

Postures and Gestures Express Faith During the Liturgy

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“A common posture, to be observed by all participants, is a sign of the unity of the members of the Christian community gathered for the sacred Liturgy: it both expresses and fosters the intention and spiritual attitude of the participants.” (GIRM, art. 42)

Postures and gestures we make in the celebration of Mass and other rites of the Church are not intended to serve a secondary role in ritual protocol. They are primary expressions of the faith we profess as Catholic Christians. Over the course of time certain postures and gestures have been included in our Catholic worship to express a certain theological point. One which was affirmed in the revised *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* is the gesture of bowing during the Profession of Faith at Sunday Mass and solemnities when the Creed is to be recited or sung. This is a gesture for all the faithful, not just the priest or attending ministers. Specifically, during the words “by the power of the Holy Spirit...and became man”, a profound bow is made by all. Two particular times when this gesture is replaced by a genuflection are the solemnities of the Annunciation (March 25) and Christmas (December 25). The purpose of this ritual gesture is to acknowledge the mystery of God’s incarnation. Christ’s coming into our world is an awesome theological reality. As we stand to declare our profession of faith, the bow we make acknowledges the profound truth that God broke forth into our human condition to make it holy. This moment in history is not of humanity’s volition, but God’s loving and divine choice.

One other gesture of reverence that has been added in our ritual protocol recently is a bow of the head before receiving the Lord’s Body and Blood during the Communion Rite. The GIRM clearly expresses that this gesture is one of reverence toward the Blessed Sacrament. (art. 160) As a statement of faith, it serves as our human acknowledgement of Christ’s Real Presence.

A posture in the liturgy that has evoked considerable debate and conversation during the post-Vatican II period is that of kneeling, especially during the Eucharistic Prayer. While there may be historical evidence that standing during the Eucharistic Prayer was custom in various regions of the world, the norms emphasize that kneeling is the prescribed posture during the Eucharistic Prayer (GIRM, art. 43). Bishop Blair has reiterated that kneeling during the Eucharistic Prayer will be normative in the Diocese of Toledo. This, too, is applicable to deacons assisting at Mass. They are to kneel during the

Eucharistic Prayer from the *epiclesis* (when the priest extends both hands over the chalice and paten to invoke the Holy Spirit over the bread and wine) until the chalice is shown at the consecration. The congregation is to kneel after the *Sanctus* (Holy, Holy, Holy) until the singing of the *Great Amen*. Admittedly, there are times due to the location where Mass is celebrated that the gathering of the faithful and their physical abilities may warrant a different posture to accommodate the circumstance. Pastoral sensitivity should prevail in these situations.

Whatever the posture or gesture, the GIRM is clear in stating their purpose: “The gestures and posture of the priest, the deacon, and the ministers, as well as those of the people, ought to contribute to making the entire celebration resplendent with beauty and noble simplicity, so that the true and full meaning of the different parts of the celebration is evident and that the participation of all is fostered.” (GIRM, art. 42)