

Dear friends in Christ,

The Advent Season is all about preparing for the coming of Jesus Christ: preparing to celebrate His birth into the world and preparing for His return in glory. Both of these require us to turn toward the Lord.

In the ancient Church, the sanctuary was generally built with its altar at the east end of the nave, which is still the preference. Pews only lined the walls, still the practice in many eastern Catholic and Orthodox churches. After the homily, the priest or bishop would cry out “*Conversi ad Dominum*” and the people would rise and turn toward the East. The priest and people celebrated the second part of the Mass ‘*ad orientem*,’ turned ‘toward the East.’ The Scriptures tell us that in the Second Coming Jesus will come from the East, and so in our worship we turn to greet him, who comes to us in this part of the Mass in the consecration. As St. Augustine said, “When we rise to pray, we turn East, where heaven begins. And we do this not because God is there, as if He had moved away from the other directions on earth..., but rather to help us remember to turn our mind towards a higher order, that is, to God.”

This weekend is half-time. How has the first half gone for you? How has this Advent season seen you turn more toward the Lord? How will you hold onto that once Christmas comes? And whether the first half has been fruitful or not, what adjustments will you make for the duration? How can you more fully turn toward the Lord in the midst of your daily labors and routines, busyness and disruptions? May we always hear, and respond, to that ancient cry: “*Conversi ad Dominum*.”

This is something we still live in the church today. The liturgical rubrics state that there is always to be a cross on or near the altar, and the altar is to be adorned with two, four or six candles. We are to always be turned to the Lord, the light of the world. Many churches have large crosses hanging above the sanctuary, or on a wall as at St. Joseph, which is a fitting way to more visibly draw everyone into this mystery. However, it severs the direct connection to the altar which is so important, and which is required. The Last Supper and the Cross are intimately connected as a part of the one sacrifice of Christ. The Last Supper was not complete until Jesus drank the wine lifted to him on the Cross, the fourth cup of the Passover meal. Also, it so happens the priest is usually the only one who can’t see the Cross as a result of its location. So all of our altars now have a crucifix on them. While the liturgical rubrics still envision Mass as being celebrated *ad orientem*, it is now the common practice to celebrate the optional *versus populum* (toward the people) – but even in this we must still be turned toward the Lord.

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