



GESTURES—BOWING

When you say the Creed in your parish, do you bow during the phrase “and by the Holy Spirit... became man”? The third edition of the Roman Missal (2012) reminds us by means of a rubric, a direction, that this and many other postures and gestures are part of the celebration of the ritual of the Mass. The Gospel of Matthew 22:37 calls us to love God with our whole heart, our whole soul and our whole mind. Does this not include our bodies? The Missal would indicate that it does. This gesture of bowing from the waist during the Creed, is one way for us to become more aware of how to worship with our whole selves.

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) lists postures and gestures in its introductory section, along with silence and singing, as important elements of Mass that are often overlooked. Why are posture and gesture important at Mass? Paragraph # 42 of the GIRM says this:

- They make the Mass resplendent with beauty and noble simplicity.
- They make clear the meaning of different parts of Mass.
- A common posture or gesture by the assembly indicates a sign of unity.
- They express and foster unified intentions and spiritual attitudes.

To witness an entire assembly bowing together is a moving and beautiful sign. When done during the Creed, for some, it will indicate a clear recognition that the Incarnation, God become human, is central to our belief and prayer. For others, it may raise a question: Why does this phrase merit a bow? And that may lead to a catechetical opportunity.

When a gesture like this is done simultaneously by everyone, all experience the impact of a united assembly. While divisions may remain strong among individual members, for one moment all practice being a united people. And as you know,

practice makes perfect.

Postures and gestures help explain other parts of the liturgy as well. Lectors coming into the sanctuary to read bow from the waist to acknowledge the altar as a sign of Christ, just as the priest and deacon do at the beginning of Mass. Communion ministers and servers do the same.

Bows come in two forms at Mass. The profound bow, which we have been speaking of, is a bow from the waist. It should be done reverently and without rushing. The other form is a bow of the head. This is the appropriate gesture when saying the name “Jesus.” The GIRM also asks us to bow the head when “the three divine persons (Father, Son and Holy Spirit,) are named together,” or when the name of the Blessed Virgin Mary or the saint “in whose honor Mass is being offered” is mentioned. This is the recommended gesture when receiving communion as well.

The Sign of Peace is a well-accepted gesture during Mass. It signifies our recognition of Christ in our neighbor. In the course of liturgical history, this rite moved to various parts of the Mass. Frequently, it was associated with the reception of Communion, as it is in our current Missal. The rubric encourages a reverent acknowledgement of Christ’s presence in the other, rather than a greeting of welcome. Offering a sign of peace to the people immediately around you, therefore, fulfills this gesture.

Engaging our bodies by means of gestures during Mass helps us to engage our whole selves, heart, mind and soul. The gestures of liturgy then become another facet of worship and a way to understand more deeply what we pray and believe. Pay attention to the many gestures at Mass. If one is unfamiliar, ask about it. Give them a try. See if they help you to enter more fully into the mystery of Christ present with us in the Eucharist.