

What is the Proper Posture for the Eucharistic Prayer?

In addition to giving a theological overview of the Mass and detailed instructions for the priest and deacon, the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM) also explicitly mentions the postures and gestures of both the priest and the people at Mass (#42-44). The GIRM presents general norms about the use of posture and gesture and, in addition, offers an explanation to help understand why such external actions are important in the liturgy. The question of posture during the Eucharistic Prayer, however, is best considered in the broader context of the various postures and gestures mentioned in scripture and those that have been part of worship in the Christian tradition throughout the centuries.

A common early posture for Christian prayer was standing. Standing was seen as a mark of respect, honor, and Easter joy, and it is still customary for people to stand in non-religious situations as a sign of respect for an honored guest. The Council of Nicea (c.325) prescribed that, on Sundays and during the Easter Season, prayers should always be said standing, rather than while kneeling (canon 20), a custom also mentioned by the early Christian authors Tertullian (2nd-3rd Centuries). It is still customary for many Eastern Catholic and Eastern Orthodox communities to stand rather than kneel during the Eucharist on Sundays and especially during the Easter Season. This custom of standing is also followed in the Roman Rite when the Litany of the Saints is sung during the Easter Season.

Although bowing and kneeling also are traditional postures during prayer, in earlier centuries kneeling was considered more as a symbol of penance for sin rather than a sign of respect during prayer. Thus, in early Christianity, kneeling was appropriate during Lent or at other times of penance, but not on days of joy. Nevertheless, prior to the Second Vatican Council, kneeling (rather than standing) was usually considered the most appropriate gesture for prayer no matter what the occasion.

As a result, prior to the introduction of vernacular liturgies near the end of the Second Vatican Council, on weekdays people generally knelt throughout the Mass, except for standing during the Gospel and Creed, and then sitting until the Sanctus. Occasionally, parishes adopted a modified posture during a solemn or “high” Mass on Sundays, in which the faithful stood or sat at other parts of the Mass (e.g., sitting during the singing of a long Gloria, standing while being incensed).

The GIRM, first published in 1969 and revised in 2002, sees external posture as a “sign of unity” and thus posture is related to the “common spiritual good of the people of God” (GIRM n. 42). It also states that postures should not be based on “private inclination or arbitrary choice.”

The GIRM includes explicit general norms for posture during the revised Mass. Thus, as a general rule, ministers and people stand throughout the liturgy, particularly during the presidential prayers including the Eucharistic Prayer, following the ancient tradition. They may sit, however, after the opening rites during the pre-gospel readings and psalm, during the homily and preparation of the gifts, and, according to circumstances, during the period of silence after communion. But the GIRM also specifies kneeling, but only at the consecration during the Eucharistic Prayer. Yet it makes an exception for “reasons of health, lack of space, the large number of people present, or some other good reason.” If people do not kneel during the Eucharistic Prayer, the GIRM says that they should make a profound bow (as do concelebrating priests) while the principal celebrant genuflects after each consecration.

When the 1969 Order of Mass became commonly used in the early 1970s, many countries of the world adopted these general norms of the GIRM without any adaptations. Thus, in many European countries, it is common for people to stand through most of the Eucharistic Prayer and only kneel for the institution narrative (if kneelers are available in the church), standing immediately afterwards to sing the memorial acclamation. The U.S. Bishops, however, adapted the general norm to permit

people to remain kneeling from the *Sanctus* to the concluding *Amen* of the Eucharistic Prayer, since the posture of kneeling was such an ingrained practice in the U.S. at that time.

In 2000, the U.S. Bishops decided to continue the general norms regarding posture that had been customary. Thus, the official U.S. practice is that the assembly kneels during the Eucharistic prayer after the *Sanctus* until the conclusion of the *Amen* at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer. But we must also realize that this is not the general practice of the Church. In fact, in some multi-ethnic parishes, when Mass is not celebrated in English, the posture of the assembly (often including many recent immigrants) sometimes follows the customs of other countries.

The general practice of the Church is for people to stand throughout the Eucharistic Prayer, except for the consecration. The U.S. practice is to kneel for a longer period of time (from the *Sanctus* to the *Amen*) unless there are extenuating circumstances. If there are questions as to what may constitute “good reasons” that justify alternative practices, it is for the local Bishop, as moderator of the liturgical life of his diocese (GIRM #22), to make a determination.

It is important to remember that the GIRM envisions posture as something that expresses the unity of the community and should never be a cause of division, and that liturgical tradition considers standing as the appropriate gesture of reverence and joy during prayer. Whether we stand or kneel, during the most important prayer of the Mass, the Eucharistic Prayer, all present should be united, in their thoughts and hearts as well as through a common posture, whatever that posture may be in a specific situation, in praise and thanksgiving offered to God for the gift of his only Son.

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