

Ad Orientem / Ad Deum ~ Why is the Priest's Back Toward Us?

Saying "Father has his back toward us," is the worst understanding of what is taking place during a Mass celebrated *ad orientem/Deum*. When the priest turns toward the altar during the Eucharistic Prayer, it is not that his back is toward us, but that he is turning to the Lord with us! We are all facing the Lord!

Let's use two other examples about the importance of bodily posture. If I were to sing our National Anthem or lead the Pledge of Allegiance, I would turn toward the flag and begin. If you happened to be standing behind me, the natural thought would be we are honoring the flag together, the singer/leader and the people together. If I led the Pledge or the National Anthem facing you it would seem more like a performance. Mass is not a performance; it is the highest form of prayer, where we worship Almighty God, and thus all of us facing the Lord or the East together makes good sense. Another example is that of an army. If an army general leading troops into war would march backward as his troops marched forward, it would seem odd. The general should march facing forward, leading the troops into the battle and hopefully into victory. As a priest, I am like the general of an army (the church militant, soldiers of God who are fighting for their salvation); I stand as a leader and a mediator, but I also am in the same battle and going in the same direction.

Praying with everyone facing in the same direction has a long history. Facing a "sacred direction" is a feature common in many religions. (Think of Jews who often turn toward Jerusalem). Thus, the idea of a "sacred direction" has been a part of Christianity since the beginning; only since the mid-twentieth century has this concept been forgotten. The first Christians expected the return of Christ in glory to occur at the Mount of Olives, from where He ascended to His Father, and so it was a common practice for them during prayer to turn towards the Mount of Olives. This practice later evolved into the general custom of preferring to face Jerusalem during prayer, and as the Church spread through the Mediterranean world, this notion further changed into a connection between the light of the rising sun and the glory of the returning Son. The Messiah coming from the East is rooted in Scripture (Wisdom 16:28, Zechariah 14:4, Malachi 3:2, Matthew 24:27 and 30, Luke 1:78, and Revelation 7:2), and the early Church placed great emphasis on this point. In the second century a great bishop, St. Clement of Alexandria wrote, "In correspondence with the manner of the sun's rising, prayers are made toward the sunrise in the East."

For these reasons, since the building of Christian churches began on a large scale in the fourth century (Christianity was legalized in 313 AD), they have been oriented to the East whenever possible, and even when the building could not run on an east-west axis, the apse/sanctuary of the church and the altar have been understood as "liturgical/symbolic East." Here at All Saints Parish, two of our church buildings face actual East: St. Martin and St. Paul. St. John the Baptist faces West and St. Joseph is facing North. Keep in mind that whether the church is built facing East or not, because the Eucharistic Prayer is addressed to God the Father and not to the congregation, the normal posture of the priest, up until 60+ years ago, has always been to face the apse (i.e. rear wall) with his congregation and offer the sacrifice of the Mass with and for them to the Father. As mentioned, it is a simple mistake to think of the priest as "having his back to the people" when they stand together on the same side of the altar; rather, the priest and people by their common orientation show that they are turning towards the Lord together.