



WELCOMING THE ROMAN MISSAL 3RD EDITION

Part XI -- Overview of the Mass

One Body in the Lord

Third Edition of the

Roman Missal

The General Instruction asks us to make a sign of reverence before receiving Holy Communion. The U.S. bishops determined that our sign of reverence before receiving the Eucharist is a bow of the head.

This bow is a simple bow of the head, made after stopping before the minister of communion. This gesture, made by all, unifies us in our visible respect for the living Christ who comes to us as our spiritual food.

Postures at Mass

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| From the start of Mass until the first reading: | Stand |
| From the first reading until the Gospel Acclamation: | Sit |
| From the Gospel Acclamation until the end of the Gospel: | Stand |
| During the homily: | Sit |
| From the beginning of the Creed to the end of the general intercessions: | Stand |
| From the preparation of the gifts until the end of "Pray, brothers and sisters": | Sit |
| From the beginning of "May the Lord accept the sacrifice . . ." until the end of the Holy, Holy: | Stand |
| During the Euch. Prayer: | Kneel |
| From the beginning of the Our Father through the Lamb of God: | Stand |
| From the end of the Lamb of God until distribution of Holy Communion: | Kneel |
| When receiving Holy Communion: | Stand |
| During silence after Holy Communion: | Sit or Kneel |
| From the Prayer after Communion until the end of Mass | Stand |

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On November 27, 2011, English-speaking Catholics in the United States will begin using a new translation of the Roman Missal (the book containing the prescribed prayers, chants, and instructions for the celebration of Mass in the Roman Catholic Church).

The motto of the United States of America is the Latin phrase, *E Pluribus Unum*. It means "One from the Many," and refers to the union of the fifty states into one nation.

The motto could also be used to describe the process that needs to happen every time that Christians assemble to celebrate the Eucharist. Coming together from separate lives, the many members of the assembly must form one body.

One of the difficulties that people face today is a lack of experiences outside the liturgy of joining in one common act. In earlier generations such activity was more common. When it was harvest time, for example, farmers in a region would work together to do the threshing, going from farm to farm in a joint effort. If a barn burned down, all the neighbors would gather to erect a new barn. Modern society seems to have fewer such experiences of joint effort on a common project. Some people get a sense of this by being part of a sports team, though many of us prefer to watch others play rather than take part ourselves.

The liturgy, however, is not a spectator sport. It requires the participation of every member of the assembly in the one common act of worship. Some people find this demand difficult because it means giving up their own preferences to the requirements of the liturgy itself. We cannot come to Mass with only our own agenda; we must be willing to enter into an act of worship that already has its structure and dynamics.

This is perhaps one of the most difficult realizations for many people in our individualistic culture. We need to learn again what it means to join together in one common activity to achieve a common goal. Imagine the chaos if every person who came to a barnraising insisted on doing things his or her own way! That doesn't work in liturgy, either.

COMMON POSTURE

One way we express and foster our unity during the liturgy is through common posture. The liturgical books specify when we are to sit and stand and kneel and bow. "A common bodily posture, to be observed by all those taking part, is a sign of the unity of the members of the Christian community gathered together for the Sacred Liturgy, for it expresses the intentions and spiritual attitude of the participants and also fosters them." (GIRM, # 42)

The Church sees in these common postures and gestures both a symbol of the unity of those who have come together to worship and a means of fostering that unity. The Church makes it clear that our unity of posture and gesture is an expression of our participation in the one Body formed by the baptized with Christ, our Head. When we stand, kneel, sit, bow and sign ourselves in common action, we give witness that we are indeed the Mystical Body of Christ, united in body, mind and spirit. We must take great care that the celebration of the Eucharist, which by its very nature signifies unity and charity, never becomes a sign of division.

POSTURES

Standing is a sign of respect and honor. From the earliest days of the Church, standing has been understood as the stance of those who are risen with Christ and seek the things that are above (see Colossians 5). When we stand for prayer, we are assuming our stature

before God as a people redeemed by the blood of Christ. We stand when the celebrant and the other ministers process into the church. We stand for the Gospel because we acknowledge that it is Christ himself speaking to us when it is proclaimed. The bishops of the United States have chosen standing as the normal posture for the reception of Holy Communion in this country.

Kneeling signified penitence in the early Church: The awareness of our sin casts us to the ground! In the Middle Ages, kneeling came to signify the homage of a vassal before his liege lord. More recently, kneeling has come to signify humble adoration. It is for this reason that the bishops of the United States have chosen the posture of kneeling for the assembly during the Eucharistic Prayer, from after singing the Holy, Holy, until after singing the Great Amen.

Sitting is the posture of attentive listening and of meditation. So the assembly sits for the readings before the Gospel and the homily, and may also sit for the period of meditation after Holy Communion.

GESTURES

The Sign of the Cross is the most familiar gesture. We make it over our bodies as we begin Mass and in the blessing at the end of Mass. This gesture, which recalls the saving death of Christ on the cross, first marked our bodies at baptism, when we were claimed for Christ. So, too, during the sprinkling rite at the beginning of Mass or when we take holy water upon entering the church, we make the Sign of the Cross.

Genuflecting is the gesture of adoration that we make to the presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. Upon entering the church, before taking our place, we genuflect toward the Blessed Sacrament reserved inside the tabernacle. The priest and ministers genuflect before entering the sanctuary if the tabernacle is located within it. During the Eucharistic Prayer, the priest genuflects three times in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament: after showing the host and then the chalice to the people, and again before he speaks the Invitation to Communion and receives the sacrament himself.

Bowing is a gesture of reverence. We recognize the altar as a symbol of Christ, and so we stop and bow to it whenever we pass in front of it. The priest and all the ministers bow to the altar after processing to the sanctuary at the start of Mass. In the Creed, we bow at the words that commemorate the Incarnation: “by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary and became man.” (*After November 27, the wording will change to: “and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.”*) This gesture signifies our profound respect and gratitude to Christ who humbled himself to share our human condition in order to save us.

There are other gestures that intensify our prayer at Mass. For example, during the Penitential Rite, when we pray the Confiteor (“I confess”), the action of striking the breast at the words “through my fault” can strengthen awareness that our sin is indeed our fault. In the Rite of Peace, we express through our handclasp or embrace that we are committed to sharing Christ’s peace. It is an expression of our desire to live in communion with one another. Thus it is appropriate that before we share in Holy Communion, the sacrament of unity, we make this symbolic gesture with those around us.

By common postures and gestures, the Church gives witness to and fosters our solidarity in Christ. If individuals were to decide to change them to suit their own piety, that would detract from our unity as one Body. When we stand, sit, kneel, bow, and sign ourselves in common ritual action, we give witness to who we are as the one Body of Christ.

In our next installment, we’ll explore Christ’s presence in the celebration of the Eucharist

Discussion Questions

1. What is your experience of being a part of the “Mystical Body of Christ” in the celebration of the Eucharist? Are there moments in the Mass when you feel you are truly worshipping as one body?
2. One way we express and foster our unity during the liturgy is through common posture and gestures. What are some other ways that we express and foster our unity as the Body of Christ?