

Postures, Processions and Gestures at Mass

The way we move as a community at liturgy symbolizes our unity in Christ. Not only do we sing and speak and respond together, but we make movements together which deepen and enrich our prayer. When our bodies participate in prayer we pray with our entire beings. There are three basic types of movement we do as a community at liturgy: postures, processions, and gestures.

Postures – Postures give meaning and attitude to our prayer. **Sitting** is a posture of attentive listening and meditation. So the GIRM calls the assembly to sit for the readings before the Gospel and for a period of meditation after all have received Holy Communion. **Standing** is a posture of respect, honor, and reverence. From the days of the early Church standing has been understood as the posture of those who are risen with Christ. So the GIRM calls the assembly to stand for the Gospel, for the reception of Holy Communion, and for many of the prayers addressed to God. **Kneeling** signified penance in the early Church so much so that believers were forbidden to kneel on Sundays and during the Easter Season when the spirit of the liturgy is joyful and thankful. In more recent times, kneeling has also become a posture of adoration. It is for this reason, that the US Bishops have adapted the GIRM to call for the posture of kneeling for the entire Eucharistic Prayer. As the GIRM reminds us, “A common posture...is a sign of unity of the members of the Christian community gathered for the Sacred Liturgy: it both expresses and fosters the intention and spiritual attitude of the participants” (GIRM #42).

Processions - Processions are not just a way to get people or ministers from here to there. They are themselves a ritual expression of who we are and what we are about. We are pilgrims on a journey. What are some of the processions at Mass? There is the entrance procession, the Gospel procession, the procession with gifts, the Communion procession, the ending procession. Each procession, if

done well, enriches our prayer. What makes a good procession? As one liturgist puts it, “It is a matter of timing and pace. It is a matter of bearing and grace. It is a matter of reverence and space.” Each procession has its own character which intensifies the prayer of the entire assembly.

During the liturgical year, we are also involved in other processions – the procession with palms on Passion Sunday, the procession for adoration of the Holy Cross on Good Friday, the Corpus Christi procession. During sacramental liturgies, we move in procession – the procession to the font with those to be baptized, the wedding procession, the procession with the body at the funeral liturgy. The way we process or attentively participate visually in a procession helps direct our minds and hearts to God.

Gestures – The most universal Catholic gesture which speaks volumes about our prayer, even without words, is **the sign of the cross** which begins and ends every liturgy. In fact, the sign of the cross begins and ends all we do as Catholics – from the cross we receive on our forehead at baptism to the cross that is made over our body at death. Gestures help intensify our prayer. We **strike our breast** during the Confiteor; we **sign our mind, our lips, and our heart** at the proclamation of the Gospel; we bow during the Creed when we remember the words of the Incarnation, we bow our heads in reverence before we receive the Body and Blood of Christ, and when we receive the final blessing. We **bow to the altar**, the sign of Christ, as we enter and leave the Church or if the tabernacle is located in the sanctuary, we **genuflect** in reverence as we enter and leave the Church. Gestures, when we perform them fully and consciously, deepen our prayer as people who totally rely on God, body, mind and spirit.