

How Prayer Looks



Part 1

Posture and Gesture

Visitors to Catholic churches immediately notice the look of prayer. They hear readings. They smell candles and incense. They see statues, vestments, and furnishings unfamiliar to them. But very often they remark about how prayer looks. People stand. They sit. They kneel. They genuflect and bow. The ministers move their arms and hands. The experience disorients many visitors. Everyone but them seems to know what to do.

“Why do you do that?” they ask. “Why do we do what?” Catholics may reply. The gestures and postures of the eucharist are so much a part of us that we often don’t notice what is so obvious to a visitor.

Like worshipers in many other spiritual traditions, Catholics use the body for prayer. We express what’s inside us with movements outside. Through movements outside we foster what’s inside.

As the Second Vatican Council explained, “Acclamations, responses, psalms, antiphons, hymns, as well as actions or gestures and bodily attitudes of the people are encouraged to promote active participation. A sacred silence should also be maintained at the proper time” (The Constitution on the Liturgy, 30). And again, “In view of the nature of the liturgy as an activity of the entire person and in view of the psychology of children, participation by

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 shoulders 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 acknowledge 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 Ezra (Ezra 9:5). During the covenant ceremony Abraham fell on his face before God (Genesis 17:2). Moses bowed his face to the earth when God replaced the broken tablets (Exodus 34:8), remaining prostrate in prayer for forty days and nights (Deuteronomy 9:18). A leper petitioned Jesus with face to the ground (Luke 5:12). Jairus fell at Jesus' feet to request healing for his daughter (Mark 5:22; Luke 8:41), as did the Syro-phoenician woman (Mark 7:25). Jesus threw himself on the ground when he prayed at Gethsemane (Matthew 26:39; Mark 14:35).

Some traditions from the early church have fallen into disuse. For example, Christians once prayed facing east. Clement of Alexandria (+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" (*Miscellaneous* 7). Tertullian (+220) lamented that some people thought Christians worshiped the sun. "This impression derives from what is well-known," he wrote; "we pray toward the place of the rising sun" (*Apology* 16). Origen (+253) wrote, "We ought to pray turned symbolically toward the east, as if the soul is looking at the rising of the true light" (*Prayer* 32). Basil (+379) agreed: "We 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 God planted in Eden to the east" (*The Holy Spirit* 27). Today, however, we pray facing any direction.

Nor have we maintained other customs. For example, Cyril of Jerusalem (+387) recommended this at communion: "While your lips are still wet with the blood of Christ, touch it with your hands, and bless your eyes, forehead, and other organs of sense" (*Mystagogic Catechesis* 5:22).

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

✠ The 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 Christ on the altar, breaks and pours the sacred elements for communion, drops a particle of the body of Christ into the blood, and blesses all with the sign of the cross.

✠ The deacon bows for a blessing before proclaiming the gospel, kisses the book afterwards, and mixes water into the wine.

✠ Others greet people at the door. Some carry incense, cross, candles, and the book of the gospels in procession. They hold the sacramentary. They take up the collection and prepare the altar. A song-leader may gesture for all to sing.

The gestures and postures of the assembly fit this context. They demonstrate individual and common prayer. Together we make movements which give the eucharist its strikingly prayerful look. A visitor is likely to ask, "Why?"

The reasons are simple. Prayer is our communication with God. Humans use spoken language and bodily movements to communicate. When we pray we do the same. Every genuflection, bow, and sign of the cross aims to communicate an interior disposition in an exterior way. Our gestures and postures can also help when prayer becomes difficult. They may create the interior disposition we seek. These traditional actions also join us to ages past. Prayer draws us into a spiritual realm beyond time and place. Gestures and posture transport us to where and when there is no there and then, in order to meet God.

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