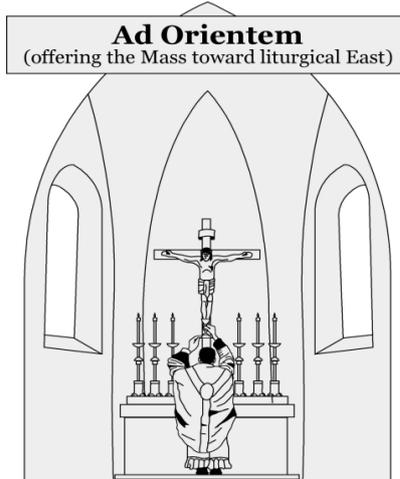


St Mary's Catholic Church Preston Park, Brighton

Letter from the Parish Priest to his parishioners and visitors to St Mary's about being part of and experiencing an ancient and time hallowed liturgical practice at Holy Mass.

23.xi.2014
Feast of Christ the King



Just over 2,000 years ago God became a man. He was born in the small village of Bethlehem near Jerusalem. 33 years later he died on a Cross on mount Calvary. 3 days later he rose from the dead and shortly after that Ascended into Heaven where he now is. Before ascending though he spoke many times of his return one day. This is an article of our faith. On day Jesus Christ will return in glory to the earth. We do not know when he will return. But Christ promised us that he would return, like the rising sun, “as light comes from the east” to bring God’s plan of redemption to its fulfilment.

In the early Church, Christians expected that Christ would come soon—any day. There was hopeful expectation. They were watchful—they looked to the sky in the east, to the place where the sun rises, to wait for Christ. And because they did not know when he would return, they proclaimed the Gospel with urgency and enthusiasm, hoping to bring the world to salvation before Christ returned. It has been nearly two thousand years now since Christ ascended into heaven. It has become easier to forget that he will come again to earth. It has become easier to forget that we must be waiting, we must be watching, and we must be ready.

In the season of Advent, as we recall Christ’s Incarnation and first coming at Christmas, we are reminded to be prepared for Christ’s second coming at the end of time. In the Gospel for the First Sunday of Advent this year Christ tells us his disciples: “Be on your guard, stay awake, ... because you do not know when the master of the house is coming, ... if he comes unexpectedly, he must not find you asleep.”

We remember that Christ has come and will come again whenever we celebrate the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. In the Holy Mass we are made present to the sacrifice at Calvary, to the joy of Christ’s present glory in heaven and to the mystery of his veiled but real presence in the Sacred Host. But we also remember that Christ will return, and we remember to watch, to be vigilant, to wait for him, and to be prepared.

The Mass is rich with symbolism. The vestments of the priest remind us of the dignity of Christ the King. We strike our breasts, and bow our heads, and bend our knees to remember our

sinfulness, God's mercy, and his glory. In the Mass, the ways we stand, and sit, and kneel, remind us of God's eternal plan for us.

Since ancient times, Christians have faced east during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass to remember to keep watch for Christ. Together, the priest and the people faced east, waiting and watching for Christ. Even in Churches that did not face the east, the priest and people stood together in the Mass, gazing at Christ on the crucifix, on the altar, and in the tabernacle, to recall the importance of watching for his return. The symbolism of the priest and people all facing *ad orientem*—to the east—is an ancient reminder of the coming of Christ.

More recently, it has become common for the priest and the people to face one another during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. The priest stands behind the altar facing the people as he consecrates the bread and the wine. The people see the face of the priest as he stands in the person of Christ who is offering himself to the Father for us, 'This is my body, ... given up for you'. This position can have its important symbolism too. It can remind us that we are a family—one body in Christ and it can remind us that the Eucharist, at the centre of the assembly, should also be at the centre of our families, and our lives. But the symbolism of all being as one and facing the same way together, looking to and awaiting Christ, is not something that ought to be lost. It is rich, time-honoured, important and perfectly legitimate. The book which the priest uses during the Mass, the Missal, has rubrics which instruct him at certain times to be 'turned towards the people' (principally when he is addressing the congregation) and at other times to be 'facing the altar' (principally when he is addressing God the Father).

Especially during Advent, as we await the coming of the Lord, facing liturgical east together—even if for us it will mean symbolically facing Christ together at the altar and on the crucifix—is a powerful reminder to us and witness to the world of Christ's imminent return. Today, at a time when it is easy to forget that Christ is coming—and easy to be complacent in our spiritual lives and in the work of evangelization—we need reminders that Christ 'will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.'

During Advent I will be celebrating the Mass *ad orientem* here in St Mary's, like last year. In the *ad orientem* posture at Mass, the priest will not be simply turning his back on the people. Rather, he will be with them turned toward Christ, offering the Holy Sacrifice for his people and waiting for his return. The Mass is the most important place where we give glory to God and he in turn sanctifies us. This is my deep hope for us all this Advent. May our gaze be lifted up this Advent from ourselves to the one who is the light and true Saviour of the world, our blessed Lord Jesus Christ. God bless you all.

Fr Bruno Witchalls
Parish Priest

Notes: I am deeply grateful to Bishop James Conley of Lincoln, Nebraska, who recently wrote to his people on this subject. I have used many of his words in this letter as he was able to say well something that I was finding difficult to say. On the parish website, 'www.stmarysbrighton.com' I have posted this letter but with additional notes and links for those who want to find out more about Mass *Ad Orientem*.

Supplementary notes

Below are some useful references for discovering and learning more about the *Ad Orientem* posture of the priests and people at Mass.

Bibliography:

Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, esp. pp.74-84

- *The feast of Faith*, esp. pp.139-145
- *A New Song for the Lord*, esp. pp.98-118
- *The Ratzinger Report*, esp. pp.119-134

Claus Gamber, *The Reform of the Roman Liturgy*, esp. pp.77-89, 117-184

- *The Modern Rite*, esp. pp.25-34

U.M. Lang, *Turning Towards the Lord, Orientation in Liturgical Prayer*

A Benedictine Monk, *The Sacred Liturgy*

- *Discovering the Mass*

Denis Crouan, *The History and Future of the Roman Liturgy*

- *The Liturgy After Vatican II*
- *The Liturgy Betrayed*

Thomas Crean, O.P., *The Mass and the Saints*, esp. pp.21-22

Alcuin Reid, OSB., *The Organic Development of the Liturgy*

Online Articles:

Here are links to a number of online articles on this subject. They range from a Bishop's Pastoral Letter, to Historical and Theological analysis of *Ad Orientem* worship to the experiences and reflections of priests concerning Mass *Ad Orientem* and to how they have tried to teach their people about what for many in the congregation is a new experience of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

<http://www.lincolndiocese.org/op-ed/bishop-s-column/3004-looking-to-the-east>

<http://rorate-caeli.blogspot.com/2012/04/fiuv-position-paper-4-liturgical.html>

http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2006/ratzinger_altareast_jan06.asp

http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2005/forewd_umlang_may05.asp

http://www.ccwatershed.org/media/pdfs/13/08/22/14-38-18_0.pdf

<http://blog.adw.org/2013/08/are-we-walking-to-heaven-backwards-a-pastoral-consideration-of-liturgical-orientation/>

<http://www.newliturgicalmovement.org/2014/05/fr-dwight-longenecker-on-worship-ad.html#.VG5Vzp1FB9A>

http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2005/fessio_massv2_1_jan05.asp

<http://www.newliturgicalmovement.org/2007/11/explaining-ad-orientem-to-folks-in-pews.html#.VG5L251FB9A>

<http://vultus.stblogs.org/?s=ad+orientem>