

Welcoming the ROMAN MISSAL THIRD EDITION

Deepen, Nurture, Celebrate

Postures and Gestures at Mass



In the celebration of Mass, we raise our hearts, minds and voices to God, but our prayer 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. 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 invited to make a variety of gestures. These postures and gestures have profound meaning and, when done with understanding, enhance our participation in 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, in humble gratitude for the marvelous thing God has done in creating and redeeming each one of us. We stand for the Gospel, the pinnacle of revelation, the words and deeds of the Lord. The bishops of the United States have chosen standing as the posture to be observed for the reception of Communion, which unites us in the most profound way possible with Christ.

The posture of kneeling signified penance in the early Church. 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 time, kneeling came to signify the homage of a vassal to his lord. More recently, this posture has come to signify adoration. This is why the bishops of the United States have chosen the posture of kneeling for the Eucharistic Prayer.

Sitting is the posture of listening and meditation, so the congregation sits for the readings, responsorial psalm, and for the period of silence 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 ...”

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 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 and on Christmas when we genuflect at these words.

In the Sign of Peace, we express through a prayerful gesture, that we are at peace, not enmity, with others. 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 before receiving Communion. The bishops of the United States 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.

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. 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 given unambiguous witness that we are indeed the Body of Christ, united in heart, mind and spirit.