

respect and acceptance.

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Pamphlet 231

## **Orientation of the Priest at Mass**

“Question” Is there any mandate that Holy Mass must be offered, according to the Rite of Paul VI (Novus Ordo), with the priest *versus populum* for the entire duration of the Mass? Is it licit for the priest to face the same way as the congregation during the Eucharistic Prayer?

“Answer” The priest may face *versus deum* or *versus populum* at his own preference. There is not any rubrics that insists he face one way or the other. There are certain parts of the Mass where the priest is supposed to face the congregation, such as during the Gospel, during various responsorials, and at the showing of the Precious Host. A complete listing can be found in the Missal. It is interesting to note that both the Rite of Mass as issued in 1970 and the current *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, chp. IV part Ia assume that the priest is facing *versus deum* for most of the Mass because they list specific times that the priest is supposed to turn and face the congregation.

**Update 3/17/2001** On September 25, 2000 the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments reaffirmed that the priest may decide which direction to face to celebrate Mass. (On the Orientation of the Priest at Mass)

While not having any bearing on the rubrical correctness of orientation, it is interesting to note that the Holy Father says Mass *versus deum* in his private chapel.

On the Orientation of the Priest at Mass  
(Prot. Prot. No. 2036/00/L)

September 25, 2000

**Author:**

Congregation for Divine Worship and the  
Discipline of the Sacraments

The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments has been asked whether the expression in n. 299 of the *Institutio Generalis Missalis Romani* constitutes a norm according to which the position of the priest versus absidem [facing the apse] is to be excluded.

The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, after mature reflection and in light of liturgical precedents, responds:

Negatively, and in accordance with the following explanation.

The explanation includes different elements which must be taken into account.

It is in the first place to be borne in mind that the word *expedit* does not constitute an obligation, but a suggestion that refers to the construction of the altar *a pariete sejunctum* [detached from the wall] and to the celebration versus populum. The clause *ubi possibile sit* refers to different elements, as, for example, the topography of the place, the availability of space, the artistic value of the existing altar, the sensibility of the people participating in the celebrations in a particular church, etc. It reaffirms that the position towards the assembly seems more

convenient inasmuch as it makes communication easier (Cf. the editorial in *Notitiae* 29 [1993] 245-249), without excluding, however, the other possibility. However, whatever may be the position of the celebrating priest, it is clear that the Eucharistic Sacrifice is offered to the one and triune God, and that the principal, eternal, and high priest is Jesus Christ who acts through the ministry of the priest who visibly presides as his instrument. The liturgical assembly participates in the celebration in virtue of the common priesthood of the faithful which requires the ministry of the ordained priest to be exercised in the Eucharistic Synaxis. The physical position, especially with respect to the communication among the various members of the assembly, must be distinguished from the interior spiritual orientation of all. It would be a grave error to imagine that the principle orientation of the sacrificial action is [toward] the community. If the priest celebrates versus populum, which is legitimate and often advisable, his spiritual attitude ought always to be versus Deum per Jesus Christum, as representative of the entire Church. The Church as well, which takes concrete form in the assembly which participates, is entirely turned versus Deum as its first spiritual movement.

It appears that the ancient tradition, though not without exception, was that the celebrant and the praying community were turned versus orientem, the direction from which the light which is Christ comes. It is not unusual for ancient churches to be

"oriented" so that the priest and the people were turned versus orientem during public prayer. It may be that when there were problems of space, or of some other kind, the apse represented the east symbolically. Today the expression versus orientem often means versus apsidem, and in speaking of versus populum it is not the west but rather the community present that is meant.

In the ancient architecture of churches, the place of the Bishop or the celebrating priest was in the center of the apse where, seated and turned towards the community, the proclamation of the readings was listened to. Now this presidential place was not ascribed to the human person of the bishop or the priest, nor to his intellectual gifts and not even to his personal holiness, but to his role as an instrument of the invisible Pontiff who is the Lord Jesus.

When it is a question of ancient churches or great artistic value it is appropriate, moreover, to keep in mind civil legislation regarding changes or renovations. Adding another altar may not always be a worthy solution.

There is no need to give excessive importance to elements which have changed throughout the centuries. What always remains is the event celebrated in the liturgy: this is manifested through rites, signs, symbols and words which express various aspects of the mystery without, however, exhausting it, because it transcends them. Taking a rigid position and absolutizing it could become a rejection of some aspect of the truth which merits