

Postures and Gestures at Mass

In the celebration of Mass we raise our hearts, minds and voices to God, but we are creatures composed of body as well as spirit and so our prayer is not confined to our minds, hearts and voices, but is expressed by our bodies as well. When our bodies participate in our prayer we pray with our whole person, as the embodied spirits God created us to be, and this engagement of our entire being in prayer helps us to pray with greater attention.

During Mass we assume different postures: standing, kneeling, sitting, and we are also 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 personal participation in Mass. In fact, these actions are the way in which we engage our bodies in the prayer that is the Mass.

Each posture we assume at Mass underlines and reinforces the meaning of the action in which we are taking part at that moment in our worship. Standing is a sign of respect and honor, so we stand as the celebrant who represents Christ enters and leaves the assembly. This posture, from the earliest days of the Church, has been understood as the stance of those who are *risen with Christ and seek the things that are above*. When we stand for prayer we assume our full stature before God, not in pride, but in humble gratitude for the marvelous thing God has done in creating and redeeming each one of us. By Baptism we have been given a share in the life of God, and the posture of standing is an acknowledgment of this wonderful gift. We stand for the Gospel, the pinnacle of revelation, the words and deeds of the Lord, and the bishops of the United States have chosen standing as the posture to be observed in this country for the reception of Communion, the sacrament which unites us in the most profound way possible with Christ who, now gloriously risen from the dead, is the cause of our salvation.

The posture of kneeling signified penance in the early Church: the awareness of sin casts us to the ground! 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 that of joy and thanksgiving. In the Middle Ages kneeling came to signify the homage of a vassal to his lord, and more recently this posture has come to signify adoration. It is for this reason that the bishops of this country have chosen the posture of kneeling for the entire Eucharistic Prayer.

Sitting is the posture of listening and meditation, so the congregation sits for the pre-Gospel readings and may also sit for the period of meditation following Communion.

Gestures too involve our bodies in prayer. The most familiar of these is the Sign of the Cross with which we begin Mass and with which, in the form of a blessing, the Mass concludes. Because it was by his death on the cross that Christ redeemed humankind, we trace the sign of the cross on our foreheads, lips and hearts at the beginning of the Gospel. Fr. Romano Guardini, a scholar and professor of liturgy wrote of this gesture:

When we cross ourselves, let it be with a real sign of the cross. Instead of a small, cramped gesture that gives no notion of its meaning, let us make a large, unhurried sign, from forehead to breast, from shoulder to shoulder, consciously feeling how it includes the whole of us, our thoughts, our attitudes, our body and soul, every part of us all at once, how it consecrates and sanctifies us ... (Sacred Signs, 1927)

But there are other gestures that intensify our prayer at Mass. During the Confiteor the action of striking our breasts at the words through my own fault can strengthen my awareness that my sin is my fault. In the Creed we are invited to bow at the words which commemorate the Incarnation: *by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary and became man*. This gesture signifies our profound respect and gratitude to Christ who, though God, did not hesitate to

come among us as a human being, sharing our human condition in order to save us from sin and restore us to friendship with God. This gratitude is expressed with even greater solemnity on the Feast of the Annunciation of the Lord and on Christmas when we genuflect at these words.

During the Communion Rite of Mass we pray the *Our Father*, the prayer given us by Jesus himself. We may extend our arms outward, holding both hands with the palm upward in the ancient *orans* gesture, a gesture that signifies our need, our humble dependence on God, and our openness to receiving the gifts of daily bread and forgiveness which we seek in this prayer. The *Our Father* is followed by the Exchange of Peace, by which we express through our gesture and the prayerful greeting of peace that accompanies it, that we are at peace, not enmity, with others. This exchange is symbolic. The persons near me with whom I share the peace signify for me, as I do for them, the broader community of the Church and all humankind.

Finally, with the new *General Instruction*, we are asked to make a sign of reverence, to be

determined by the bishops of each country or region, before receiving Communion while standing. The bishops of this country have determined that the sign which we will give before Communion is to be a bow, a gesture through which we express our reverence and give honor to Christ who comes to us as our spiritual food.

In addition to serving as a vehicle for the prayer of beings composed of body and spirit, the postures and gestures in which we engage at Mass have another very important function. The Church sees in these common postures and gestures both a symbol of the unity of those who have come together to worship and 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, sit, bow and sign ourselves in common action, we give unambiguous witness that we are indeed the Body of Christ, united in heart, mind and spirit.

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