

CATHOLIC CHURCH OF EASTERN MONTANA DIOCESE OF GREAT FALLS-BILLINGS

How we Catholics Worship: What we do and why we do it. Postures and Gestures #7

Postures

Much to our embarrassment, our friends can often tell us how we are feeling before we can say a word. Our body, particularly our facial expressions, speak volumes for us. Body language it's called. We cannot prevent it; we act the way we feel and, of course, we all know the wide range of our emotions.

We also know that the positions of our body assist us in accomplishing certain things that we may plan to do. When we wish to take a nap, for instance, we lie down. If something important is about to be said in a meeting, we sit erect and keep alert. If an important person comes into our midst, we stand up in recognition. If we want to relax to watch a sport event, we sit in a comfortable position. Each of these positions and only these positions, helps us participate in the human activity we have chosen.

For Catholics, all this is particularly important because we are a people who pray not only with our lips and our voices but also with our bodies. The bodily position that we take enhances what we reflect on with our mind and speak with our lips.

For that reason our church has wisely integrated certain bodily positions into our prayer life: Sitting is a posture of attentive listening and meditation. For that reason, we sit for the scripture readings before the Gospel. We remain seated as the gifts of bread and wine are being collected, prepared and set apart for Eucharist. After

receiving Holy Communion and when the Eucharist has been replaced in the tabernacle, we sit for some moments of quiet thanksgiving.

Standing, a posture which identifies us most uniquely as human persons, is also a posture of respect, honor and reverence. From the days of the early Church standing has been understood as the posture of those who are risen with Christ. So the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) calls the assembly to stand for the proclamation of the Gospel, for the reception of Holy Communion and for many of the prayers addressed to God.

Kneeling, from the earliest days of the Church, has signified penance; indeed, so much so that believers at one time were forbidden to kneel on Sundays and during the Easter Season when the spirit of the liturgy is joyful and thankful.

In more recent times, kneeling has also become a posture of adoration. It is for this reason that the US bishops have adapted the GIRM to call for the posture of kneeling for the entire Eucharistic Prayer. As the GIRM points out, "A common posture is a sign of unity of the members of the Christian community gathered for the Sacred Liturgy: it both expresses and fosters the intention and spiritual attitude of the participants" (GIRM #42).

Every community that gathers for an event of local interest, secular or sacred, will obviously be a blend of people,

differentiated in many ways: age, culture, personal interest, physical and mental capacities, etc. One thing for sure, we do not all fit neatly into the same space in the same way although the assumption often is that we do or should!

Unfortunately, as a church, a community of Christians, we often have assumed that everyone who comes to church will fit equally into the same sacred space and will have normal and equal access to all the sacred gifts that are offered there. That is not always the case, of course, and we are embarrassed to say that we “never noticed.”

Many people, who join the community for Sunday liturgy come with special needs: they come to pray and worship, but they need special and loving attention particularly in terms of access and physical space. The seating arrangements in our churches do not always adapt themselves well for those who are elderly and infirm, those who are physically or mentally disabled or even to parents with children.

Moreover, it must truthfully be said that even our rules for liturgy, which are meant to bond us into a community, often discriminate against those who are disadvantaged. Many people, for instance, find it difficult to stand for long periods of times. Others cannot kneel for parts of the liturgy. Many others need to be close to the sanctuary to be able to see and hear. Those who come in wheelchairs need access to communion stations. Everyone needs a clear understanding of where the nearest exit is. The ministry of hospitality, therefore, is really a Christian demand in our churches.

What is of utmost importance, of course, is a Christian community that has learned the rules of Christian etiquette, or better, Christian service, in the model of Jesus. There should never be an occasion in our churches where anyone feels unnoticed or unwelcome. That would be the height of unchristian behavior. As Christians, as God’s people, we ought to be able to say:

“There is room for everyone.”

Gestures

It is sometimes said that we Catholics who have the longest tradition of using certain gestures in our liturgy, often appear reluctant, even stuffy in their use. If one wishes to experience religious gestures in their most exuberant form, we need only attend a group of fundamentalist Christians at worship, or a community of African-American Baptists. They have no reluctance in using hands and arms, and, indeed, their entire body to pray.

Nonetheless, reluctant as we often seem in the use of our sacred gestures, there are several which have been our practice for centuries and which speak volumes about our prayer: The sign of the cross, for instance, which begins and ends every liturgy, recalls the One who suffered and died for us on the cross. In fact the sign of the cross begins and ends all we do as Catholics — from the cross we receive at baptism to the cross that is made over our body at death. Many Christians spontaneously lift their hands in prayer when so invited or at the Lord’s Prayer. As a sign of respect for the words of Christ when they are publicly proclaimed at the Gospel, we sign ourselves on the forehead, lips and breast. We bow at the words of the Incarnation during the creed and before we receive the body and blood of Christ. We bow to the altar, the sign of Christ present when we enter or leave the church. If the tabernacle is located in the sanctuary we genuflect in reverence to the sacramental presence of Christ.

In short, even though we may not seem very emotionally demonstrative in our external gestures, it is because we are recipients of an ancient Roman tradition which observes moderation and brevity in all things sacred. We know the meaning of the old saying “less is more.”