# Exiled East:

## Ad Orientem as the Architectural, Liturgical, and Spiritual Posture of the Christian Church

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## Introduction

Although having a common, dedicated direction for prayer remains normative for most Jews, Muslims, and Eastern Christians, many modern Christians in the West have entirely forgotten the longstanding Christian tradition of praying facing East (or, in Latin, *ad orientem*). This practice began to be lost in the West during the Protestant Reformation, when many of those who left the Catholic Church abandoned all but the most basic aspects of traditional Christian worship. The practice of praying toward the East has since largely been lost even in the Catholic Church as a result of the Liturgical Movement that corresponded with the era of the Second Vatican Council. Since then, the Mass has been nearly universally celebrated *versus populum* (that is, with the priest facing the people rather than with the entire congregation together facing East). The purpose of this paper is to aid Western Christians in rediscovering the beautiful practice of praying *ad orientem*; namely, how this posture—traditionally found in Christian architecture and liturgy—reflects the spiritual disposition of the Church as an exiled people, and points to the eschatological hope with which she awaits the return of her Savior.

## Scriptural Basis

The practice of *oriented* prayer not only has roots in the earliest days of Christian tradition, but indeed its basis can also be traced to the very first pages of the Bible. Scripture records that after the original sin and the subsequent Fall of mankind, God "drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life" (Genesis 3:24). Thus, man was exiled east, and

leaving his primordial paradise behind to the West, he embarked upon the pilgrimage that we all now experience as the fallen human condition.

This East-West, Exile-Paradise symbolism makes another significant appearance in the Pentateuch with the construction of the Tabernacle, which had an oriented entrance (Exodus 26:22). An east-facing entrance means the Tabernacle's Holy of Holies stood to the west, representing the Edenic paradise where God's Presence dwelt, and from which man had been expelled. When Israel's high priest entered the Holy of Holies once a year, he began walking from the east, ultimately passing through the cherubim-embroidered veil that symbolized the angelic guards stationed outside of the Garden. In doing so, he represented all of mankind's longing to return to God and to dwell once more in peace with Him.

This symbolism of orientation is found also in the New Testament, particularly regarding the prophecies concerning the *Parousia* (that is, the "second coming" or return of Christ): "For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of man" (Matthew 24:27). Here Christ acts as the true High Priest of mankind, who comes from the East (the entrance to the Tabernacle) and leads us to the West (the Holy of Holies). This expected manner of Christ's return is closely bound up with His Ascension, which having taken place on Mount Olivet (Acts 1:9-12), occurred to the east of Jerusalem—and the disciples knew from the angel's words that Christ would return "in the same way" as they saw Him leave (Acts 1:11). It was this striking combination of Old and New Testament symbolism, added to the expectation that Christ would return from the East, that caused the earliest Christian communities to incorporate orientation into their liturgical lives.

**Historical Roots**

According to Lang, the earliest Christians would often pray facing the Mount of Olives in expectation of the Parousia of Christ, which, considering "the topography of the city . . . meant that they were facing east."[1] As Christianity expanded outside of Israel, and after Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD, prayer towards the Mount of Olives specifically diminished in significance, but prayer towards the East remained a central aspect of Christian praxis:

> There is no doubt that, from the very early times, it was a matter of course for Christians all over the known world to turn in prayer towards the rising sun, that is to say, towards the geographical east. In private and in liturgical prayer, Christians turned, no longer towards the earthly Jerusalem, but towards the new, heavenly Jerusalem; they believed firmly that when the Lord came again in glory to judge the world, he would gather his elect to make up this heavenly city. The rising sun was considered an appropriate expression of this eschatological hope.[2]

So universal was this custom that it became common practice for Christians to mark the eastern wall of their churches with a cross, to note the direction toward which they should be praying.[3] Indeed, church buildings themselves were constructed such that the altar was positioned near the east wall so that the presider could lead the congregation, symbolically facing the Lord together with them, during the celebration that epitomizes the pinnacle of Christian worship: the Eucharist.[4]

More than merely during the Sunday gathering, orientation shaped the whole of Christian life—from beginning to end. During the conversion process, a catechumen would face west whilst renouncing Satan before physically "converting" bodily towards the East to profess his

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[1] Uwe Michael Lang, *Turning Towards the Lord: Orientation in Liturgical Prayer* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2009), 38.

[2] Lang, *Turning Towards the Lord*, 45.

[3] Ibid, 46.

[4] Ibid, 73-74.

acceptance of Christ.[5] Then, at the end of life, a Christian would be buried facing the East, so that when Christ returns, he can rise to face his Savior.[6]

**Clearing up Misconceptions**

All this being said, the day-to-day experience of most modern, Western Christians is decades (if not centuries) removed from any direct connection to the traditional Christian practice of privately and corporately celebrating the Faith *ad orientem*. As such, a multitude of misconceptions have crept into Western Christian culture regarding this ancient and venerable practice that need to be addressed, perhaps the most prevalent of which is the idea that during *ad orientem* worship the priest "has his back to the people." Quite the contrary. Indeed, traditional Christian worship involves "the priest and people together facing the same way in a common act of trinitarian worship."[7] It is not a question of the presider facing away from the people, but of the entire congregation together turning towards the Lord in worshipful awe.

Indeed, far from *ad orientem* worship being an example of priest turning away from people, it is in reality an acknowledgment of the fact that humanity (both priest and people) are tasked by God with representing all of Creation—in that, when all people (both cleric and lay) turn to the Lord Christ in worship, it serves as an expression of the cosmos itself adoring the Lord: "For the true location and the true context of the eucharistic celebration is the whole cosmos. 'Facing east' makes this cosmic dimension of the Eucharist present through liturgical

[5] Ibid, 57.
[6] Ibid, 51.
[7] Jospeh Ratzinger, *The Feast of Faith* (San Franscisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1986), 140.

gesture."[8] Thus, the only way that this manner of worship can be construed, as it is by some, as an instance of the "priest facing the wall" or "with his back to the people" is if all of Christian history has been forgotten. After all, the congregation—including the priest—"does not carry on a dialogue with itself; it is engaged on common journey toward the returning Lord."[9]

Failure to understand this truth of Christian worship is no trivial matter. Not to acknowledge the faithful's joint orientation toward the Lord is to miss the point of the gospel itself: "The turning of the priest toward the people has turned the community into a self-enclosed circle. In its outward form, it no longer opens out on what lies ahead and above, but is closed in on itself."[10] When we turn toward each other, we turn away from the Lord. As Christians, we are not meant to gaze upon one another, but to "set off for the *Oriens*, for the Christ who comes to meet us."[11] The late Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, expressed this point with utmost eloquence when he noted that:

> This is a case, not of something accidental, but of what is essential. Looking at the priest has no importance. What matters is looking together at the Lord. It is now a question, not of dialogue, but of common worship, of setting off toward 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.[12]

**Conclusion**

Considering the historical and Scriptural evidence, the loss of the traditional practice of *ad orientem* worship in the West can be understood as no less than a critical and abject tragedy.

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[8] Ratzinger, *The Feast of Faith*, 140.
[9] Ibid, 142-143.
[10] Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2020), 94.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid, 95.

When the Christian congregation turns in on itself rather than facing the Lord together, the entire essence of Christianity has been forsaken. The Christian gathering makes sense only as a corporate exercise in anticipation. Either we are constantly looking toward the Lord, whose second coming offers us our only hope of peace, or we have fundamentally apostatized. How exactly this practice—which has its Scriptural and historical basis in divine revelation itself—might be reclaimed is one question; however, *that* it must once again regain its place in the Christian tradition can hardly be denied.

## Bibliography

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