

“Conversi ad Dominum.”

The ancient call to prayer, *Conversi ad dominum* (Turn to the Lord), is synonymous with *Ad Orientem* (face East).

In the Acts of the Apostles, there is a rather dramatic presentation of the Church’s response to Our Lord’s Ascension. “As they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:9-11).

Tradition gives us some very interesting insights into the Sacred Liturgy. The early Church continued to look up to heaven as they waited in expectant hope of His immanent return, in the same way He left.

Indeed, we still await Our Lord’s return in joyful hope and expectation. Yet, we don’t know the day or the hour. Many have speculated and just as many have been wrong. The one thing we know for sure is, He will return as He left.

This belief was reflected in how the Church celebrated the Mass and how it is still

celebrated in our Eastern Rites.

St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome has an interesting history in this regard. When it was built, the altar was placed at the West end and the doors to the East because of the landscape of where it was built. St. Peter’s is built on what is known as Vatican Hill, once a major Roman cemetery. These cemeteries were called cities of the dead, because the tombs resembled little homes, creating streets and walkways.

It was in this cemetery that St. Peter found his final resting place. The early Christians knew the spot, but kept it hidden from the Romans, in fear that they would destroy his remains.

After Constantine’s conversion, he built the first St. Peter’s Basilica on top of this Roman cemetery, to the chagrin of the pagan Roman citizens, who could no longer visit their relatives and friends.

Building the basilica was a major challenge, due to the hill behind the cemetery. Constantine had to cut away at

this hill, which placed the basilica facing west.

During Mass, the congregation would stand to the side in the nave, facing the altar for the part we call the Liturgy of the Word. However, during the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the doors at the East end were opened, the Deacon declared “*Conversi ad Dominum*” (Turn to the Lord). “During the eucharistic liturgy the congregation would face the same direction as the celebrant, looking towards the open doors of the church through which the light of the rising sun, the symbol of the risen Christ and his Second Coming in glory, flooded into the nave” (U.M. Lang, *Turning Towards The Lord*, Pg. 79).

*God bless,
Fr. Finelli*

