

# *Ad Orientem* As A First Step Toward Spiritual Renewal

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Modified for use in the bulletin by Rev. James C. Campbell

**Pope Francis and his pontificate** [went] on trial February 21-24 when the heads of the world's bishops' conferences [gathered] for a summit on "The Protection of Minors in the Church" after the fallout from clergy sexual abuse and its episcopal cover-up. Catholics worldwide are demanding real, structural reform that will prevent such scandals from ever happening again.

Since the Church is not a mere human institution, but a divine one with a spiritual, and not a temporal, end, the only way that structural reform can succeed is if it is preceded by genuine spiritual reform: the spirit gives meaning and *gravitas* to the structures. It is never the other way around. There is a spiritual reform that Francis and the bishops could enact that, if brought about with true devotion to God and an acknowledgement of the infinite debt we owe him, would communicate a new direction—a new orientation, if you will—for the Church in these troubled times: turning the priest to the east when he offers the holy sacrifice of the Mass, so that he and the people face the Lord together.

From apostolic times until those halcyon days of the late 1960s, Mass was always offered with priest and people facing the same direction—*ad orientem*, to the east, from whence Christ is expected to come again.

(The Eastern Orthodox, who were not as enthralled by 1960s-craziness as Roman Catholics, still offer their divine liturgy to the east.) In this way, the re-presentation of Christ's self-sacrifice on the cross reminds us that our Savior is also our Judge, and that we await the coming of Christ into our world so he can bring us up into his. Theological meaning aside, having the priest and people face the Lord together is simply good manners: why, when addressing prayers directly to God, should the priest be looking at someone else?

Critics deride this orientation as the priest turning his back to the people. Dare we suggest that some priests and bishops have already done this by abusing the trust of the faithful? With every sin we turn our backs on God and turn in on ourselves. The episcopal cover up of abuse has provided the world a nefarious example of the insularity of sin. At least in terms of orientation, when the priest offers Mass facing the people, a self-enclosed circle—to use Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger’s description—is created, giving the impression of an insular congregation content with its own self rather than being open to the coming of the transcendent Lord. Mass offered with the priest facing the people, *versus populum*, contributes to another problem, one that Francis has spent his entire pontificate denouncing—clericalism. In the words of Cardinal Ratzinger, by turning the priest toward the people, “*an unprecedented clericalization came on the scene*. Now the priest—the ‘presider,’ as they now prefer to call him—becomes the real point of reference for the whole liturgy. *Everything depends on him*... Less and less is God in the picture.”

When the entire congregation can do nothing but stare at the priest’s face, when the priest’s demeanor and personality have such an impact on the feel of the Mass, and when the action of Christ’s sacrifice is obscured behind the notion of a priest presiding at a communal meal, we have the type of clericalism that Francis despises and [has denounced](#) repeatedly: “Clericalism forgets that the visibility and sacramentality of the Church belong to all the People of God, not only to the few chosen and enlightened.”

On a deeper level, since the McCarrick fiasco, clericalism has been the buzzword in the Church, as [many prelates] have deemed it the cause of sexual abuse and its cover-up. This is a debatable claim, akin to blaming Harvey Weinstein’s abusive actions on “executive producerism” or blaming the Penn State and Michigan State cover-ups of abuse by Jerry Sandusky and Dr. Larry Nassar respectively on “college athletic administrativism.” If [we as a church are] serious about combating clericalism and the [abuse crisis](#)—“To say ‘no’ to abuse is to say an emphatic ‘no’ to all forms of clericalism”—then turning the priest toward God when offering the Mass is the perfect place to start....

Only profound spiritual reform will allow the Church to heal from the abuse crisis. Symbolically, when the priest turns his back on God at Mass, we as the People of God turn in on ourselves—we become the People of Ourselves. In doing so, we forget our true purpose: to serve God in this life, and be happy with him forever in the next.

Repentance and healing can only occur if we turn away from our sinful ways and turn toward God. There is no better way, and no better place, to make this shift—this reorientation—possible, than by humbly beseeching the Lord while facing him—priest and people together—at Holy Mass.