

The Amen Corner: About Face

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Many people care strongly about where a priest puts his face. From the halls of the Vatican to the sanctuaries of Catholic rural America, heated debates continue to boil. At best they argue *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*; at worst they argue *ad hominem*. Some people earnestly feel that during the eucharistic prayer at mass the priest should face the same direction as the people - toward the back wall of the church. Others find the idea offensive.

The practice has been called *ad orientem*, or “toward the east” or even *ad apsidem*, “toward the apse.” Not all churches align on an east/west axis, but inside the space the main doors define what may be called the architectural west, spinning out the other compass points accordingly. Liturgical “east” may not be geographical east, but the term conveniently describes one part of the room in the way that theater companies refer to stages left and right, and baseball teams hire southpaws, even though not all third baselines point north and thus expose a pitcher’s left arm to the south. Not every church has an apse, so whereas the expression *ad apsidem* eliminates the occasional geographical conundrum, it may invite an architectural one.

The rubrics say little about the priest’s face, and the minimal evidence has been scrutinized *ad infinitum*. At the risk of raising the issue *ad nauseam*, a broader review of the missal’s rubrics may help all parties discuss *ad orientem*.

Facing the people

The Roman Missal’s Order of Mass (OM) scripts the lines a priest says at every celebration of the eucharist. On a few occasions the OM asks him to say some words facing the people. Today these rubrics still surprise many faithful who stumble upon them because they have never seen the priest face any other way, rendering the rubric unnecessary if not tautological. In general, these few instructions appear where the minister is addressing the people, so as a matter of courtesy he is to look at them. The rubrics never tell him to turn away. Still, for those familiar with the liturgical changes authorized by and immediately after the Second Vatican Council, these particular rubrics seem to have survived the reordering of the mass like the smile of the Cheshire cat.

The instructions probably remain in the heart of the Roman Missal for the sake of historical churches where a centuries-old altar remains against the apsidal wall. The Sistine Chapel is perhaps the most famous example. Many are the shrines in the Holy Land where altars in small spaces remain in their historical position, and many are the side chapels in large basilicas where small congregations gather in concentrated spaces, some with altars fixed to the walls. In those circumstances, the post-Vatican II rubrics remind the priest to turn around and look at the people when addressing them. If these rubrics had envisioned that the practice would be more common, they would have told the priest when to turn around and face the other way. None of them do.

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Such parts of the mass come to light when researching *ad fontes*. In addition to the OM, this essay treats the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM), as well as The Order of Mass with the Participation of a Single Minister (OMM), which covers the circumstance where the priest has not a full congregation, but only one other person with whom to celebrate. Some priests occasionally - or frequently - celebrate a mass without anyone else present, but the Roman Missal neither foresees nor permits such an option.

Concerning the introductory rites, OM 1 says that the priest faces the people for the sign of the cross. Unsurprisingly, in OMM 1 he faces the *minister* for the sign of the cross. GIRM 124 does not mention where the priest faces at this time, but it has him face the people for the greeting that follows the sign of the cross. GIRM 257 repeats this instruction for mass with the participation of a single minister. OMM 1 combines these instructions, telling the priest to face the minister for the sign of the cross and again for the greeting, even though it follows immediately. The rubric obviously carries over too much information from the GIRM. It would be absurd to conclude that the priest should briefly turn away from the minister between these consecutive elements of the introductory rites. At the earliest moment the rubrics instruct the priest to face the people.

Similarly, at the Easter Vigil in the light of the newly enflamed paschal candle, the deacon faces the people while leading the dialogue about the light of Christ. In the preconciliar liturgy, he sang at the head of the procession, the people behind him. On Good Friday, after the ministers prostrate or kneel to begin the service, the priest faces the people for the oration. Formerly he stood before the steps of the altar.

All of this seems to imply that the priest faces the people for all the introductory rites. The Good Friday prayer especially seems to provide a key to interpret where the priest puts his face. On that day he has not been facing the people yet because its liturgy begins without a sign of the cross, without a greeting, and without a standard penitential act or Gloria. The priest's first opportunity to face the people is the oration, so the rubric explicitly fills in the blank.

Just before the eucharistic prayer, the priest faces the people for the *Ora te, fratres* (OM 29 and GIRM 146), inviting his brothers and sisters to pray that God may find their sacrifice acceptable. The priest is addressing the people, so the rubric to face them makes common sense. He also faces the individual when celebrating mass with one other person (OMM 18). Strangely, the priest addresses that person in the plural, calling him or her *fratres*. The first two Latin words of this invitation may have carried into this more private liturgy for the sake of tradition. Saying *Ora, frater* would not carry the same resonance as the traditional invitation, grammatically correct though it would be. The plural formula even served as the title for a renown liturgical journal ninety years ago, so perhaps it remains in the OMM *ad perpetuam memoriam*.

To introduce the eucharistic prayer the priest sustains a dialogue with the people, but the rubrics never ask him to face them even in those circumstances

when he celebrates mass at an altar fixed against the wall. It should be obvious that the priest looks at the people to whom he is speaking. The preconciliar liturgy had the priest face the people anytime he said, *Dominus vobiscum*. The instruction to face the people for the *Orate, fratres* surely perdures through the prayer over the offerings, as the instruction for facing the people at the beginning of mass perdures through the collect. The priest then continues facing the people for the preface dialogue. Others may draw different conclusions *ad hoc*.

After the eucharistic prayer the priest faces the people to offer the greeting of peace (OM 127, GIRM 154). In a more private setting he faces the one person in attendance (OMM 23). While inviting people to behold the Lamb of God, the priest faces them (OM 132, OMM 26, GIRM 157), even when there are concelebrants (GIRM 243), and on Good Friday (Roman Missal 26). When inviting people to pray the prayer after communion, he faces them again (OM 139, GIRM 165).

In the concluding rites, the priest faces the people for the greeting (OM 141, OMM 33). In all the solemn blessings and prayers over the people, even according to specific instructions on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, he extends his hands over the people, which can only be done while facing them. At weddings, the nuptial blessing that follows the Lord's Prayer carries a similar instruction: The priest faces the *couple* for the nuptial blessing while he is speaking to God. This was true even in the blessing of the bride in the preconciliar ceremony, when the priest faced away from the couple for much of the rest of their wedding mass. At the very end of the eucharist, the deacon or priest faces the people for the dismissal (OM 144, GIRM 185).

The existence of so many instructions for the priest to face the people has led some bishops to request that their priests honor this postconciliar practice at all masses in their dioceses, communicated in letters *ad clerum*.

Facing objects and individuals

In other occasions the rubrics deliver instructions about the face. During the preparation of the gifts, for example, the priest stands at the middle of the altar for the prayers blessing God because that is where the bread and wine have been placed (GIRM 142). He faces these elements.

When reciting the first eucharistic prayer the priest is asked to raise his eyes to heaven as he recalls that Jesus performed the same action. The synoptic gospels do not say that Jesus raised his eyes during the words of institution, but John's gospel says that he raised them for the final prayer at the Last Supper (17:1). The rubric is a midrash on the biblical evidence, and it opines that heaven is up, not east.

The priest faces the *altar* for his communion (OM 33; GIRM 158, 244, 268; and 27 in the Good Friday liturgy). In those circumstances where the altar is fixed against the wall, the priest has turned away from the altar in order to face the people for the *Ecce Agnus Dei*. For that reason he is told to face the altar again after this dialogue in order to receive communion. His compliance with this rubric cannot be detected when he is facing the people throughout. Furthermore, the priest is to hold the broken host over the ciborium or the chalice for the *Ecce*

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Agnus Dei. If he has been facing the wall and now faces the people, he needs to hold some vessel under the elevated host to catch any errant crumbs. However, the rubric never asks him to raise the vessel, as many priests do even when celebrating mass facing the people. The rubric assumes that he is standing at the altar, facing the people, holding the host above a vessel resting on the altar.

The mass of chrism instructs the bishop where to face while blessing and consecrating oils. The rubrics for this liturgy still default to the preconconciliar sequence in which the oil of the sick is blessed during the eucharistic prayer, while the oils of catechumens and chrism are treated after communion. Most dioceses take advantage of the permission for the bishop to bless and consecrate all the oils together after the homily. Nonetheless, some dioceses around the world probably observe the earlier sequence. In that case, the deacons are asked to hold the oil of the sick in front of the bishop at the altar near the end of the eucharistic prayer. This makes most sense if the bishop has been offering the eucharistic prayer facing the people, and the deacons are holding the oil across the altar from him. Otherwise, they would have to stand between the bishop and the altar. For the blessing of the oil of catechumens, the rubrics explicitly tell the bishop to face the people. No such direction is given for the consecration of chrism, but it immediately follows the blessing of the oil of catechumens, so the bishop logically holds the same posture facing the people. In the preconconciliar ceremony, the bishop sat on a faldstool facing the altar for the blessing of all three of the oils.

On Good Friday the deacon or priest faces the people for the dialogue that introduces the adoration of the cross, as he did in the preconconciliar liturgy. Communion is distributed only under the form of consecrated bread. On other days when the people receive communion under the form of consecrated wine, the rubrics instruct them to face the minister (GIRM 286). It is difficult to know where else the communicant would face *ad libitum*, but there you have it.

Architectural notes

The rubrics also give some guidance toward church architecture in order to facilitate these various placements of the face. Perhaps the most cited passage is GIRM 299, which says that the altar should be built separate from the wall and stand out freely in the sanctuary as the center of attention, thus facilitating mass facing the people. In a related paragraph, the presider's *chair* is to face the people, preferably from the head of the sanctuary; that is, at the apse. However, placing it elsewhere is acceptable (GIRM 310). Thus the chair, not the altar, is recommended for the back wall. Furthermore, the tabernacle is not to rest upon the altar as it did in the past (GIRM 315). The tabernacle may stand independently in the sanctuary or in a chapel suitable for private adoration and prayer. If the chair is elsewhere and the tabernacle occupies the central location at the back wall, the GIRM says that its location is therefore "behind" the altar (GIRM 310), not on it as it would be if the altar were there, and not in front of it, as would be the case if a priest reoriented the altar in that direction for the eucharistic prayer.

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The placement of the ambo also considers the face. People should be able to see the reader (GIRM 309), and they are all asked to turn toward the ambo when standing for the gospel (GIRM 133). Even the person who announces the intentions during the universal prayer stands at the ambo and faces the people (GIRM 138). By contrast, in the preconciliar liturgy the deacon or priest greeted the people and read the gospel while facing *ad librum*, that is, “toward the book,” which rested on the altar fixed to the back wall. Now the rubrics insist that the people see the proclaimer’s face. These changes to the liturgy of the word have been broadly implemented and accepted with widespread hopes that they last *ad multos annos*, not *ad interim*.

Theological notes

Although some priests and deacons find it inspiring for the presider to lead the eucharistic prayer *ad orientem*, there are difficulties with it. True, the rubrics of the mass permit it, but they by no means encourage it. Having the priest face the people is one expression of the full and active participation of all the people, which the Council decreed the aim to be considered before all else (*Sacrosanctum concilium* 14).

In the minds of many of the faithful, the two greatest changes to the celebration of the mass after the Council were words in the vernacular and priests facing the people. Intertwined, these policies became emblematic of the liturgical movement. They expressed a new ecclesiology that respected the gifts of all members of the Church, and indeed obliged people to use them. Benedict’s summary of monastic life, *ora et labora*, is a mantra for the spiritual life not just of monks, but of everyone in the church. Each member prays. Each member works. The two spiritual principles conjoin. Instinctively, many faithful Catholics fear that a change to the *ora* implies a change to the *labora*. Some feel that a priest presiding *ad orientem*, literally turning his back on the faithful, discredits the gifts of the faithful in the church’s liturgical and ministerial life. Those who favor the practice may deny that intent, but the symbols of language and face have locked onto the liturgical renewal.

The *ad orientem* debate raises the uncomfortable question of just what the priest is looking at when he turns about face. The common opinion argues that by looking to the liturgical east of the building, the priest is looking toward God. But this is not convincingly *ad rem*. If the presider’s chair is in the apse, this touches on messianic clericalism. If the tabernacle is in the apse, it blurs the distinction between the reserved sacrament and the very purpose of the eucharistic prayer and communion. If he is looking east because that is the direction from which the Son of Man will come, as some interpret Matthew 24:27, why face a direction associated with Christ while offering a eucharistic prayer to the Father? Over the preferences of some organists, some priests and bishops have decried the sensible acoustic suggestion to situate pipes in the liturgical east of the building. “We don’t worship the organ,” clerics counter. But what do we worship? The wall? The chair? The east? And if it is the tabernacle, why would someone be worshipping the tabernacle during the eucharistic prayer?

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The liturgy and mission of the church demand the active participation of the people. If a priest finds it hard to pray while facing the people in his *oratio*, one wonders if he finds it hard to minister with them in his *labor*. The faithful are not a distraction. A presider who looks at them with love will feel himself transported *ad astra*, facing the face of God.

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