



January 14, 2022

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

The Second Vatican Council aptly described the celebration of the Eucharist as the source and summit of the whole Christian life.¹ The council also affirmed that “in the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy, the full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else”.² That participation finds its highest expression when the priest and faithful alike, in communion with Christ and one another, offer themselves as a living sacrifice in union with the one sacrifice of Christ, made present in the celebration of the Mass.

Throughout the centuries, there have been many variations in the how the Mass has been celebrated. Quite notably, the Second Vatican Council restored the option for priests to celebrate at a free-standing altar facing the people (*versus populum*). In the last fifty years, this method has become nearly universal, so that many Catholics today have known no other way. It must be noted, however, that the practice of more than a millennium of having both the priest and people face the same direction is still a permissible option in the Latin rite. This manner of celebrating is called *ad orientem*³. The two manners of celebrating Mass each express in their own way a particular aspect of the Church’s rich theological and spiritual tradition⁴.

While allowing for legitimate options, there should nonetheless be a general consistency in our common worship that reflects our unity in the Eucharist. Also, the faithful should not have their experience of the Mass significantly altered whenever a new pastor arrives. For these reasons,

¹ Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium*, no. 11. Also, cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, dogmatic constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 10.

² *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 14.

³ One of the ancient titles for Christ himself is *Oriens*, which is Latin for the rising sun or the radiant dawn. In a way, every Mass is celebrated *ad Orientem*, i.e., toward Christ, regardless of what direction the priest is facing. *Oriens* is also the Latin word for “east”. The ancient practice of having everyone face geographical east for the celebration of the Mass was an acknowledgment that the sun rising in the east is a profound symbol of Christ, the true *Oriens*, the true Rising Sun which never sets.

⁴ The terms describing the two modes of celebrating are themselves significant. Because every Mass is directed “to God”, the Church does not speak of Mass facing the people as “*ad populum*” (directed to the people, which would constitute false worship) but rather “*versus populum*” (turned toward the people, while still directed to God), a technical but important distinction.

I am issuing the attached particular law to regulate the celebration of the Mass *versus populum* and *ad orientem* in the Diocese of Erie. I do so in accord with canon 223 §2, by which the diocesan bishop, as chief custodian of the liturgy within his diocese, may lawfully regulate the exercise of rights through the issuance of particular law.

There is only one set of directions for celebrating the Mass, whether *versus populum* or *ad orientem*. They are found in the rubrics clearly printed in the Roman Missal. The only perceivable difference in the manner of presiding comes in the how the priest will comply with the rubrics while he is standing at the altar beginning with the presentation of the gifts and running through the communion rite. During that time, when the rubrics instruct him to face the people, he will either need to turn around to face them or to look across the altar into the body of the Church. Everything else, e.g., the entrance rites, liturgy of the word, concluding rites, etc. are indistinguishable in Masses celebrated *versus populum* and *ad orientem*.

It is my hope that this letter and the attached decree will help us find that proper balance between respecting the fullness of our liturgical tradition with the options legitimately provided for by the Roman Missal, while honoring the liturgical directive that “the altar should be built apart from the wall, in such a way that it is possible to walk around it and that Mass can be celebrated at it facing the people, which is desirable wherever possible”.⁵

Be assured of my prayers for you all, for a renewed and deepened awareness of the mystery we celebrate in the Eucharist.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

+Lawrence T. Persico

The Most Reverend Lawrence T. Persico, JCL
Bishop of Erie

⁵ General Instruction of the Roman Missal, no. 299.