



Celebrating the Sacred Liturgy of the Mass: A Review of New Diocesan Norms—Part VIII

By means of this series of inserts we have examined the Sacred Liturgy so that we might better understand what we pray together in the Mass. We have considered the disposition with which we should approach the celebration of the Paschal Mystery and how the faithful participate in the celebration with the priest. We have mentioned that while many times our participation is verbal, at other times we participate through attentive silence. Yet another means of participation is through our postures and gestures.

We profess our Catholic belief that both body and soul will be resurrected into life everlasting. It is, therefore, only fitting that we praise and worship God not only with the love of our hearts and souls, but with our voices, hands, and indeed our whole self, including our bodies.

Gestures and Postures Unite Us

Gestures and postures carried out in prayerful union with our brothers and sisters in Christ during worship manifest our unity and help to form us into a community. Gestures of reverence remind those who make them of the very precious gift celebrated in the Eucharist and give examples to our children and even to adults who are new to our faith. In a very real way, our common gestures and postures help to pass on our beliefs.

While we usually kneel for silent prayer to prepare ourselves to celebrate the Sacred Liturgy, our first common posture is standing. There is a long history within the Church of standing as a reminder of our having been raised to new life through Our Savior, Jesus Christ. Perhaps considering just two examples of standing in our culture will help us understand why we stand at different parts of the Mass. Just we stand in order to greet someone, so we stand at the ready to begin the Mass and at other significant moments: as a sign of deep respect and reverence to greet the

Word of God proclaimed in the Gospel and to receive the Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion.

Although we stand for the Gospel, we sit to listen to the other readings from Sacred Scripture and for the homily. This posture may have come down to us from the practice of sitting in the synagogue to listen to God's Word. It is, of course, also a common posture for students. We sit to listen to instruction with our attention focused on the one who is speaking to us and on the words being said. Kneeling or sitting is also the usual posture for our period of sacred silence and meditation following the reception of Holy Communion.

Kneeling in Adoration

As a sign of reverence, in the United States we kneel for the Eucharistic Prayer, and in the Diocese of Raleigh we also kneel from the end of the Lamb of God until the distribution of Holy Communion. Traditionally, kneeling has been associated either with adoration, penance and humility. There is something very intimate about kneeling before our God. The posture of kneeling can help to facilitate our personal relationship with God.

Genuflecting is a very important way for us to show reverence to the Blessed Sacrament. When we enter or leave a church and make note of the tabernacle, we genuflect, bending the right knee to the ground in adoration to the Real Presence of the Lord Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. For person reasons of health, one may also make a profound bow as a gesture of reverence.

It is also the custom to reverence the altar with a bow since the altar represents Christ and it is there that Christ will be made present for us. Likewise, when we pass in front of a tabernacle or when the Blessed Sacrament is exposed on the altar (for example, during the Forty Hours Devotion), we genuflect.

The Sign of Salvation

The Sign of the Cross is the gesture most identified with our Catholic faith. This sign of our salvation which honors the cross on which Christ died and overcame death, and is made at the very start of the Mass and again during the blessing which concludes the Sacred Liturgy. This powerful gesture also proclaims our faith in the Most Holy Trinity. We trace small crosses on our foreheads, lips, and breast before the reading of the Gospel to indicate our commitment to keep the Good News always in our minds, on our lips, and in our hearts.

As mentioned previously, we bow in reverence to the altar when we pass in front of it. As a sign of reverence for the Incarnation, we bow during the recitation of the Creed, at the words: “by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary and became Man.”

Those who are unable to kneel during the Eucharistic Prayer make a profound bow when the priest genuflects following the elevations of the Body and Blood of Christ. Finally, we bow our heads before we receive the Eucharistic species during Holy Communion.

One final gesture to consider is the sharing of a sign of peace during the Communion Rite. It is important to keep in mind that sharing a sign of peace, whether a handshake, a hug, or even just a nod and a smile, is meant to be a sign of reconciliation with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

This is not a time of social greeting but a sign of our own repentance for harm to others and also forgiveness of any offenses and a genuine acceptance of one another (see Matthew 5:23-24).

The sign of peace is also a symbolic action; it is not necessary to share a sign of peace with everyone in the assembly; those standing near us represent all those with whom we may have failed to be at peace.

Each of our gestures at the Sacred Liturgy of the Mass thus forms not only a personal, but also a common witness to our faith and our relationship with God.

Important Postures and Gestures for the Sacred Liturgy of the Mass

From the beginning of Mass to the First Reading	Stand
From the First Reading until the Gospel Acclamation	Sit
From the Gospel Acclamation through the Gospel	Stand
During the homily	Sit
During the Creed and the Prayers of the Faithful	Stand
From the beginning of the Preparation of the Gifts until the <i>Orationes Fratres</i>	Sit
From the beginning of “Pray Brethren” (<i>Orationes Fratres</i>) until the end of the “Holy, Holy”	Stand
After the “Holy, Holy” until after the Great Amen of the Eucharistic Prayer	Kneel
From the beginning of the Our Father until the Lamb of God	Stand
From the end of the Lamb of God until the distribution of Holy Communion	Kneel
For the distribution of Holy Communion (Bow of the head before the Body and Blood of Christ before receiving each sacred species)	Stand
Following the reception of Holy Communion	Stand
(kneeling or sitting is also an option)	
During the sacred silence	Sit or kneel
From the Prayer after Communion until the end of the Mass	Stand
(If there are announcements, the congregation may be asked to sit following the Prayer After Communion)	