

Turning towards the Lord *Celebrating Mass facing the altar*

Dear parishioners,

As you know, Holy Mass at our two churches is offered both facing the people and facing the altar. Beginning in Lent, I intend to begin offering my own daily Masses at both churches facing the altar rather than facing the people. Please permit me to offer the reasons why.

For many, the immediate impression is that the priest "has his back to the people." This can seem quite odd and standoffish at first, so it takes a deeper analysis to understand what is happening. It is more correct to say that the priest is "facing the altar" or "turning towards the Lord." The intention is not to spurn the congregation, but to lead them towards God in worship. Besides, the people in the forward pews always have their "backs toward" the ones behind them! But we just don't look at it in these negative terms.

Please know that the Church fully *permits* either orientation in the instructions for Mass. Were this not the case we would never do it here. In fact, in four places the rubrics of the Roman Missal even instruct the priest to "turn toward the people." The presumption is that he was not already facing the people.

Another consideration is that the readings and homily are done facing the people. Those words are addressed to the congregation. But the Eucharistic Prayer is addressed to God Almighty, and so it is fitting to turn towards the Tabernacle for this part of the Mass.

This direction is sometimes called "*ad orientem*," or "facing East." Churches have traditionally been oriented towards the East, the direction of the rising sun and, for us in the West, the direction of Jerusalem. Our own St Elizabeth's is built that way, and so was the old St Anthony's prior to its renovation. But even were this not the case, we still refer to the priest facing the altar as "liturgical East." Genesis 2:8 reveals that the Garden of Eden was "in the East," and thus facing East during Mass is a way to symbolize the direction of our goal which is Paradise.

The priest offering the Holy Sacrifice oriented *with* the people and in the same direction vividly shows that he is leading them towards the Lord, as a captain in a well-fought fight.

Why then is Mass now offered almost everywhere facing the *people*? From antiquity Mass was always offered facing the altar (*ad orientem*). This is the traditional stance. Following the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) the Church began to *allow* Mass facing the people, and the idea gained almost universal currency. It is how just about all of us have experienced Mass for 50 years. But it must be stated clearly that the documents of Vatican II itself contain no such directive. Granted, the Pope did authorize the practice, but after the Council ended.

On April 10, 2000 the Holy See issued a clarification on the matter, stating: "*Both positions are in accord with liturgical law; both are to be considered correct...a priest's choice of position to offer Holy Mass, whether facing the apse or facing the people may never be used to call into question his adherence to Catholic Doctrine.*" And on September 9th of 2000, in another decree, the Holy See rejected the idea that the priest has a "general obligation" to offer Mass facing the people.

You should also know that Pope Benedict, prior to being elected, wrote forcefully in favor of offering Mass *ad orientem*. In his book, "The Spirit of the Liturgy" he stated, "*A common turning toward the East during the Eucharistic Prayer remains essential...looking at the priest has no importance. What matters is looking together at the Lord...What corresponds with the reality of what is happening is not the closed circle, but the common movement forward, expressed in a common direction for prayer.*"

My friends, it is not my intention to criticize those who prefer Mass facing the people or even to impugn this common practice approved by Holy Mother Church. Rather, I wish to ask you to prayerfully consider the arguments I have made with an open mind and heart. I hope you will come to see the beauty of this practice and the theological purpose of my decision; and I invite you to contact me should you have further questions.

Omnes cum Petro ad Iesum per Mariam,

Father de Rosa

