

POSTURES AND GESTURES

In the celebration of the Mass, we raise our hearts and our minds to God. Yet, we are creatures of body as well as spirit, so our prayer is not confined to our minds and hearts. It is expressed by our bodies as well. When we pray with our whole person, it helps us to pray with greater attentiveness.

During Mass, we assume different postures — standing, kneeling, sitting — and we are invited to make a variety of gestures. These postures and gestures are not merely ceremonial. They have profound meaning and when done with understanding, can enhance our participation in the Mass.

STANDING

From the earliest days of the Church, this posture has been understood as the stance of those who have risen with Christ and seek the things which are above. By Baptism we have been given a fuller share in the life of God and the posture of standing is an acknowledgement of this wonderful gift. Standing is a sign of respect and honor, so we stand as the celebrant, who represents Christ, enters and leaves the assembly. We stand when we address God in the various the prayers of the Mass; we assume our full stature before God, not in pride, but in humble gratitude for the marvelous things God has done in creating and redeeming each one of us. We stand for the proclamation of the Gospel which recalls the words and deeds of the Lord. The bishops of the United States have chosen standing as the normative posture to be observed for the reception of Communion (GIRM 160).

KNEELING

In the early Church, kneeling signified penance. So thoroughly was kneeling identified with penance that the early Christians were forbidden to kneel on Sundays and during the Easter season, when the prevailing spirit of the Liturgy was one of joy and thanksgiving. In the Middle Ages, kneeling came to signify homage, and more recently this posture has come to signify adoration, especially before the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. It is for this reason that the bishops of this country have chosen the posture of kneeling during the entire Eucharistic Prayer.

SITTING

Sitting is a posture of listening and meditation, so the assembly sits for the pre-Gospel readings and the homily and may also sit for the period of meditation following Communion. All should strive to assume a seated posture during the Mass that is attentive rather than merely at rest.

PROCESSIONS

Every procession in the Liturgy is a sign of the pilgrim Church, the body of those who believe in Christ, on their way to the Heavenly Jerusalem. The Mass begins with the procession of the priests and ministers to the altar. The Book of the Gospels is carried in procession to the ambo. The gifts of bread and wine are carried forward to the altar (The word “Offertory” comes from *ob ferre*, “to carry toward”). Members of the assembly come forward in processions to receive Holy Communion. We who believe in Christ are moving from time to time toward that moment when we will leave this world and enter into the joy of the Lord in the eternal kingdom he has prepared for us.

THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

Because it was by his death on the Cross that Christ redeemed humankind, we begin and end Mass by marking ourselves with the Sign of the Cross. The cross reminds us in a physical way of the Paschal Mystery we celebrate: the Death and Resurrection of our Savior Jesus Christ. We dip our hand in the holy water and make the Sign of the Cross on ourselves as a reminder of our baptism in which we share in the dying and rising of Christ. We trace the Sign of the Cross on our foreheads, lips, and hearts at the beginning of the Gospel, praying that the word of God may always be in our minds, on our lips, and in our hearts.

BOWING

Bowing signifies reverence, respect, and gratitude. In the Creed, we bow at the words which commemorate the Incarnation. We also bow as a sign of reverence before we receive Communion. The priest and other ministers bow to the altar, a symbol of Christ, when entering or leaving the sanctuary. As a sign of respect and reverence even in our speech, we bow our heads at the name of Jesus, at the mention of the Three Persons of the Trinity, at the name of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and at the name of the saint whose particular feast or memorial is being observed (GIRM 275).

GENUFLECTING

As a sign of adoration, we genuflect by bringing our right knee to the floor. Many people also make the Sign of the Cross as they bend their knee. Traditionally, Catholics genuflect on entering and leaving the church if the Blessed Sacrament is present in the sanctuary. The priest also genuflects in adoration after he shows the Body and Blood of Christ to the people after the consecration and again before inviting the people to Holy Communion (cf. GIRM 274).

ORANS

The priest frequently uses this ancient prayer posture, extending his hands from his sides, slightly elevated. “Orans” means “praying.” Early Christian art frequently depicts the saints and others standing in this posture, offering their prayers and surrendering themselves, with hands uplifted to the Lord. It is a gesture that echoes Christ’s outstretched arms as he offered himself on the Cross.

PROSTRATING

In this rarely used posture, an individual lays full-length on the floor, face to the ground. A posture of deep humility, it signifies our willingness to share in Christ’s Death so as to share in his Resurrection (Romans 6). The gesture is used at the beginning of the Celebration of the Lord’s Passion on Good Friday and during the Litany of the Saints at Ordination, when those to be ordained deacons, priests, and bishops prostrate themselves in humble prayer and submission to Christ.

CONCLUSION

The Church sees in these common postures and gestures both a symbol of the unity of those who have come together to worship and also a means of fostering that unity. We are not free to change these postures to suit our own individual piety, for the Church makes it clear that our unity of posture and gesture is an expression of our participation in the one Body formed by the baptized with Christ, our Head. When we stand, kneel, bow, and sign ourselves in common action, we give witness that we are indeed the Body of Christ, united in body, mind, and voice. ■

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United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship, Pastoral Liturgy Series 4, Washington, DC. USCCB, 2007.

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