

Gestures and Postures

Let us stand and join together to sing... Last week I spoke of how we *follow a leader* in our celebration of Mass, usually beginning with the Song Leader. But even before the Song Leader invites *to sing*, we are invited *to stand*. So this week I would like to speak about how we use bodily postures and movements in our prayer. Recall what I've already said about the *sacramental principle* in our Catholic faith. This refers to how we see all created things as symbols and expressions of God their Creator, which can be used in our prayer for experiencing and expressing our relationship with God.

At Mass we raise our hearts and minds to God. But our prayer involves more than just our minds and hearts. It is expressed by our bodies as well. When our bodies participate in our prayer we pray with our whole person, as the embodied spirits God created us to be, and this helps us pray with greater attention and involvement. During Mass we use postures such as *standing, kneeling, sitting*, as well as a variety of gestures such as the sign of the cross and raising our arms and hands. These postures and gestures have profound meaning and, when done with attentiveness and understanding, can enhance our participation in Mass.

Each posture reinforces the meaning of the actions of our worship. Standing is a sign of respect and honor, and when we stand for prayer we assume our full stature before God, not in pride, but in humble gratitude for all God has done in our creation and redemption. Kneeling signified penance in the early Church: the awareness of sin casts us to the ground! Because kneeling was identified with penance in the early Church, the first Christians were forbidden to kneel on Sundays and during the Easter Season when the prevailing spirit of the liturgy was joy and thanksgiving. More recently this posture has come to signify adoration, which is why we kneel throughout the Eucharistic Prayer. Sitting is the posture of listening and meditation, so we sit for the readings, and for the period of silence after Communion.

Gestures too involve our bodies in prayer. The most familiar is the Sign of the Cross with which we both begin and conclude Mass. Because of Christ's death on the Cross we trace the Sign of the Cross on our foreheads, lips and hearts at the beginning of the Gospel. When we cross ourselves, it should be a generous gesture, not just small and hurried in a way that gives little sense of its meaning. Other gestures also intensify our prayer at Mass. During the Creed we bow in gratitude and respect at the words which commemorate the Incarnation: *by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary and became man*. The Our Father is followed by the Exchange of Peace, a gesture which expresses that we are – or are at least committed to be - at peace with others. Those near me with whom I share the peace signify for me, as I do for them, the broader community of the Church and all humankind. In the new Instruction for Mass we are asked to make a sign of reverence before receiving Communion, such as bowing, a gesture which expresses our reverence and honor for Christ who comes to us in Holy Communion.

In addition to serving as a part of our bodily prayer, our postures and gestures at Mass are also *a symbol of our unity* with others who have come together to worship, and *a means of fostering that unity*. When we stand, kneel, sit, bow and sign ourselves in common action, we given witness that we are indeed the Body of Christ, united in heart, mind and spirit.

Please let us know what else about our faith tradition you'd like to find out more about. Contact our Council for Catechesis at tkautza@saintmaryhc.org.