

Proper Postures and Gestures of the Lay Faithful in the Church

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Deacon Dave Illingworth has done for us some important research on the proper postures and gestures of the lay faithful in the Church. It is of great benefit for us as laypersons striving to be faithful Catholics to know about these postures and gestures, why we use them, and how we can benefit from them. For this reason, I am proud to feature Deacon Dave's excellent work as part of my usual weekly bulletin articles. We would welcome your questions and conversation about this information so that together we might all come to a better understanding of them and be able to more fruitfully put them into practice. His reflections begin as follows:

In the celebration of Mass we raise our hearts, minds and voices to God; yet we are creatures composed of body as well as spirit and so our prayer is not confined to our minds, hearts and voices, but is expressed through our physical bodies as well. We pray best as whole persons, as the embodied spirits God created us to be, and this engagement of our entire being in prayer helps us to pray with greater attention. During Mass we assume different postures: standing, kneeling, sitting; we are also invited to make a variety of gestures. These postures and gestures are not merely ceremonial; they have profound meaning and, when done with understanding, can enhance our personal participation in Mass. In fact, these actions are the way in which we engage our bodies in the prayer that is the Mass (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, USCCB.com, Posture). In this article I list several of the postures and gestures that are used during the Mass. In doing so, my hope is that our worship together will be enhanced through a greater understanding of what we do and why.

Why do we have Holy Water? As we enter the sanctuary, our worship space, we pass from the outer world into a quiet and sacred area designed explicitly for worship. Baptized Catholics touch the Holy Water in the font and trace the sign of the cross reminding ourselves of our baptism. The sign of the cross is our recommitment or promise to live as Disciples of Christ in the world.

Do I genuflect, bow or do nothing when entering my pew to be seated? At Saint Mary Magdalene Catholic Church we do not have a tabernacle (the ornate box that contains within it the Body of Christ reserved for the sick and dying) in the main sanctuary. Our tabernacle is located in the chapel. So, in the main church, it is appropriate to bow respectfully to the altar before entering the pew and when leaving the pew to exit the sanctuary. It is not necessary to bow when leaving to receive Holy Communion.

What do I do in the chapel where the tabernacle is located? In any Catholic Church or chapel where a tabernacle is located, it is appropriate to genuflect (briefly kneeling on the right knee) before entering and when leaving the pew. This is the highest sign of reverence, which is reserved for the Eucharist.

So am I supposed to genuflect to the Eucharist at Holy Communion? In the United States, the Conference of Catholic Bishops has determined that bowing before receiving the Body of Christ and before receiving the Blood of Christ is the norm. The practical idea here is that genuflecting might cause accidents in the Communion line.

I see some people bow to the altar before they serve at the altar; why? In a Catholic church where there is no tabernacle in the sanctuary, it is an appropriate sign of reverence to bow deeply to the altar, the sacred space where the most Holy Eucharist is offered in memory of our Lord's sacrifice. Remember, wherever one sees the tabernacle, the appropriate sign of reverence is to genuflect in that direction.

Do I have to hold hands with my neighbor during the *Lord's Prayer*? No one is ever required to hold hands during the liturgy, although many of the faithful enjoy this gesture. It is correct either to place your hands together in the praying position or to hold your arms extended outward in the "orans" (prayer) posture. The Roman Missal (large red book that guides our worship) does not

prescribe any particular position. Indeed, during cold and flu season, holding hands might well be discouraged.

Should people kneel during the Eucharistic Prayer? The General Instruction to the Roman Missal, number 43 states: ...In the dioceses of the United States of America, they should kneel beginning after the singing or recitation of the *Sanctus* until after the *Amen* of the Eucharistic Prayer, except when prevented on occasion by reasons of health, lack of space, the large number of people present or some other good reason. Those who do not kneel ought to make a profound bow when the priest genuflects after the consecration. The faithful kneel after the *Agnus Dei* unless the diocesan bishop determines otherwise.

If I am not Catholic, or I have not received my first Holy Communion, what should I do at Communion time? This is a little tricky. The short answer is that during Holy Communion, only those practicing Catholics who are eligible to receive our Lord's Body and Blood should come forward and present themselves. The missalette, located in the pews, informs us that all others should remain and pray at their pews. That said, especially in America, there has developed a tradition for those not receiving Holy Communion to walk forward with arms crossed over the chest to receive a blessing. While the true purpose of this walking forward is for practicing Catholics in the state of grace to present themselves to receive our Lord sacramentally present in Holy Communion, what are the ordinary and extraordinary ministers supposed to do with those who present themselves not wishing to receive Holy Communion? Ordained clergy, ordinary ministers, can offer a blessing, although this is indeed not what we are supposed to be doing at the Communion rite; extraordinary ministers, non-ordained laypersons, are instructed not to pronounce the Church's blessings since this is not their office of service in the ministry of the Church. Official guidelines about the Communion rite may be found on the last page of the missalette in the church pews. You will notice that presenting oneself in the "procession" is not offered as an option for those not receiving Holy Communion. Perhaps we could all benefit from carefully reading these guidelines established by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

What is the correct posture when receiving Holy Communion? As we approach the Blessed Sacrament we should make a deep bow. Then we move forward to the minister distributing the Body of Christ and clearly respond, "Amen" to the proclamation of the mystery of our faith, "The Body of Christ." Either holding out our hands, left hand cradled in our right hand, or with our hands near our bodies, we clearly stick out our tongues to receive the host. We immediately consume the host regardless of receiving in the hand or on the tongue. We may then move to the minister distributing the Blood of Christ, repeat the deep bow and clearly spoken "Amen" before drinking from the chalice, if we choose to receive the Precious Blood.

After Holy Communion when do we sit back down? After receiving Holy Communion it is an appropriate sign of reverence to remain kneeling in prayer at our individual seats (if health and space allows) until the hosts remaining have either been placed in the tabernacle or have passed by us on the way to the tabernacle. A good sign would be when you see presider take his seat.

Is it disrespectful to leave Mass early or ahead of the celebrant? Yes, of course it is. Most of us would not go to a friend's or relative's house for dinner, arrive late and then eat and run. At the Mass, appropriate behavior is to arrive early enough to be seated and have time for personal prayer, remain for the entire Mass, including the blessing and dismissal, and only leave after the priest and ministers have exited the sanctuary. Ideally, we should all stay to sing the concluding hymn together.

The choir was really great last week and Father's homily was the best; should we applaud? Pope Benedict, XVI: "*Wherever applause breaks out in the liturgy because of some human achievement, it is a sure sign that the essence of liturgy has totally disappeared and been replaced by a kind of religious entertainment.*" (Spirit of the Liturgy, P. 198) We assemble as Catholics to celebrate the Holy Eucharist, God's saving gift to us; we often refer to this gift as the "Source and Summit" of our faith. Each of us gathered: priest, deacon, lector, acolyte, extraordinary minister,

server, singer, musician, usher and lay faithful, has a part in this worship. The Roman Missal prescribes each of these roles and our collective responses. **Nowhere are we instructed to applaud during or following Mass.** Our church is a holy place dedicated to offer prayer and thanksgiving to God for His great mercy and grace. Talking, especially into cellular telephones, chewing gum, reading the bulletin, clapping and other non-liturgical activities serve no useful purpose in our communal celebration. Indeed, these very actions detract from the reverence due our Lord and the respect due to those who wish to pray. To be sure, the homilist preaches to explain the Word of God so that we might understand and apply its truth in our lives. The choir leads singing to help us all participate in the responses of the Mass. These tasks are not done to draw attention to the individuals. Applause, however well- intentioned as a sign of gratitude for a job well done, often indicates recognition and approval for personal achievement, which is out of place in liturgical worship. Instead of applause, which is really a natural and understandable response to the joy one feels at these moments, may I suggest a prayer of thanksgiving for the blessings of a wonderful choir or talented preacher along with a personal word of support to those who deserve our thanks, after Mass of course.

Learn more about postures and gestures at Mass! Go to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Website: <http://usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/the-mass/postures-and-gestures-at-mass.cfm> or email me and I'll send you the link.