

Reverence in Church and at Mass

By Graham Osborne

Many visitors, and even many Catholics, are often confused by the mix of gestures seen at a Catholic Mass. Why is it so important to be reverent at Mass?

It's worth reflecting first on what makes a Catholic church different from any other church. It houses the Real Presence of Jesus Himself – God present in the Tabernacle. It is unlike any other place on earth.

And from this Real Presence flows our response. So we see the church literally as a temple, and we try to act accordingly. Our English word, profane has roots that give us some clues here, coming from the Latin word “profanum”, which literally means outside of, or in front of, the temple. There are things which are meant to be kept inside the temple, and some outside. How does this apply to our behavior in church?

The church space is set apart for sacred things – for sacred food, sacred talk, sacred actions. It's not a place for common food, but only one Food: the Body and Blood of Christ.

It is not a place for everyday talk, such as who won the game last night, or how your garden is doing, as fine as all these things might be – and are otherwise important for building up a parish community. They still belong “outside the temple”. The Church even calls for a sacred silence, particularly in preparation for Mass: “it is commendable that silence... be observed in the church, in the sacristy, in the vesting room, and in adjacent areas, so that all may dispose themselves to carry out the sacred action in a devout and fitting manner” [General Instruction of the Roman Missal, GIRM 45].

The Church also calls us to sacred actions in the church, reminding us that “*all who pass before the Most Blessed Sacrament*” should make “*a genuflection, made by bending the right knee to the ground*” as a sign of adoration “unless... moving in procession” or “carrying the processional cross or candles”. These should “bow their heads instead of genuflecting” [GIRM 274].

If the altar is in a place separate from the Tabernacle, then we are also called to make a bow of the body, that is to say, a profound bow... to the altar”, as we pass in front of it, as a sign, not of adoration, as in the genuflection to the Real Presence of Jesus in the Tabernacle [indicated by the lit red Sanctuary Lamp], but as a sign of “reverence and honour” [GIRM 274] to that very special place where Jesus will be made present at Mass.

But that said, many today have substituted a bow [normally, more a sign of reverence in the Roman Rite] for a genuflection [normally a sign of adoration] to the Tabernacle. That's permissible if for good reason [infirmity, etc], but it is important that we are obedient to the Church in this matter, and that we show in our bodies what we believe spiritually in our hearts. This “attitude of our bodies” will be discussed in greater detail below.

And incidentally, the Church also calls us to make a reverent bow of the head “when the three Divine Persons are named together and at the names of Jesus, of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and of the Saint in whose honour Mass is being celebrated.”

But Mass will unquestionably be the high point from which the church building and space itself gains its sacredness, for without the Mass, there is no substantial, Real Presence. Certainly Jesus is present in His Word, where two or three are gathered in his name, and in a particularly special way, in the baptized. All of these presences are real and important, but they differ significantly from Jesus' *substantial* presence in the Eucharist –His Body, Blood, Soul *and* Divinity. And this Real Presence is what sets a Catholic church apart from all others.

And so, in the Mass, the Church calls us to respond in particular ways at particular times as well. And each posture carries with it spiritual significance in bodily form. I now want to focus on one of these postures in particular: kneeling.

Over the last fifty or so years in the Catholic Church, there has been a definite move towards the reduction if not the complete removal of kneeling, especially at Mass.

A common reason I have heard is that “we are resurrection people, we stand, not kneel!” And perhaps some feel kneeling is a purely penitential posture, not fully realizing the attitude of adoration and worship that it conveys, even from the earliest times of the Old Testament. Or perhaps some just feel that kneeling is undignified and beneath them – even inappropriate. Certainly, we live in a culture that tells us exactly that. Some may even feel uncomfortable or embarrassed when they kneel –or genuflect – perhaps to the point where it even interferes with their ability to pray.

Cardinal Ratzinger, before he became Pope Benedict XVI, addressed this exact situation in his essay entitled, “The Theology of Kneeling”: “There are groups, of no small influence, who are trying to talk us out of kneeling. ‘It doesn’t suit our culture’, they say... ‘It’s not right for a grown man to do this — he should face God on his feet’. Or again: ‘It’s not appropriate for redeemed man — he has been set free by Christ and doesn’t need to kneel any more.’”

He then goes on to add his profound reflections on the matter, confirming that, “the kneeling of Christians is not a form of inculturation into existing customs. It is quite the opposite, an expression of Christian culture, which transforms the existing culture through a new and deeper knowledge and experience of God.”

Cardinal Ratzinger then reminds us that kneeling comes from the Bible. “The Hebrews regarded the knees as a symbol of strength, to bend the knee is, therefore, to bend our strength before the living God, an acknowledgment of the fact that all that we are we receive from Him. In important passages of the Old Testament, this gesture appears as an expression of worship”, he reminds us.

Turning next to the New Testament, he then points out that the word *proskynein* [Greek] means adoration on one’s knees. It occurs 59 times in the New Testament alone, and at many extraordinarily pivotal moments [like Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, or as St Stephen, the first martyr, is stoned to death – and many other places]. It occurs 29 times in the Book of Revelation alone, which is the book that describes the Sacred Liturgy in Heaven, from which the Church draws “the standards for her own Liturgy”, the Cardinal reminds us.

He then goes on to summarize that, “the spiritual and bodily meanings of *proskynein* are really inseparable. The bodily gesture itself is the bearer of the spiritual meaning, which is precisely that of worship... when someone tries to take worship back into the purely spiritual realm and refuses to give it embodied form, the act of worship evaporates, for what is purely spiritual is inappropriate to the nature of man.” He then concludes that “worship is one of those fundamental acts that affect the whole man. That is why bending the knee before the presence of the living God is something we cannot abandon.” Wow! This from one of the greatest theologians of the Church.

And so, from this theology flows the reason for us kneeling at various key points in the Mass. Always in adoration, certainly in humility before God, sometimes combined with penitence – but all because of the Real Presence of the King of Kings in our very midst. This proximity to profound holiness – the actual presence of God Himself – calls from us both a bodily and spiritual response that acknowledges this truth, uniting both in an act of worship.

Scripture is equally clear on this, time and again bidding us to kneel. In Isaiah 45:23, God commands: “By myself I swear, uttering my just decree... To me every knee shall bend; by me every tongue shall swear”. And likewise, Psalm 22:29-30: “Yes, to Him shall all the proud of the earth fall down; before Him all who go down to the dust shall throw themselves down”.

And in Philippians 2:11, St Paul reminds us that “at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth”. And in the Book of Revelation, repeatedly, “*The twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down [prostrate!] and worshiped God*” [Rev 11:16-17; 4:10-11; 19:4].

But as mentioned earlier, there has also been much discussion, even disagreement, over the last few decades over the appropriate postures to be taken by the congregation as a whole at various points of the Mass, especially regarding kneeling.

Various groups have interpreted directives from the Church’s General Instruction of the Roman Missal [GIRM, the official document from Rome that provides directives on how to celebrate Mass] and Vatican II differently, leading to some confusion – and even to an elimination [unapproved by Rome] of kneeling in some places.

But Cardinal Arinze, the past prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments framed a beautiful response to all this [you can find his response here: [youtube.com/watch?v=Cc0g3UMRtMM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cc0g3UMRtMM)], saying that after the Second Vatican Council, certain “Liturgy experts” have tried to do away with kneeling all together, even to the point of removing kneelers and Communion rails. But he then very forcefully adds that Rome has never told anyone to remove church kneelers, or altar rails. “Rome NEVER said that!” he added emphatically.”

He then made a profound comment: “If you believe that Christ is our God, and He is present, why don’t you kneel? Why don’t you crawl?... why don’t you show respect?”

And similarly, there is confusion in some places regarding what people can or should do immediately after receiving Communion. Some dioceses stress the importance of unity in posture, preferring all stand until everyone has finished receiving communion. In other dioceses, people kneel immediately after returning to their seats, treasuring that most sacred moment when they themselves have become a tabernacle, kneeling in prayer and adoration. The differences have even lead to squabbles amongst various groups, which should not happen – “charity in all things”.

So Cardinal Arinze also addressed this exact question in 2003, stating that GIRM 43, “is intended, on the one hand, to ensure within broad limits a certain uniformity of posture within the congregation for the various parts of the celebration of Holy Mass, and on the other, to not regulate posture rigidly in such a way that those who wish to kneel or sit would no longer be free.”

But when prayerfully considering all this, I was suddenly struck by a profound verse from Romans 14:11: “Why then do you judge your brother? Or you, why do you look down on your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written: ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bend before me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.’”

And note the mention of *both* standing and kneeling here! Both have their place in the worship of God. Ultimately, kneeling in God’s presence is not something we should argue over. It should simply be a way of responding to a desire in our heart to worship God – a desire placed there by God Himself. If we follow the Church and our hearts in doing whatever is permitted, all will work for good...