

Liturgical Catechesis; Homily 9 'Posture and Gestures'

As a human person, we are "made-up" of a variety of components. We have a mind (to think), we have emotions or spirit (to feel), we have a body (to sense), and as believers we also hold that we have an eternal soul (to be). All of these things help to make us who we are - thinking, feeling, and sensing beings. You can't ignore any of these, without ignoring an important part of who we are.

The same is true in prayer. Our prayer should involve the whole person; it should express our thoughts and our feelings, and it should be reflected in our bodies, which we believe are temples of the Holy Spirit. As physical beings, we can touch things, see things, smell things, hear things, and taste things. Thus, our prayer can (and should) involve these senses too. To feel holy water upon finger-tips or to shake the hand of the person next to you, to see candles burning or incense rising, to smell incense or flowers, to hear church bells or sacred music, to taste the host. . . these things help us express ourselves and to experience God's presence.

One aspect of this is our physical posture. Our physical posture helps to *express* our attitude. If you're talking with your kids, and they are sitting with arms crossed and head turned away and their eyes rolled back in their head - you know the attitude - you're probably very likely to say to them, "pay attention to me, when I'm talking to you." Or how many times must teachers say, "sit up straight and pay attention." Or, if you're talking to your parents, and they're reading the paper or watching tv, you might feel like saying, "hey, aren't I important."

But, our physical postures also help *affect* our attitude. For example, when you've had a hard day and are trying to relax, doesn't a deep breath help to relax you.

Thus, when here at church, we use a variety of physical

postures in our prayer, or, as sometimes you hear it said, “Catholic aerobics.” I’m going to use a couple of volunteers, and go over some of these and their importance briefly.

STANDING is an *active* posture of receptivity. It indicates you are “ready to be sent.” It speaks of confidence. You might think of it as a soldier arriving at field command, ready to be sent with orders to the front line.

SETTING is a *passive* posture of receptivity. It indicates you are “ready to receive.” You might think of it as a student in a classroom, ready to receive information or directions and to reflect on them or study them.

KNEELING was originally a posture of repentance and sorrow. Thus, an early council even forbade kneeling on the day of the Lord’s resurrection, which was supposed to be joyful.

However, over time, kneeling also became a posture of private adoration and prayer. And as various groups began to reject Christ’s presence in the Eucharist, it became more commonly accepted as the community’s posture of adoration during the Eucharistic Prayer. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal now says that we “should kneel at the consecration unless prevented by the lack of space, the number of people present, or some other good reason.”

However, prior to the current practice, for almost 1500 years, the standard posture was standing. Eucharistic Prayer II even says, “we thank you for counting us worthy to stand in your presence and serve you.” Thus, in some places, the original meaning of kneeling & the long tradition of standing were considered “good reasons” not to kneel, and thus, they choose to stand during the Eucharistic Prayer.

Here, we kneel - but know that it is not, in and of itself, disrespectful to stand; it is more important that the community’s movements are uniform.

BOWING is an act of respect, and traditionally there are two types of bows.

The first is a bow of the head. You can think of this as the nod we give to one another as we pass on the street and say, "hello." It is a brief sign of acknowledgement and respect. Most often it is used at the name of Jesus or when the three divine persons (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) are named together.

The second is a bow of the body. It is more profound, and you can think of it as the bow or curtsy given to a king or queen. You see it done by the priest a number of times during the Mass, but everyone is supposed to bow during the Profession of Faith at the words "by the power of the Holy Spirit." I'm not sure that many people do this; I can't tell 'cause I'm looking at the floor at that time. If you don't bow then, you might consider bowing as a sign of respect, humbling yourself because Jesus Christ humbled himself to come among us.

Traditionally, one also bows to the altar. For example, you see this done by the ministers as we arrive and leave the altar area and by the lectors.

ORANS POSITION is *the* prayer position for Christians. Almost like the sign of surrender, it is a way physically showing that we are completely open to the will of God, surrendering ourselves to God. It imitates Christ, with arms outstretched on the cross, who surrendered himself unto death for us.

For centuries, this was the posture taken by Christians when they prayed. You still see it every time the priest invites us to pray at Mass, and it was and is the prayer posture for all Christian prayer, including the Lord's prayer.

At a certain point in the 1960s and 70s, many places began holding hands during the Our Father. The orans-position would have a longer historical precedent and a more theological connection to the cross, but I'm not sure there is any reason to

change what you are doing here.

INVOCATION is a means of blessing or asking God to send down the Holy Spirit. It almost always involves the imposition of hands.

If it is an invocation on a thing, then the hands are stretched out over the thing. You see it most often at the consecration. But you also see it when we bless holy water or rosaries. If it is an invocation on a person, then the hands are often laid on the person's head in silence. You see it at the ordination of a priest, when the bishop and other priests "lay hands" upon the newly ordained, asking God to pour out his Spirit on the man. You also see it in Confirmation and the Anointing of the Sick, and in Mass, there is an invocation of the spirit on those who will receive the Body and Blood that they might be united in "one Spirit, one Body in Christ."

PROSTRATION is laying flat on the floor, in a sense, knocked down by the awesome power of God. It is used on Good Friday, on Ordinations and in religious professions. Other than that, you don't see this very often, although to kneel and then bow your head and shoulders is also considered a prostration.

GENUFLECTION is a posture of humble adoration - while keeping the torso straight, the left knee bends and the right knee is brought all the way down to touch the floor. When I was in grade school, the nun had a little metal clicker, so that when we lined up in Church, she would click and we could all genuflect together. As a kid, I'm not sure we had any idea why we genuflected or even that we should be genuflecting to someone. It was far more important, it seemed, to genuflect together.

In fact, the genuflection is a sign of reverence to Christ's real presence among us. One should genuflect towards his presence, in the tabernacle, upon entering and before leaving the Church. Apart from Mass, one should also genuflect when

you pass directly in front of the tabernacle or while opening & closing the tabernacle. Don't genuflect to the altar!

Perhaps now our "Catholic aerobics" will be less "aerobic" and more "Catholic."