

On postures of prayer during the Our Father

I

This week I'm taking a little break from my regular typology articles because I think there is curiosity, and perhaps stronger feelings as well, over part of Bishop Foys' recent decree. Among other things, the decree asks us to refrain from holding hands or elevating our hands during the Our Father. This, as you may have seen, was picked up on by the local media and rather blown out of proportion. So, I think that it's important for us to review the facts so that we understand *how* the Church and Bishop Foys are asking us to worship and *why*.

To begin, then, we need some background history on postures of prayer. There are two ancient postures of prayer in the Church: folding hands and raising hands. (Notice that holding hands is not one of these two.) These are not the only postures in which we pray, of course, but they are the postures that we use in the liturgy. Now, each of these two postures is roughly associated with one of the two 'halves' of the Catholic Church, that is, the Western and the Eastern Rites of the Church. (Even though we speak of halves, however, the distinction has more to do with culture than geography, and the Western or Latin Rite is much larger than all of the Eastern Rites combined.) Of course, you can find both postures in both East and West. Generally speaking, however, western Catholics fold their hands to pray, whereas eastern Catholics raise their hands to pray.

This latter gesture of raising hands to pray is known as the *orans* position, which is Latin for the "praying" position. This position shows through the body that we are lifting our minds and hearts to God in prayer. The *orans* position is an ancient posture of prayer used in many religions, including Judaism. For example, in Ps. 63:5 the psalmist says of God, "I will bless You as long as I live; *I will lift up my hands*, calling on Your Name." See the position there? Or again, in Isa. 1:15a God condemns hypocritical worship through the prophet, saying, "When *you spread out your hands*, I close my eyes to you." The *orans* position, naturally, continued to be used in the early Church. Most importantly, however, it is the position of Jesus Christ on the cross, where He acted most fully as the great High Priest of the new and eternal covenant.

In the East, this ancient posture of prayer was retained for everyone, clergy and lay alike, even to the present day. If you think that the western Church is slow to change things, you should talk to an eastern rite Catholic—they change things much, much less and more slowly. Now, there is much more to be said here, so tune in next week for the history behind folding hands and what this all has to do with the Our Father.

II

Continuing on in our discussion of postures of prayer and what posture we may assume during the Our Father, we recall that in the Eastern Rites of the Catholic Church both the priest and the people pray in the *orans*, or "praying," position, meaning with hands extended. While the East preserved this ancient posture, in the West something different happened. This was because the eastern half of the Roman Empire centered around Constantinople remained standing for centuries, preserving the social order. The western half, however, collapsed in the 400's. To survive, society developed into what we call feudalism, which worked as follows: One noble lord

owned a bunch of land because he had money and civil power, but he couldn't farm it all himself. So, he would allow peasants, called serfs, to live on the land and work it for him. The serfs gave part of their crops to the lord, so he had food and also had to serve as part of the lord's army. In return, the serfs and their farms were protected by the lord. All of this was cemented by oaths, which the lord and the serf made to each other.

In the actual exchange of oaths, the serf would fold his hands together and the lord would fold his hands around the hands of the serf. This gesture of folding hands expresses outwardly humble obedience of the heart and the interior plea for mercy, help, and salvation. Not surprisingly, then, it was adopted as the common posture of prayer in the West, including as a liturgical posture. In fact, that same oath-taking posture is still used today by the bishop and the deacon-to-be or priest-to-be during the Rite of Ordination when the promise of obedience is made to the bishop. The beauty of folding our hands to pray is that it reminds us of how close Jesus Christ is to us. He has His hands tenderly and protectively wrapped around ours, receiving our prayer—how intimate! (And if you want to put even more meaning into your folded hands, you can cross your right thumb over your left, symbolizing that mercy—God's "right hand"—always has the final word over justice—His "left hand" [cf. Jas. 2:13])

Even though folding the hands in humble supplication became the normal posture in the West, the *orans* position did not entirely disappear. Rather, since it is the position of Jesus Christ on the cross, the eternal High Priest, it became reserved in the liturgy to the priest standing *in persona Christi capitis*, in the person of Christ the Head. But even the priest doesn't use the *orans* position *whenever* he prays; he only uses it when he prays as Christ and on behalf of the people, Christ's Body. You will notice that the priest assumes the *orans* position when he prays the Collect (Opening Prayer), the Prayer over the Gifts, the Eucharistic Prayer (beginning at the Preface), the prayers following the Our Father, and the Prayer after Communion. During all of these prayers, the priest alone prays because he is not praying as an individual, but rather with Christ the Head he prays on behalf of the entire congregation. Not, of course, that the congregation *isn't* praying—God's holy people should be uniting their own personal and silent prayers to the prayer of Christ and His Church. Now, the priest also assumes the *orans* position during the Our Father, and that is what we need to talk about next, but it will have to wait. So, please tune in next week for the exciting conclusion.

III

So far we have discussed how praying with hands raised—the *orans* position—is the common posture of prayer in the East, whereas in the West the *orans* position shows that the priest is praying as Christ the Head on behalf of God's people and the common posture is the folding of hands. We now need to apply this to praying the Our Father at Holy Mass, but first we need to go over two quick points so that we can fully understand Bishop Foy's decree that we should neither hold nor raise/extend our hands at the Our Father. These two points are, first, the matter of holding hands, and, second, that a common bodily posture in the liturgy is a sign of unity.

Now, holding hands can certainly be a way of showing unity and love of neighbor.

However, holding hands, especially with strangers, can also make people needlessly uncomfortable. And even if two people know and like each other, there is always the danger of distracting yourself from praying to God our Father because you are focused on your hands or the people next to you (especially, I might add in my capacity as high school chaplain, at co-ed high schools). There are pros and cons to everything, of course, but the real point is that we, as Catholics, pray according to the ancient traditions of our Church.

This raises the question: Where does the tradition of holding hands during the Our Father come from? Well, the answer is that it comes from our separated brothers and sisters in Protestant communities. Of course, there is nothing wrong with the Catholic Church picking up ideas and practices from other religions—*but* the Church must act carefully when she does this. Only the Catholic religion has the fullness of truth because her Lord Jesus Christ, Who is the Truth, gave her the living Faith and Tradition that she possesses and in which she is preserved by the Holy Spirit. Even good ideas from other religions can have an admixture of error within them. And let's face it, while Protestant religions may have some practices and qualities that are worth imitating, good liturgy is not usually their strong suite. The practice of holding hands during the Our Father, therefore, is not a Catholic tradition and has never been officially approved by Holy Mother Church. Of course you can hold hands when you pray outside of Church liturgies, but at Holy Mass and other liturgies we should stick to our Catholic traditions.

The last point that needs to be made is that, as *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal* says, "A common bodily posture, to be observed by all those taking part, is a sign of the unity of the members of the Christian community gathered together for the Sacred Liturgy" (par. 42.2). What we should want to do in the liturgy is to all have the same bodily position (in so far as possible, recognizing limitations imposed by physical disabilities, etc.). This shows that we are all members of the one Mystical Body of Christ, united under the priest, that is, under Christ the Head.

And so now, let us apply all of this to the Our Father and Bishop Foys' decree. Applying the principle that our bodily posture should show our unity, the Church asks that we all assume the same posture when we pray. Of course, this means standing during the Our Father. Beyond that, as Bishop Foys' decree points out, the Universal Church does not specifically regulate the position of the congregation (although she does regulate the priest's position: *orans*). And yet, the Church Universal entrusts each Local Church, or diocese, to a bishop who has the authority to make specific laws for the good of this Local Church. Bishop Foys, who I can personally attest to be a holy, wise, orthodox man, has decided to more closely regulate the posture of the congregation at Holy Mass to help us worship God in a more fitting way. And so, he has asked us not to hold hands since it is a non-Catholic tradition that has crept into our liturgies.

Bishop Foys has also asked the congregation not to assume the *orans* position. Now, people might wonder more about this second part because this *is* a Catholic tradition, albeit an eastern one. And Vatican II and Bl. Pope John Paul II did encourage the Church to "breathe with both lungs," meaning that the East and the West should learn from each other. Furthermore, although the priest assumes the *orans* position at the Our Father, it is not a presidential prayer

since the entire congregation prays it with him. There are, in fact, dioceses in the U.S. where the people have been instructed by their bishop to assume the *orans* position along with the priest. And yet, if we are going to keep unity of posture among the entire congregation, and not only at the parish level but on the universal level, so that all Catholics in our Latin Rite are praying the same way, then it makes the most sense to observe not the eastern tradition, but our own western tradition. And this is what Bishop Foys, quite sensibly, has asked us to do in asking us not to assume the *orans* position.

Now, as we said, the instructions of the Mass don't actually regulate the congregation's posture beyond asking us to stand. And Bishop Foys has only asked us *not* to do certain things; he has not told us what to do. So, no one is saying that you *have* to fold your hands during the Our Father. However, folding hands is the traditional posture of our Latin Rite, and it is certainly more reverent than just standing there with your arms at your side, or leaning on the back of the pew in front of you. I personally recommend, therefore, that we make our own the ancient posture of folding our hands—the posture of our father and forefathers, the posture of humble supplication and of deepest intimacy with our Lord Jesus Christ.

That is all I have to say. I hope this little series of articles has helped you understand more clearly both how we worship as Catholics as well as Bishop Foys' recent decree. Please take the time to explain this information to people you may know who are confused or upset about this topic.