Ask Father Michael:

Why does Fr. Michael face the tabernacle and Crucifix instead of the congregation during the second part of the Mass?

There are many reasons and they come from a variety of influences: faith tradition, spiritual, anthropological, practical, and personal reasons why some priests choose this option during the second part of Mass (what we call The Liturgy of the Eucharist). Let me give a brief response for each one and in future bulletins I can give some further explanations. Please know I am always open to sit down in person and discuss this in detail as well. Just call or email me and we can sit down together.

Faith tradition: First, it needs to be said that the priest addressing prayers toward the East/toward the Lord (Ad Orientem/Ad Deum) is an ancient practice that has been around for just under two thousand years. Contrary to popular practice and perception, the Second Vatican Council in the late 1960's did not call for the turning of the priest toward the people for the entire Mass. What the liturgical reforms did do is add times during the Mass where the priest would turn more toward the people to address them. In the Mass before Vatican II, the priest would only turn to the people a few times ("The Lord be with you"/ and "Pray brothers and sisters that my sacrifice…"/ "Behold the Lamb of God…"). The readings and all the opening and closing prayers were all facing East/or toward the Lord. The homily was the only other time that the priest would face the people. The reforms after Vatican II added options for the priest to turn toward the people for the readings and for the opening and closing prayers. What happened in practice, though, was that many priests decided to face the people for the whole Mass. A stress was placed on the community gathered around a table. But, in the last thirty years, the ancient practice has been renewed by some of the younger priests. They wanted to stress the other realities at Mass: that we are a people on pilgrimage and are all together priest and people here to look to the Lord who comes to us in the Eucharist. A church on pilgrimage does not stand around in a circle but is on the way to the heavenly Jerusalem, looking to and moving toward the East, where the Risen King comes again and promises to bring us with him to paradise.

Spiritual: None of us come to Mass merely to encounter each other. I can do that at a restaurant, a park, and in our home. We come to encounter the Blessed Trinity and receive the Risen Son in the Eucharist. The entire second half of Mass are prayers addressed to the Father by the priest and these prayers are offered in, with and through the person of Jesus Christ. There is a mystery to this encounter; something we can't get our whole hearts and heads around. The reason why priests wear vestments is to conceal his individual personality so the person of Jesus can remain our focus. You can meet and know the priest personally before Mass, after Mass, at social events. But the Mass is not about the priest; its about Jesus and that's where I want our focus held.

Anthropological (the study of our humanity): Our humanity and our bodies matter and are made of matter. How we move them and posture them, and orient them effects our invisible and immortal souls. And also vice versa. So where we focus our eyes during Mass effects what our souls focus on. Kneeling during the consecration (if we are able) can have a positive impact in our souls disposition toward God, who is Holy. When we come to Mass our bodily movements

and orientation are not meant to be exactly like every other human event we participate in. If I go to a concert or conference or public speech, the way we approach those experiences with our bodies is different than when we encounter the Blessed Trinity at Mass. It should look, feel, and be a different bodily experience than those other forms of gathering.

Practical/Personal reasons: I have trouble focusing too. I'm not that holy yet. I'm not a saint yet (though I am striving to become one.). There are dozens of distractions at Mass that can get our focus off of Jesus. The priest is at Mass to pray as well, and the Liturgy of the Eucharist is meant to be a very powerful experience for us all. As I said, the prayers during this time are all addressed to God. They are not a performance or a show for the people. I find it easier to enter into the prayers of the Mass when I keep my eyes fixed on Jesus on the Crucifix or in the Tabernacle. We are not here just to go to Mass, but to pray the Mass and be in communion with the Blessed Trinity who gives us our every heartbeat and breath. The Mass is a prayer of thanksgiving. We give thanks, and God gives us himself in the Eucharist.

One final point: Both orientations are permitted and valid in the current liturgy. They both emphasize different good things about our faith. Some priests have only known facing the people the whole time during the Mass and they celebrate the Mass faithfully and reverently. Some priests have found fruit in renewing some of these ancient practices and orientations. Our Catholic faith calls us to unity and diversity. There are over 20 forms (rites) of the Catholic liturgy celebrated throughout the world and none of them look completely like the other forms. They arose over hundreds of years in various languages and cultures. It is good to experience this variety and see how God works through them to draw people to Himself.

I'll be sure to give more explanation in the months ahead. Feel free to keep submitting questions via call, written note, or email!