



# A Review of the Holy Sacrifice of The Mass Celebrated Ad Orientem

## The History

The history of the Roman Rite of the Mass celebrated Ad Orientem, that is toward the East, is one of the greatest constants in all of Church history. References in Sacred Scripture point us eastward. For example, in Ezekiel we read, “Then he led me to the gate which faces East, and there I saw the glory of Israel coming from the East...” In Luke, Zechariah exclaims, “The daybreak is Jesus Christ to whom early Christians looked on Sunday mornings, the day of the Resurrection. St. John Damascene, explains that “It is not without reason or by chance that we worship toward the East...Since, therefore, God is spiritual light, and Christ is called in the Scriptures Sun of Righteousness and Dayspring, the East is the direction that must be assigned to His worship. For everything good must be assigned to Him from Whom every good thing arises.” We might also remember that catechumens in the early Church were to renounce Satan and then turn to the East to profess their faith in Christ.

## The Direction

Sometimes Mass Ad Orientem is referred to as Mass Ad Deum, that is, toward the Lord, and this is the crux of the matter: to turn together, priest and faithful, towards the Lord.

## The Priest

Pope Benedict states that “a common turning to the East during the Eucharistic Prayer remains essential, looking at the priest has no importance. What matters is looking together at the Lord. It is not now a question of dialogue, but of common worship, of setting off towards the One who is to come. 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.” The priest stands as one with the faithful and at the head of the faithful, offering, by vocation, the Victim to the Heavenly Father.

## The Altar

Every sacrifice demands an altar. Jesus Himself is, as the Preface of Easter reminds us, “the Priest, the Altar, and the lamb of Sacrifice.” In the early Church we see the distinction between a table for a meal and a table, that is dedicated to the Sacrifice of the Mass. This latter was covered with a cloth, while the former was not. As altars developed, they many times were place in the apse of a church always Ad Orientem and sometimes with a curved back reflecting the apse itself with the priest standing at the front. The priest comes to Mass as Christ bearing the sins of the faithful—and his own sins—and venerates the altar thereby identifying himself more and more with the crucified Christ. The prayers at the foot of the altar in the Extraordinary form of the Mass declare, “Introibo ad altare Dei” that is, I will go unto the altar of God. And this is what the priest does, he goes unto the altar of God and not behind it.

## The Chasuble

Each article of clothing that the priest puts on before Mass has meaning, The last to be put on is the chasuble. Benedict XVI reminded priests that the priest, “clad in liturgical vestments must make it clearly visible to those present that (the priest is) there “in the person of an Other”. Just as in the course of time priestly vestments developed, they are a profound symbolic expression what the priesthood means.” The chasuble should be beautiful, not for the priest, but for Christ. It reminds both priest and faithful that the priest is disappearing so that Christ may appear. Often the priest finds the chasuble awkward which is a constant reminder that he is not himself, but acting in the person of Christ.

## The Rubrics

The Roman Missal is the book which establishes the Roman Rites of Holy Mass. There is a Novus Ordo Missal and an Extraordinary Form Missal. The official texts are in Latin. The Missal has lengthy instruction followed by the actual Rite with words in black (what the priest is to say) and red (what the priest is to do.) The latter are called rubrics. There are five times when the rubrics instruct the priest to *conversus ad populum*, that is turn toward the people. These times are at the beginning and end of Mass and then for the “Pray Brothers and Sisters that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God the Almighty Father.” Then secondly at the “The peace of the Lord be with you always.” Finally at the “Behold the Lamb of God.”

## The Mystery

At the conclusion of the sacrifice the priest in awe exclaims, “Mysterium Fidei!”. The mystery of faith is something that should fascinate us. Calvary is made present before us and indeed has commanded us to do this in His Memory. The more he hides Himself in the Eucharist, like a treasure buried in the field of the altar, the more joy we have in finding Him! As St. Jean Vianney said, “If we truly understood the Mass, we would die of joy!”

