

Turning Towards The Lord

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

For the past few weeks at Christ the King, priest and people have together looked towards the Altar and the Crucifix. I would like to take this opportunity to share a few reflections on the rich spirituality of facing the Crucifix during the liturgy.

The notion of priest and people looking towards God in prayer has its roots in Scripture and in the rich tradition of Catholic spirituality. There are many reasons for this practice, but I will limit this reflection to four key principles – namely: **sacrifice, turning towards the Lord, looking eastwards, and pilgrimage.**

These key themes have their roots in the Old Testament and find their fulfilment and focus in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Just as the Temple was the place where heaven and earth met, so for us Christ is the person and place where God and humanity come together in the most profound and fundamental way. With this in mind, let us briefly explore these four principles in turn.

1. Sacrifice

Just as sacrifice was at the heart of the Temple liturgy for the Israelites, every Christian understands that Christ on the Cross offered Himself, once for all, as the most perfect sacrifice to God the Father.

As such, every Catholic understands that to participate in Holy Mass is to participate in Christ's sacrifice on the Cross. Hence, what we witness on the Altar is bread and wine becoming the Body and Blood of Christ.

The Crucifix and the Altar, therefore, are the focal points of the church building and of our liturgical worship – the very centre of our attention.

2. Turning Towards the Lord

Praying to God has always meant turning and facing the Lord as one approaches Him. This is clear when we look at the Temple, where God appeared to His people. Hence, when praying, Jews everywhere looked towards the Temple. As Psalms 138 says, *"I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness."*

We see the same in Leviticus 16, where the High Priest, on the Day of Atonement, entered the most holy place – the Holy of Holies – to stand before the Mercy Seat, facing God.

This same concept was embraced by Christians from the earliest times: during the liturgy, we come before God, and thus priest and people look in the same direction – the direction of the Cross.

After all, the prayers during Mass are addressed and directed to the Father. Hence, it is not the priest but the Cross and the Altar that are the centre of our attention.

It is true that the priest stands *in persona Christi*, performing Christ's work and leading the liturgy, but he is not the focus of our gaze. Together, priest and people, in one spirit, look towards the Lord.

This is no different from our experience during Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament – at Adoration, the priest is not turning his back to the people; rather, priest and people look in the same direction: Christ in the Blessed Sacrament.

On a personal note, as a priest at the Altar, I find looking at the door and the ceiling a distraction that prevents me from fully focusing on Mass. In contrast, when I look at the Cross, I can give my full attention to the liturgy.

3. Looking Eastward

Another dimension of facing the Cross is that of looking to the East – to the rising sun (*ad orientem*, in Latin). From the very beginning, Christians saw the work of Christ as one that renews all creation, and that all creation worships the Lord. Hence, when we gather for Mass, we are not merely a small local community concerned with ourselves; rather, we join the whole of creation – heaven and earth – in worshipping the Lord.

“The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork... In them he has set a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy.” Psalm 19

In our church, on a sunny day, we see the sun shining on the Crucifix, mingled with incense and prayers as we worship God.

As well as worshipping with creation, the rising sun is a symbol of Christ – especially of His second coming. As the Lord tells us in the Gospel of Matthew: *“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

Thus, looking East in prayer expresses our hope at the Altar – we stand on the verge of heaven, looking beyond the here and now to the coming of the Lord.

Traditionally, churches have been built facing east, with the Altar and Crucifix on the eastern side. Of course, the Altar at Christ the King faces west, but this is not unique to our church. Many church buildings throughout history have faced different directions for topographical or technical reasons. Nevertheless, the Cross and the East came to signify the same thing for Christians.

“The sign of the Son of Man, of the Pierced One, is the Cross, which has now become the sign of victory of the Risen One. Thus, the symbolism of the Cross merges with that of the East.” Pope Benedict XVI

That is why we speak of the **“Liturgical East”** – that is, *where the Cross is, there is the East*. For the Cross signifies not only Christ’s sacrifice but also His resurrection and His second coming. Hence, even though we may not be physically facing east at Christ the King, we are nonetheless liturgically looking eastward – towards the Cross of Christ.

4. Pilgrimage

Finally, as God’s people, we are a pilgrim people. Our identities are defined by our relationship with God – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. While we live here on earth, we look towards the heavenly places and towards the Lord, conforming our lives to that of Christ. Hence, our *orientation* is towards the Cross as a sure guide to a life worthy of God.

Fr. Timothy Ezat

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