

POSTURES AND GESTURES



Have you ever stopped to consider the many different postures we assume while we are at Mass? Or have you ever thought about the many gestures that we partake in at Mass? And even more important, do you know why we utilize these various postures and gestures?

Before we continue, I want to stress that whatever we do at Mass, we should do it together - as a community - communally - in real communion with one another. This is because we are all “one body.” If we each did “our own thing” at Mass, there would be no unity, but only chaos and discord.

From the very earliest days of the Church standing has been a posture of respect and honor. Even outside of church, when we want to honor or show our respect for someone, we stand when they enter a room.

At Mass we stand from the Opening Procession until the First Reading, the Alleluia Verse to the Homily, the Creed and Intercessions, during the Preface, from the Our Father to the Lamb of God, when we receive Communion, and from the Prayer after Communion through the Closing Procession.

Think about these times when we stand during Mass. They all have some special significance. We stand during the Opening and Closing Processions as a sign of respect for the priest since he represents Christ in our midst. We stand during the Gospel because we are honoring Christ Himself who is giving us the Good News. And as we receive our Lord in Holy Communion, we honor Him by our standing.

In the early Church kneeling was a sign of penance. And in the Middle Ages it began to be used as a sign of adoration. And so it is today. We kneel during the Eucharistic Prayer and before and after Communion. These are the times when we most adore our Lord who is present with us.

The last posture we assume at Mass is sitting. This posture should serve to indicate active listening and meditation. Thus we sit during the first two Readings, the homily, and the period after Communion.

We also participate in several gestures at Mass, such as the Sign of the Cross, genuflections, bows and Signs of Peace. Again, consider the significance and meaning behind these various gestures.

The Sign of the Cross is perhaps the most familiar to us since we probably learned it as a very young child. This gesture should serve to remind us of Christ’s saving action on the cross and also of our baptism when we were “marked” for Christ with the Sign of a Cross. When we use holy water or when we are sprinkled with it, we cross ourselves. This action should help us remember our baptism and thus who we are and whose we are.

We trace the Cross on our forehead, lips, and heart and the beginning of the Gospel and silently say something like: “May the words of the Holy Gospel be on my mind, on my lips and in my heart.” This signing serves as a sort of seal on our intentions as they relate to the Gospel.

We genuflect, or get down on one knee and face the tabernacle when we enter or leave our pew. This is a sign of our adoration for Christ who is present in the Blessed Sacrament.

Another common gesture is the bow. We should bow our head whenever we pass the tabernacle, during the Creed when we say: “and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man,” and at Communion after the minister shows us the Host and says: “the Body of Christ.” Bowing as we receive Communion is the gesture that the US Bishops have prescribed as the common, unifying gesture. We bow on all of these occasions as a sign of our respect and honor for our Lord.

Other common gestures at Mass include the striking of our breast during the Confiteor. This is an outward sign of our inner contrition. At the Sign of Peace we also make some gesture to those around us showing that we do indeed wish them peace. It is another indication that we really want to live in communion with one another and that is why this action takes place before the Communion Rite. At the Our Father there are people who have the practice of extending their hands or even holding hands. This indicates our openness to the Lord or our need for the Lord to support us or to show our support for one another as we pray together as one. And let’s not forget the common method for praying with either our palms pressed together with our fingers facing heavenward or our fingers intertwined together.

I hope you can see that all of the postures and gesture that we partake in at Mass have meaning and purpose and that they are not merely ceremonial. For them to have the most meaning and the desired effects, we must treat them in the same way that we should pray and sing and participate in the entire Mass – in a full and conscious, and active manner.