

Facing East

Celebrating the Novus Ordo Mass Ad Orientem



In recent years, a quiet but meaningful movement has emerged within the Church: the celebration of the Novus Ordo Mass “Ad Orientem”—Latin for “toward the East.” **This posture**, in which the priest and people face the same direction during the Liturgy of the Eucharist, **is not a return to the past, but a rediscovery of a posture deeply rooted in Christian tradition.**

What Is Ad Orientem? “Ad Orientem” refers to the ancient liturgical orientation in which the celebrant and congregation together face liturgical east, symbolizing the direction of Christ’s return. While often associated with the pre-Vatican II Mass, this posture is fully permitted in the current Roman Missal. In fact, the Missal presumes this orientation being used as it instructs the priest to turn toward the people at specific moments—implying that he has been facing away from the faithful before that instruction is given.

Why Celebrate This Way? Celebrating Mass Ad Orientem emphasizes **that the priest is not performing for the congregation, but leading them in worship toward God.** It visually reinforces that the liturgy is a common

turning toward the Lord. As Pope Benedict XVI wrote, **“Looking at the priest has no importance. What matters is looking together at the Lord.”** This orientation also deepens the sense of mystery and reverence. When the priest faces the altar with the people, the focus shifts from personality to presence—from the celebrant to the sacrifice. The sanctuary becomes less a stage and more a sacred space, drawing hearts and minds Heavenward.

Is This Allowed in the Novus Ordo? Yes. The rubrics of the Roman Missal allow for either orientation. While ***versus populum (facing the people)*** has become common, Ad Orientem remains a legitimate and often enriching option. Many parishes have reintroduced this posture, especially during Advent and Lent—seasons of expectation and repentance—as a way to highlight the eschatological dimension of the liturgy.

How Does It Affect the Faithful? For many, the experience of Ad Orientem Mass is quietly transformative. It invites interior participation, fosters silence, and re-centers the liturgy on Christ. This posture also connects us with centuries of Christian worship. From the early Church through the Middle Ages and beyond, facing east was the norm. **To recover this orientation is not to reject the reforms of Vatican II, but to embrace them more fully—drawing from the Church’s rich treasury to deepen our encounter with the sacred.**

A Living Witness: Rooted in the Carmelite charism of contemplative prayer and deep reverence for the sacred mysteries, it invites the faithful into a more profound encounter with Christ. Whether in daily Mass or solemn feast days, this orientation draws worshipers into a shared gaze toward the Eucharistic Lord.

A Posture of Hope: Ultimately, Ad Orientem is not about nostalgia or aesthetics. **It is about hope—turning together toward the rising sun, the Risen Son who comes to meet us in every Eucharist.** In a world often turned inward, this simple gesture reorients our hearts to the One who is our true East. May this ancient yet ever-new posture lead us not backward, but forward—toward deeper reverence, unity, and joy in the mystery we celebrate.