

The New Roman Missal

Posture and gesture in the new Missal

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By Sr. Ann Rehrauer

For the past eight weeks we've considered changes in the words we will sing and speak in November. While the liturgy celebrates sacred mysteries, it is also humanly holistic and involves our entire person. This week we'll consider other ways to pray and communicate at Mass using signs, symbols, gestures and movement.

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy describes participation as "involving acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons and song," as well as "actions, gestures, and bearing"(posture). SC #30. Our body is not only a symbol of our self but also is our basic instrument of communication. What is deepest within us is expressed in verbal and non-verbal ways.

Gestures have always been part of the liturgy. Baptism was done by immersion in water. Confirmation was celebrated with the laying on of hands and the disciples laid hands on Paul and Barnabas before sending them on mission, to empower them and verify that they acted on behalf of the community and not as independent agents.

Today we begin (and often end) prayer with the sign of the cross, signifying our unity with Christ, the cross as central to the mystery of salvation, strengthening our Christian identity, and helping us recall our baptism in the name of the Trinity.

During the Confiteor, we will strike our breast, expressing sorrow and humility. The priest extends his hands over the gifts as we ask the intercession of the Holy Spirit during the eucharistic prayer. Before receiving holy Communion we offer others a sign of peace.

We also reverence objects within Mass. The bishop kisses the Gospel book. On Good Friday we venerate the cross by touching or kissing or bowing to it. When we enter the church we genuflect to Christ present in the tabernacle as a sign of reverence and adoration, and we bow to the altar, which is a symbol of Christ.

Our posture is participation at liturgy because it expresses our inner attitude. At times we stand, recalling the resurrection; the priest prays with hands extended (orans) gathering the prayers of all; we kneel to express repentance or reverence, and we sit listening attentively with an attitude of readiness to hear the word of God. At the end of Mass, we humbly "bow our heads and pray for God's blessing."

Because liturgical prayer is communal, there is a certain amount of uniformity. This is about more than good order. "Common posture is observed . . . as a sign of the

community and unity of the assembly; it both fosters and expresses the spiritual attitude of those taking part.” GIRM 20

Recently, Bishop David Ricken asked us to make two changes in our posture at Mass. The first is not a change for some of us. Because the church asks us to kneel during the eucharistic prayer, some churches have had to add kneelers. Since kneeling is what has been asked of us by the U.S. bishops since 1967, we will work to observe that posture (unless we have some physical difficulty or knee replacements — which require us to sit instead of kneel. The second change is at the Our Father. For legitimate reasons, parishes started using the orans posture (praying with hands extended). Now there has been a change in approach and that gesture is being reserved to the priest or leader of prayer. We are asked to pray with folded hands or hands at our side. Common mind and heart expressed in common posture is more important than whether I think it is more appropriate to do something else, or whether the church did something else at another time, or whether Catholics in other countries do something else. Even as we find the changes difficult, we work toward this common mind and heart.

The fourth aspect of participation is movement. This can be utilitarian (to get us from one place to another), or it can be symbolic. We process with the Blessed Sacrament on Holy Thursday evening to the altar of repose and on the solemnity of Corpus Christi as a sign of honor and reverence. Ministers process to the sanctuary, we sing as we move forward to receive holy Communion and each year we process with palms to recall Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem shortly before his death.

All these aspects of participation enable us to pray with our bodies as well as our minds and hearts.

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