Prayer looks
means of gestures and posture should be
strongly encouraged in masses with children,
with due regard for age and local customs"
(Directory for Masses with Children, 33).
Gestures and postures are expressions. They
work for the body the way words work in a
language. Like language, their meaning varies
from one culture to another, and often from
one family to another. Some of them remain
popular for generations; others fade away.
We use culturally defined gestures and
postures daily. With a movement of your head
you say yes or no. With a shrug of the shoul-
ders you declare uncertainty. You express
degrees of affection with a handshake, a touch,
or a kiss. You roll your eyes in exasperation.
You look up to recall. You wink to acknowl-
dge a secret. You stand when someone enters
the room. You stoop to learn from a child. You
can do all this without saying a word.
Gestures and postures can express values.
In the bible people stood for the elderly
(Leviticus 19:32; 1 Kings 2:19). They bowed to
greet a visitor (Genesis 19:1; 2 Kings 2:15).
They grasped another's feet to show respect
(2 Kings 4:27; Matthew 28:9). They reclined at
table for a formal meal (John 13:23).
Such actions enter into public worship, just
as words do. The spoken and visible language
of a people combine to enhance prayer.
Some signs change over time. Many gestures and postures for prayer in biblical times are uncommon today. Solomon knelt before the altar with hands outstretched toward heaven (1 Kings 8:54), as did E zra (E zra 9:5). D uring the covenant ceremony A braham fell on his face before G od (G enesis 17:2). M oses bowed his face to the earth when G od replaced the broken tablets (Exodus 34:8), remaining prostrate in prayer for forty days and nights (D euteronomy 9:18). A leper petitioned Jesus with face to the ground (L uke 5:12). J airus fell at Jesus’ feet to request healing for his daughter (M ark 5:22; L uke 8:41), as did the Syro- phoenician woman (M ark 7:25). Jesus threw himself on the ground when he prayed at G ethsemane (M atthew 26:39; M ark 14:35). Some traditions from the early church have fallen into disuse. For example, Christians once prayed facing east. C lement of A lexandria (+215) noted that “the most ancient temples looked towards the west, so that people who stand with their face turned toward idols might be taught to turn to the east” (M iscelaneous 7). Tertullian (+220) lamented that some people thought C hristians worshiped the sun. “T his impression derives from what is well-known,” he wrote; “we pray toward the place of the rising sun” (A pology 16). O rigen (+253) wrote, “W e ought to pray turned symbolically toward the east, as if the soul is looking at the rising of the true light” (P rayer 32). B asil (+379) agreed: “W e all look to the east when we pray, but few people know that, facing it, we are searching for an ancient homeland, namely paradise, which G od planted in Eden to the east” (T he H oly S pirit 27). Today, however, we pray facing any direction.

N or have we maintained other customs. For example, C yril of J erusalem (+387) recommended this at communion: “W hile your lips are still wet with the blood of C hrist, touch it with your hands, and bless your eyes, forehead, and other organs of sense” (M ystagogic C atchés 5:22).

Today the celebration of the eucharist involves an elaborate sequence of movement. M inisters execute quite a number of them.

T he priest kisses the altar, extends his arms when greeting, opens his arms to pray, washes his hands, raises his arms to lift hearts at the eucharistic prayer, imposes his hands over the bread and wine and blesses them with the sign of the cross, elevates the consecrated bread and chalice for all to see, genuflects to the presence of C hrist on the altar, breaks and pours the sacred elements for communion, drops a particle of the body of C hrist into the blood, and blesses all with the sign of the cross.

T he deacon bows for a blessing before proclaiming the gospel, kisses the book afterwards, and mixes water into the wine. O thers greet people at the door. Some carry incense, cross, candles, and the book of the gospels in procession. T hey hold the sacramentary. T hey take up the collection and prepare the altar. A songleader may gesture for all to sing.

T he gestures and postures of the assembly fit this context. T hey demonstrate individual and common prayer. Together we make movements which give the eucharist its strikingly prayerful look. A visitor is likely to ask, “W hy?”

T he reasons are simple. Prayer is our communication with G od. H umans use spoken language and bodily movements to communicate. W hen we pray we do the same. E very genuflection, bow, and sign of the cross aims to communicate an interior disposition in an exterior way. O ur gestures and postures can also help when prayer becomes difficult. T hey may create the interior disposition we seek. T hese traditional actions also join us to ages past. Prayer draws us into a spiritual realm beyond time and place. G estures and posture transport us to where and when there is no there and then, in order to meet G od.