

Postures and Gestures at Mass



In the celebration of the Mass we raise our hearts, minds, and voices to God. As creatures composed of body as well as spirit, we also pray with our bodies. During Mass we assume different postures: standing, kneeling, and sitting. We also make a variety of gestures: bowing, signing ourselves, shaking hands as a sign of peace, processing to the altar. These postures and gestures are not merely ceremonial. They carry a profound meaning when done consciously, with understanding and faith. Through these postures and gestures, we participate in the liturgy more attentively.

Postures

Standing is a sign of respect and honor. From the earliest days of the Church, standing has been understood as the stance of those who are risen with Christ and seek the things that are above (see Colossians 5). When we stand for prayer, we are assuming our stature before God as a people redeemed by the blood of Christ. We stand when the celebrant and the other ministers process into the church. We stand for the Gospel because we acknowledge that it is Christ himself speaking to us when it is proclaimed. The bishops of the United States have chosen standing as the normal posture for the reception of Holy Communion in this country.

Kneeling signified penitence in the early Church: The awareness of our sin casts us to the ground! In the Middle Ages, kneeling came to signify the homage of a vassal before his liege lord. More recently, kneeling has come to signify humble adoration. It is for this reason that the bishops of the United States have chosen the posture of kneeling for the assembly during the Eucharistic Prayer, from after singing the Holy, Holy, until after singing the Great Amen.

Sitting is the posture of attentive listening and of meditation. So the assembly sits for the readings before the Gospel and the homily, and may also sit for the period of meditation after Holy Communion.

Gestures

The **Sign of the Cross** is the most familiar gesture. We make it over our bodies as we begin Mass and in the blessing at the end of Mass. This gesture, which recalls the saving death of Christ on the cross, first marked our bodies at baptism, when we were claimed for Christ. So, too, during the sprinkling rite at the beginning of Mass or when we take holy water upon entering the church, we make the Sign of the Cross.

Genuflecting is the gesture of adoration that we make to the presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. Upon entering the church, before taking our place, we genuflect toward the Blessed Sacrament reserved inside the tabernacle. The priest and ministers genuflect before entering the sanctuary if the tabernacle is located within it. A genuflection is made by bending the right knee to touch the ground. During the Eucharistic Prayer, the priest genuflects three times in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament: after showing the host and then the chalice to the people, and again before he speaks the Invitation to Communion and receives the sacrament himself.

Bowing is a gesture of reverence. We recognize the altar as a symbol of Christ, and so we stop and bow to it whenever we pass in front of it. The priest and all the ministers bow to the altar after processing to the sanctuary at the start of Mass. In the Creed, we bow at the words that 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 humbled himself to share our human condition in order to save us.

There are other gestures that intensify our prayer at Mass. For example, during the Penitential Rite, when we pray the Confiteor (“I confess”), the action of striking the breast at the words “through my fault” can strengthen awareness that our sin is indeed our fault. In the Rite of Peace, we express through our handclasp or embrace that we are committed to sharing Christ’s peace. It is an expression of our desire to live in communion with one another. Thus it is appropriate that before we share in Holy Communion, the sacrament of unity, we make this symbolic gesture with those around us.



A New Gesture

The General Instruction asks us to make a sign of reverence before receiving Holy Communion. The bishops of this country have determined that our sign of reverence before receiving the Eucharist will be a bow of the head to the Body and Blood of Christ in the hands of the minister. Through this reverent gesture we honor the living Christ who comes to us as our spiritual food. This bow is not a deep bow from the waist, but a simple bow of the head, made after stopping before the minister of communion. This simple gesture, made by all, unifies us in our visible respect for the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation which we are about to receive.

By common postures and gestures, the Church gives witness to and fosters our solidarity in Christ. If individuals were to decide to change them to suit their own piety, that would detract from our unity as one Body. When we stand, sit, kneel, bow, and sign ourselves in common ritual action, we give witness to who we are as the one Body of Christ.

Postures for the Parts of the Mass

From the start of Mass until the first reading: **Stand**

From the first reading until the beginning of the Gospel Acclamation: **Sit**

From the beginning of the Gospel Acclamation until the end of the Gospel: **Stand**

During the homily: **Sit**

From the beginning of the Creed to the end of the general intercessions: **Stand**

From the preparation of the gifts until the end of “Pray, brothers and sisters . . .”: **Sit**

From the beginning of “May the Lord accept this sacrifice . . .”

until the end of the Holy, Holy: **Stand**

During the Eucharistic Prayer: **Kneel**

From the beginning of the Our Father until the beginning of the Lamb of God: **Stand**

From the end of the Lamb of God until distribution of Holy Communion: **Kneel**

When receiving Holy Communion: **Stand**

During silence after Holy Communion: **Sit or Kneel**

From the Prayer after Communion until the end of Mass **Stand**