

Blueprints. Architecture. If you want to know about a civilization, take a look at its buildings. And, to understand the Church and Her liturgy, look at Her churches. It's the only way to get to the bottom of this case: "The Case of Facing the People."

You know what I'm talking about. Priests saying Mass with their back to God, rather than facing Him.

Oooh — maybe you haven't heard it put that way before? Well, that's what it is.

The Mass is the most sacred rite of the Church, the Holy Sacrifice of Christ on Calvary for our sins. It's offered by the priest, to God, on behalf of the people. It's a sacred rite, offered in a sacred space, with a particularly sacred space called the sanctuary reserved for the priest and other ministers.

Now, that's important to understand. In fact, it's the *first* thing we need to remember. So, keep that in mind while we talk about architecture and orientation — and, yes, that word was chosen deliberately.

See, "orient" can mean two things. It can mean "the East," the direction of the rising sun, towards Boston if you're standing in Seattle. Or it can mean "to line yourself up," to get yourself facing the right direction.

Why is that? Why that connection between the East and aligning yourself correctly?

Because there was once a time when the Church actually counted for something in civil society, and the thing you lined yourself up with was the altar at Mass. Historically, churches have been built so they are oriented (there's that word again!) with the altar at the eastern end of the building, so the people face the East when they face the altar, during Mass.

Why is that? What's the big deal about the East?

Well, it's pretty simple. According to Catholic tradition, Christ departed towards the East, and will come back to us from the East. And we're admonished by Scripture in the Gospel of Matthew, "Watch ye therefore, because ye know not what hour your Lord will come."

Christ left going that way, He's coming back that way, and we're told to watch out for him. Pretty simple, right?

But what happens if a particular church isn't built facing east? I mean, there might be lots of reasons why that is the case. Historically, the architecture of ancient churches was influenced by particular devotions. A classic example is St. Peter's Basilica itself; it doesn't face east. Its orientation — and, yes, even if it doesn't face east, it's still "oriented" — and doubly so if it's a church, but we'll get to that later.

Its orientation is determined by the position of the "confessio," the underground chapel which houses the tomb of St. Peter and is named after his famous confession of faith. The basilica is built so the celebrant is standing above the tomb of St. Peter. Literally, standing on the rock the Church is built on. How cool is that?

There are other churches which are oriented around a particular devotion. But there are other, more practical reasons why, too. In the modern world, when real estate is at a premium, the shape of the lot the church is built on might determine which way the church has to face.

Hey, we live in an imperfect world.

So, a church doesn't face east. Or maybe the church is built "in the round" with a central altar. Which direction do we orient ourselves towards then?

Well, it's a trick question — you face east, because all churches face east, even if they don't face east.

OK, that sounds crazy — but it's not. The church might be aligned with a geographic or magnetic direction other than east, but it's always oriented to *liturgical* east. For a particular church, the direction the altar faces is liturgical east, and that's the important direction we should align — we should *orient* — ourselves to.

Pope Benedict XVI addresses this when he writes:

Where a direct common turning toward the east is not possible, the cross can serve as the interior "east" of faith. It should be in the middle of the altar and be the common point of focus for both priest and praying community

Notice that. The focus for both the priest and the community is east — be that geographic east or liturgical east, it doesn't matter. Priest and people are facing the same direction. They are "towards the East." In Latin, the language of the Church, that is "ad orientem." The alternative isn't "towards the West" but rather "towards the people," or "versus populum."

The Mass should be said with the priest and people facing the same direction. Yes, that direction is the East, and the East is important — remember, that is the direction Christ the Son rises, the direction the dawn from on high will break on us — but perhaps more important is that the priest and the people aren't facing each other.

Now, to most people, this seems like a no-brainer. "I don't go to Mass to look at the back of the priest's head!" No, you didn't. But neither did you go to look at his face.

Remember where we started and what we've talked about before. The Mass isn't primarily a communal meal; it's the awesome Sacrifice of God offered *by* God *to* God on behalf of His people for the forgiveness of their sins. It's not a cozy, sit-down, feel-good meal where we get to chit-chat.

Max Thurian, in an article published in L'Osservatore Romano, the daily newspaper of the Vatican, writes: "The whole celebration is often conducted as if it were a conversation and dialogue in which there is no longer room for adoration."

He finished up by saying: "The fact that celebrants and faithful constantly facing each other closes the liturgy in on itself."

All right. Some guy in some newspaper — am I going to start quoting "Dear Abby" next? How about Pope Benedict, perhaps one of the greatest liturgists of the last century? In his book "The Spirit of the Liturgy," he says the same thing and warns against this "conversationalizing" of the liturgy:

The priest — the presider, as they now prefer to call him — becomes the real point of reference for the whole liturgy. Everything depends on him. We have to see him, to respond to him, to be involved in what he is doing. His creativity sustains the whole thing. ... Less and less is God in

the picture. More and more important is what is done by the human beings who meet here and do not like to subject themselves to a pre-determined pattern.

When you think about it from a Catholic perspective, a God-oriented perspective and not a man-centered, Protestant perspective, it makes all kinds of sense. Really, *this* is the no-brainer. The priest is offering a Sacrifice — a gift — to God on our behalf. Would you give a gift with your back to the recipient?

If you asked someone to give something — flowers, maybe — to someone you'd offended to say sorry on your behalf, would you be happy if that person faced you and chatted with you all the time, and didn't face the recipient?

The priest doesn't have his back to us any more than Moses had his back to the Israelites when he was leading them to the Promised Land. And that is what the priest is doing. He is leading us — leading us in prayer at Mass, yes, but also leading us to a place far, far better than the land of milk and honey God promised the Israelites. He is leading us into a deeper communion with God in this life, and to an unimaginably deep communion, an infinitely deep communion with God, in the next.

We are a pilgrim people on a journey. We should follow the priest as he leads us, not stop to have some man-centered conversation.

There are, of course, lots of objections.

Some people will argue celebration versus populum, towards the people, is an ancient practice. And, yes, it is — in that it was done in ancient times. But it was never common; it was never the *norm*. Certainly, celebration ad orientem, with the priest and the people facing the same direction, is also an ancient practice, and all the indications are it was the normal way of offering Mass.

Other people say the first Mass was the Last Supper — which is true — and then say Christ faced the Apostles — which is less true. Once again, Pope Benedict in “The Spirit of the Liturgy” makes this clear: “They were all sitting, or reclining, on the convex side of a C-shaped table having approximately the shape of a horse shoe.”

And this is the key thing: They were facing *the Temple*. They were orienting themselves towards something, together, led by Christ, not having an enclosed conversation.

Another objection — or, perhaps it is better understood as a defense of versus populum, or an argument for why it is actually a good practice — is saying when priest and people look at each other they are looking at the image of God in man, since we're made in the image and likeness of God.

Just on the face of it this sounds like grasping at straws. I mean, if looking at a human being allowed us to see God in that way — in a liturgical way of worship and adoration — we wouldn't need Mass. We wouldn't need anything except to chat with fellow human beings. Heck, maybe we could just look at paintings or photographs, or stare into a mirror!

That whole idea, the notion that because man is made in the image of God, God is somehow substantially present in the image of man, is a classic example of the desupernaturalization, the desacramentalization, of the Faith. It denies the essential nature of God, which is sacred, that is “set apart,” different, distinct from us.

As always, Benedict has a quicker and more direct way of saying it in “The Spirit of the Liturgy”: “For we do not see the image of God in man in such a simplistic way.”

The source of these objections and arguments is, ultimately, Satan. He is the author of lies, the father of deception, and *hates*. He hates pretty much everything, of course, but he hates the Mass perhaps most of all, because the Mass is the means by which humanity accesses that once-for-all Sacrifice of Christ that crushed his head and broke his power. Christ died to save us, but only the Mass is the way that Sacrifice is applied to us.

Satan knows this. He would like it best of all if we never went to Mass — and, oh, yes, he's persuaded lots of people to do just that! But if he can't stop us going to Mass, he wants us to get as little out of it as possible. He wants us to misunderstand it, see it as what it isn't. He wants us to see Mass as *not* the Sacrifice it truly is but rather a community meal, a man-centered meeting rather than God-centered worship.

That's not to say everyone who voices these objections is consciously working for Satan, or even willingly working against the Church. An awful lot of them are simply useful idiots, repeating some pretty pabulum they've been told because it feels good, because it sounds nice.

And yes, it does sound nice, doesn't it? The awesome Sacrifice of Christ offered by the priest with reverence and glory is huge, frightening. It makes us realize how small we are, how far short we fall of holiness. It reminds us we are sinners and that we need redemption and forgiveness, and that we can't do this alone.

That is, of course, totally the point.

But a man-centered liturgy is comfortable, cozy. We can have a conversation with the priest. We feel affirmed, encouraged, not challenged to change.

All of this, of course, is one reason why the Tridentine form of the Mass, the extraordinary form, the “Latin Mass,” as it's commonly known, is often more conducive to piety and holiness than the Novus Ordo, the ordinary form. The Tridentine Mass is always said *ad orientem*. The Novus Ordo is most often said *versus populum*.

Here's the bombshell you can drop on people: It shouldn't be.

What?

Here's the deal. The Mass is the Mass, okay? It's the Sacrifice of Christ on Calvary, re-presented to us by the priest. The Novus Ordo doesn't change that. If it's right to offer Mass with the priest and people facing east, and wrong to offer Mass with the priest and people facing each other, then it's always right to offer Mass facing east, and wrong to do it facing the people.

That's logic.

What people are going to do, and *do* do, is whip out that ol' warhorse Vatican II and say “Vatican II changed all that!”

<sigh>

No, it didn't. That's not so much a warhorse as a Trojan horse, and it's not so much Vatican II as the "Spirit of Vatican II," which is a fancy way of saying "stuff Vatican II didn't say but we really wish it did and if we just repeat it often enough people will believe it and not challenge us."

No dice, useful idiot. I've read the documents back to front. *Nowhere* in "Sacrosanctum Concillium," the document on the liturgy (and you can read it as many times as you like) does it speak about celebrating Mass facing the people. It's just not there.

All right, what about the Roman Missal? That's the book which tells a priest how to say Mass. "Say the black, do the red" is the rule. The priest reads the words in black and does the instructions printed in red. Surely that talks about celebrating the Novus Ordo facing the people?

Nope, it doesn't. Most editions presume a celebration correctly oriented, facing liturgical east. Oh, sure, it gives instructions to turn to face the people during particular parts of the liturgy; for example, when the priest says "Dominus Vobiscum." There, he is saying "The Lord be with you" *to* the people, so it makes sense to face them.

But the fact that the missal says to turn towards the people shows the priest wasn't, in fact, facing towards them before he started turning. That's just logic; you don't tell someone to turn to face someone if he's already facing them!

The Mass is oriented towards one thing — offering worship to God by the re-presentation of the once-for-all Sacrifice of Christ on Calvary. That is the orientation, the focus, the direction Mass should point toward. And that is the direction *we* should be pointed towards. We should be oriented to *that*, not facing inward in some kind of feel-good conversation between ourselves that excludes God and puts the emphasis on man, not God.

Today, that doesn't seem to be the norm. Most Masses look more like man-centered community meals than sacrifices offered to God by God of God for our salvation. That's due in no small part to not only a general protestantizing of the Catholic faith, but also major architectural changes — "wreckovations," as they are called — which have made celebration ad orientem harder and celebration towards the people easier.

But we weren't made for ease and comfort. We were made for challenge. And, make no mistake; Changing this will be a challenge. It's more than merely flipping altars and Mass around. It is a wholesale re-orientation of the spirit of the liturgy as practiced in most parishes. We all have our work cut out for us, but that doesn't change the simple fact that this case is closed.