of both the priest and of the people with him symbolizes the looking together toward that direction from which the Lord will return. In itself, this shared direction by all

of the people portrays both vigilance and anticipation - as we symbolically look toward the east for the return of Christ from the east of the holy city, Jerusalem. On a deeper, spiritual level, as this eastward direction is the direction to which we look for the rising of the sun each day, so in our desiring and encountering of heaven in the offering of the Mass, we look toward the east for the rising and return of the true eternal light of the world, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Given all of these meanings of this common directional posture in our worship, it remains necessary to address some practical considerations. In particular, we must account for the fact that many today view the *ad orientem* posture of the priest as him having “turned his back” on the people. Likewise, a real objection to the posture that some raise is that if we are to face “east,” should not every church building be oriented accordingly? To answer both of these concerns, might we look at a few practical examples from lived experience outside of worship to show how neither the literal orientation of the building nor the argument that the priest should not turn his back to the people hold up to the real meaning and power behind this posture. First of all, when it comes to building orientation, many Catholic church buildings through the centuries were built such that the main doors were on the west side - so that upon entering all would be facing east, with the altar at the far, east end of the building. On the other hand, that not every build is this way is often a result of practicalities required by the building site itself or (risk I say it) a lack of knowledge of the symbolism of the eastward direction by those who have designed and/or constructed the churches. Even in these buildings, the *ad orientem* direction is possible by thinking *liturgically* insofar as whatever side of the building the altar is placed can be considered “liturgically east,” symbolizing this union of direction by all.

As for the priest “turning his back,” lived experiences reveal that such a posture of directing prayer to God while turning toward the people when asked



*When the priest is turned toward the crucifix in the “ad orientem” direction while offering Mass, the visible nature of his offering upward to heaven of the sacrifice of Christ’s Body and Blood on behalf of and in union with those in the Church is plainly expressed, while symbolically looking toward the Lord in vigilance of his coming “in the same way” that he departed in his Ascension.* Stained glass window at St. Benedict’s Church, Duluth, MN. Photo by Fr. Joel Hastings.

to address those who follow behind him is analogous to other everyday happenings. Think of a grade-school teacher who faces the students when directing words to them, but then leads them by walking ahead of them when leading them in line to another part of the school building. Think, too, of the national anthem at a sports event, when all stand and face a common direction (toward the flag) while the musicians may be out of sight. Finally, think of a group pilgrimage to a beautiful sight which is only viewed by all when they stand in a common direction (such as a marvel of nature, a work of art, a monument, etc.). In each of these real life images (and in many more), it is clear that when many are looking toward a singular place or goal (as we all look toward God in heaven at the Mass), that is not only fitting but proper and even necessary that we face a common direction.