

Gestures and Postures of the Congregation at Mass

In *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Pope Benedict stressed the need for formation and instruction about the Sacred Mysteries of the Eucharist (“mystagogical catechesis”), so that Catholic people will more fully understand and be able to unite themselves interiorly with the action of the Eucharist. The Holy Father specifically mentions signs and gestures.

The Church’s great liturgical tradition teaches us that fruitful participation in the liturgy requires that one be personally conformed to the mystery being celebrated, offering one’s life to God in unity with the sacrifice of Christ for the salvation of the whole world. For this reason, the Synod of Bishops asked that the faithful be helped to make their interior dispositions correspond to their gestures and words. Otherwise, however carefully planned and executed our liturgies may be, they would risk falling into a certain ritualism. Hence the need to provide an education in eucharistic faith capable of enabling the faithful to live personally what they celebrate.... (*Sacramentum Caritatis* §64)

Part of this instruction about the mystery of the Eucharist, the pope writes, involves the meaning of ritual gestures:

A mystagogical catechesis must also be concerned with *presenting the meaning of the signs* contained in the rites. This is particularly important in a highly technological age like our own, which risks losing the ability to appreciate signs and symbols. More than simply conveying information, a mystagogical catechesis should be capable of making the faithful more sensitive to the language of signs and gestures which, together with the word, make up the rite. (§64, b. Original emphasis.)

The vocabulary of ritual gestures Catholics make during worship is by now, quite clearly, endangered—as has happened with other unwritten languages. As there are relatively few explicit rules (and even these are often not followed), little uniformity of practice, and considerable

confusion, it seems worthwhile to compile a sort of “dictionary” of ritual gestures, their meaning and grammar, in order to relearn our historic language of ritual worship.

By our ritual gestures—this “body language”—we unite the physical and mental/spiritual aspects of our worship of the Lord, and express our unity with Him with our entire being. Recalling this may help remind each of us to make the effort to restore this ineffable and powerful “form of speech” in our own acts of worship. With our bodies and our minds united, we express our love for Christ and witness to others His love for all.

From “*Gestures for Worship — Relearning Our Ritual Language.*” Adoremus Bulletin, February 2010.

Entrance Rites

- Make the sign of the cross with holy water (a sign of baptism) upon entering the church.
- Genuflect toward the tabernacle containing the Blessed Sacrament and the Altar of Sacrifice before entering the pew. (If there is no tabernacle in the sanctuary, or it is not visible, bow deeply, from the waist, toward the altar before entering the pew.)
- Kneel upon entering the pew for private prayer before Mass begins.
- Stand for the entrance procession.
- Bow when the crucifix, a visible symbol of Christ’s sacrifice, passes you in the procession. (If there is a bishop, bow when he passes, as a sign of recognition that he represents the authority of the Church and of Christ as shepherd of the flock.)
- Remain standing for the entrance rites. Make the sign of the cross with the priest at the beginning of Mass.
- Strike your breast at the “*mea culpa(s)*” (“through my fault”) in the *Confiteor*.

- Bow and make the sign of the cross when the priest says “May Almighty God have mercy...”
- Bow your head when you say “Lord, have mercy” during the *Kyrie*.
- If there is a Rite of Sprinkling (*Asperges*), make the sign of the cross when the priest sprinkles water from the aspergillum in your direction.
- Throughout the Mass, bow your head at every mention of the name of Jesus and every time the Doxology [“Glory be”] is spoken or sung. Also when asking the Lord to receive our prayer.
- *Gloria*: bow your head at the name of Jesus: (“Lord Jesus Christ, only begotten Son”, “You alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ...”)

Liturgy of the Word

- Sit for the Scripture readings.
- Stand for the Gospel at the Alleluia verse.
- When the priest announces the Gospel, trace a cross with the thumb on head, lips and heart. This gesture is a form of prayer for the presence of the Word of God in one’s mind, upon one’s lips, and in one’s heart.
- Sit for the homily.
- Creed: Stand; bow your head at name of Jesus; on most Sundays bow during the Incarnatus (“by the power of the Holy Spirit ... and was made man”); on the solemnities of Christmas and the Annunciation all *genuflect* at this moment.
- Make the sign of the Cross at the conclusion of the Creed at the words “I believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.”

Liturgy of the Eucharist

- Sit during the offertory.
- Stand as the priest says “Pray brethren that our sacrifice...” and remain standing to respond, “May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands...”
- If incense is used, the congregation bows toward the thurifer when he bows to the congregation both before and after he has incensed them.
- The congregation remains standing until the end of the *Sanctus* (“Holy, holy”), when they kneel for the entire Eucharistic Prayer.
- At the moment of the Consecration of each element, bow the head and say silently “My Lord and my God”, acknowledging the Presence of Christ on the altar. These are the words of Saint Thomas when he realized that it was truly Christ who stood before him (John 20:28). Jesus responded, “Because you have seen me, you believed. Blessed are they that do not see and yet have believed” (John 20:29).
- Stand at the priest’s invitation to recite the Lord’s Prayer (*Pater Noster*).
- Reverently fold your hands and bow your head as you pray the Lord’s Prayer.
- Remain standing to exchange the sign of peace, if the invitation is made. (The sign of peace may be either a handshake or a bow of the head towards those nearest you, accompanied by the words “Peace be with you”.)
- In reciting (or singing) the *Agnus Dei* (“Lamb of God...”), strike the breast at the words “Have mercy upon us”.
- Kneel at the end of the *Agnus Dei* (“Lamb of God...”).

- Bow your head and strike your breast as you say, *Domine non sum dignus...* (Lord, I am not worthy...)

Reception of Communion

- Bow your head and strike your breast as you say, *Domine non sum dignus...* (Lord, I am not worthy...)
 - Leave the pew (without genuflecting) and walk reverently toward the altar, with hands folded in prayer.
 - Make a gesture of reverence as you approach the priest in procession to receive Communion. If you are kneeling at the Communion rail, no additional gesture is made before receiving.
 - You may receive the host either on the tongue or in the hand. If the former, open your mouth and extend your tongue, so the priest can place the Host properly. If the latter, place one hand over the other hand, palms open, to receive the Host. With the lower hand, take the Host and reverently place it in your mouth. (See Holy See’s 1985 directives).
- If you are carrying a child, it is much less awkward to receive on the tongue.
- If you also receive from the chalice, make the same gesture of reverence when you approach the minister to receive.
 - Make the sign of the cross after you have received Communion.
 - Kneel in prayer when you return to your pew after Communion, until the priest sits down, or until he says “Let us pray”. (GIRM 160 American adaptation says that people may “stand, sit or kneel”.)

Conclusion of Mass

- Stand for the concluding prayers.
- Make the sign of the cross at the final blessing, as the priest invokes the Trinity.
- Remain standing until all ministers have processed out. (If there is a recessional, bow in reverence to the crucifix as it passes by.)
- If there is a hymn for the recessional, remain standing in your pew until it concludes. If there is no concluding hymn, remain in your pew until all the ministers have gone out of the main body of the church.
- After the Mass is concluded, you may kneel for a private prayer of thanksgiving.
- Genuflect reverently toward the Blessed Sacrament and the Altar of Sacrifice as you leave the pew, and leave the nave (main body) of the church in silence.
- Make the sign of the cross with holy water as you leave the church, a reminder of our baptismal obligation to carry Christ’s Gospel into the world.

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Phone: 314 863-8385; E-mail adoremus@adoremus.org