

**Homily for the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
December 8, 2020**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Reverend Fathers, Deacons, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

When I was a child, my parents would often take me and my siblings to Resurrection Cemetery in Justice, Illinois, to pray at the graves of my grandparents, great-grandparents, and other family members. One of the lessons I learned as I walked around the cemetery was not to step on the graves of the people who were buried there. My parents taught us that we should show respect for the deceased by not walking on their graves. Since childhood lessons like these often stay with a person throughout one's lifetime, it has always been uncomfortable for me to celebrate Mass while standing on the grave of Bishop James A. Griffin, who built our Cathedral in Springfield and who is buried here in the sanctuary. Although you cannot see it from the pews, his grave is in the floor on the opposite side of the altar of sacrifice. When the Cathedral was renovated in 2009 shortly before my appointment as Bishop of Springfield in 2010, the altar of sacrifice was firmly fixed in the floor of the sanctuary adjacent to Bishop Griffin's grave, so it

would not be a simple matter just to move the altar to avoid standing on his tomb while celebrating Mass.

Since neither the altar nor the grave can be moved very easily, I have decided to start celebrating Mass from the other side of the altar. Doing so will also mean that I will be celebrating Mass in our Cathedral *ad orientem*, that is, facing the same direction as the people in the pews instead of facing towards them, which in Latin is called *versus populum*.

The phrase *ad orientem* in Latin means “toward the east.” The phrase in not be taken literally, though, since the celebrant is looking east geographically when celebrating Mass facing the people in our Cathedral. Facing the same direction as the people in the pews would actually be facing the west geographically.

When speaking about celebrating Mass *ad orientem*, what is meant liturgically is to be praying while facing Our Lord, the “Dawn from on high” who will “break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet on the way to peace” (Luke 1:78-79). While celebrating Mass facing the people became popular after the Second Vatican Council, there is actually no document from the Second Vatican Council that calls for Mass to be celebrated facing the people.

In his book, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (who would later become Pope Benedict XVI) wrote that prayer and worship “toward the East” (*ad orientem*, oriented prayer) “is, first and foremost, a simple expression of looking to Christ as the meeting place between God and man. It expresses the basic Christological form of our prayer. . . . Praying toward the east means going to meet the coming Christ. The liturgy, turned toward the East, effects entry, so to speak, into the procession of history toward the future, the New Heaven and the New Earth, which we encounter in Christ” (pp. 69-70).

Another reason for celebrating Mass *ad orientem* is to make clear that the celebrant is leading the people in prayer with their bodies physically facing in the same direction, directing their prayers to God, rather than putting on a performance for the people in the pews to watch, as if they were passive spectators. As the Second Vatican Council taught in the Sacred Constitution on the Liturgy, “The Church earnestly desires that all the faithful be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations called for by the very nature of the liturgy” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 14).

In his pastoral letter, “Turning Toward God: Celebrating the Mass Ad Orientem,” issued July 22, 2019, Bishop James Wall of the Diocese of Gallup, New Mexico, announced that “the 11:00 AM Sunday Mass will henceforth be celebrated *ad orientem* at the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart in Gallup. This provides the faithful with the opportunity to attend the Mass in this way – indeed, in this way which is still approved and generously allowed by the Church. This is also a practice I would like to encourage throughout the Diocese of Gallup. I believe it is pastoral to offer Masses both *ad orientem* and *versus populum*, so that, together, we can all be exposed to the varied riches of the Church and Her prayerful history.”

Similarly, it is my intent to henceforth to celebrate the 10:00 AM Sunday Mass at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Springfield *ad orientem*. I also encourage this practice throughout the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois.

Today is indeed a special day liturgically as we celebrate the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, the patronal feast of our Diocese, of our Cathedral, and of our country, the United States of America. In his sermon about the Virgin Mary, the bishop St. Anselm wrote:

The whole universe was created by God, and God was born of Mary. God created all things, and Mary gave birth to God. The God who made all things gave himself form through Mary, and thus he made his own creation. He who could create all things from nothing would not remake his ruined creation without Mary. God, then, is the Father of the created world and Mary the mother of the re-created world. God is the Father by whom all things were given life, and Mary the mother through whom all things were given new life. For God begot the Son, through whom all things were made, and Mary gave birth to Him as the Savior of the world. Without God's Son, nothing could exist; without Mary's Son, nothing could be redeemed.¹

Mary's obedience to God redeemed humanity from the disobedience of Eve, whose decision with Adam to ignore God's command brought untold imperfections into God's good creation. Sin has consequences. All sins, even those committed privately, have negative consequences on the sinner that then adversely affects others. All sin is social.

In order to rectify the situation, God creates a new Eve. He richly blesses young Mary of Nazareth and then asks her to cooperate in his plan of salvation. Mary cooperated not only with God but also with the grace and faith with which she had been blessed from the first moment of her life.

A disciple, as the word implies, is a student, a person open to following the teaching of a master. A disciple puts faith in the teacher's knowledge and direction. This is what Mary did. Just as Eve's sin had negative social implications for all of humanity, Mary's gracious response to God's call opened the path to redemption for all. In our celebration of the Eucharist, Christ our Redeemer comes into our hearts.

In his 2007 address to the monks of Holy Cross Abbey in Vienna, Pope Benedict said, "In all our efforts on behalf of the liturgy, the determining factor must always be our looking to God. We stand before God – he speaks to us and we speak to him. . . . In the light of this, I ask you to celebrate the sacred liturgy with your gaze fixed on God within the communion of saints, the living Church of every time and place, so that it will truly be an expression of the sublime beauty of the God who has called men and women to be his friends!"

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ From a sermon by Saint Anselm, bishop (*Oratio* 52: PL 158, 955-956), quoted in the *Liturgy of the Hours*, Office of Readings for the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary.