

The priest stands during the Eucharistic Prayer as he acts in the person of Christ, in what the Catechism of the Catholic Church calls "so great and so holy a moment". (#1385) The posture of standing reminds us of that great multitude from every nation and race that "stood before the throne and before the Lamb, wearing white robes " joyfully crying aloud in praise of God the Father on His heavenly throne and in praise of Jesus, the Lamb of God. (cf. Revelations 7:9) We also remember the words of the Second Eucharistic Prayer in which the priest prays to the Father, "We thank you for counting us worthy to stand in your presence and serve you".

Clearly, both the Sacred Scriptures and our liturgical tradition look upon standing, comparable to genuflecting and kneeling, as a reverential posture to express our faith in God and our love for Him. We should keep this in mind when we process forward and stand to receive Holy Communion, with a bow of the head as a sign of reverence prior to reception.

You have probably noticed that priests genuflect before receiving Holy Communion, rather than bowing their head.

Why would priests genuflect at this time but the laity only bow their heads? Because the laity were kneeling during the Eucharistic Prayer while the priest was standing. Since he has not been kneeling prior to Holy Communion, it is appropriate that the priest genuflect at this point to express his belief in the Real Presence of Christ and to manifest his reverence.

A few of our laity still kneel or genuflect prior to receiving Holy Communion, and rightly they are not denied the Blessed Sacrament. While I appreciate the good intentions that prompt these actions, I invite them to consider again the reverential nature of standing during the Sacred Liturgy and the real value of a unified expression of our fraternal communion in Christ. Taking exception to liturgical norms can distract others and even divert their attention during this most sacred moment of communing with our Savior. It can draw undue attention to oneself.

Receiving Communion is also a statement of our union with the entire Church, not just a time of individual experience.

### **Nine Postures of Saint Dominic**

We are told that Saint Dominic had nine different ways of praying, each marked by a different bodily posture. This great saint, who is associated with beginning the Rosary, knew well that praying involves more than just the soul.

Our body plays an important role in our communication with the Lord. Far from being trivial, what we do with our knees, whether we sit or stand, whether we genuflect or kneel, greatly impacts on our inner attitude before the Lord. It can stir our devotion or diminish it. If done sloppily or ignored, it hinders our openness to God's grace. But if done out of love, it assists us in humbly seeking God's mercy and in entering into loving communion with the Lord.

As we celebrate the Sacred Liturgy, then, whether at daily Mass or on a more solemn occasion, let us aim at more than external compliance with rubrics. Let us practice deep reverence before these Sacred Mysteries. Let us use our knees to live our faith every moment of every day and to express our love for Christ.

Bishop Thomas Olmsted, of Phoenix, addressed the significance of kneeling the Phoenix diocesan publication, *The Catholic Sun*, in a two-part article that appeared February 17 and March 3. Bishop Olmsted's complete article is reprinted here with his permission.

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## **Knees to Love Christ**

Bishop Thomas Olmsted

Knees symbolize both strength and humility. Athletes use strong knees to run for touchdowns in football and to block shots and to slam-dunk in basketball. Knees also bend in adoration of the Eucharistic King and in recognition of the grandeur and majesty of the Most High God.

Already in Biblical times, knees were a symbol of humility and strength. To bend one's knee before God was a profound act of worship; it stated boldly yet simply that God is the source of all power and that the one on bended knee is ready to place his life and all his energy at the service of the Lord.

What we do with our knees gives evidence of what we believe in our hearts. When we kneel down beside the bed of a dying person, when we stand up for the dignity of the unborn child, when we genuflect before Christ in the Blessed Sacrament, we say louder than any rhetoric what matters most in our lives. Knees express what we believe and make clear what we will live and die for.

Not surprisingly, then, knees play an important role in the Church's Sacred Liturgy, especially during the season of Lent. What we do with our knees during worship is anything but trivial. It rivals in importance what we do with our voices and our ears, what we do with our hands and our hearts.

When we gather at the Eucharist, our attention is drawn with awe and devotion to the sacramental presence of Christ. While the Body of Christ far exceeds the value of our own bodies, it also gives meaning to them. It reminds us, too, of the human body's vital role in that "full, conscious and active participation in the Sacred Liturgy" called for by the Church at the Second Vatican Council.

It is understandable then why our posture at Holy Mass stirs such deep emotion within us who cherish

our Catholic faith, and who know that our greatest treasure is the Eucharist. In three liturgical postures at Mass, our knees play a central role: kneeling, standing, and genuflecting.

Let us look, for a moment, at the practice of kneeling.

### **Kneeling for the Eucharistic Prayer**

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (third edition) speaks of the proper posture for the laity during the Eucharistic Prayer. In paragraph 42, it states: "In the dioceses of the United States of America, they should kneel beginning after the singing or recitation of the *Sanctus* until after the Amen of the Eucharistic Prayer, except when prevented on occasion by reasons of health, lack of space, the large number of people, or some other good reason. Those who do not kneel ought to make a profound bow when the priest genuflects after the consecration. The faithful kneel after the *Agnus Dei* unless the Diocesan Bishop determines otherwise".

It is expected, then, that the lay faithful kneel during the Eucharistic Prayer and after the *Agnus Dei*, unless they are prevented "on occasion" from doing so. It is only in exceptional situations and on extraordinary occasions that the laity stand during the Eucharistic Prayer. Of course, it is understood that some of the elderly and disabled will not be able to kneel. In chapels in nursing homes and similar environments, kneeling is often not possible.

Special problems are also posed by those few churches and chapels that presently have no kneelers. In these cases, until the installation of kneelers can occur (which I hope will be soon), kneeling may not be possible.

The practice of kneeling assists our whole person to be attentive to the Lord, to surrender to His will, to lift our soul and our voices in worship. Indeed, it points to the heart of what faith in Christ is all about. We see this reflected already in the earliest days of the Church. In the Acts of the Apostles we are told that Saint Peter "knelt down and prayed" (9:40), and

that Saint Paul "knelt down and prayed with them all" (20:36); we see how the first Christian martyr Saint Stephen fell to his knees and prayed that his enemies be forgiven (cf. 7:60), and we see how the whole community, men and women and children, prayed on their knees. (cf. 21:5)

### **Even Jesus Knelt to Pray**

Jesus Himself knelt to pray to His beloved Father. We see this most dramatically in the Garden of Gethsemane where, on His knees, He speaks those deeply moving words: "Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me; still, not my will but yours be done". (Luke 22:42)

The passage of Sacred Scripture that gives the strongest theological foundation for kneeling is that famous hymn found in Saint Paul's Letter to the Philippians, 2:6-11, where we are told that, "at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father".

Kneeling is more than a gesture of the overly pious. It is a fundamental act of faith, a strong expression about Who stands at the center of one's life and Who stands at the center of all creation. Bending the knee at the name of Jesus is a decisive act of those with athletic souls and humble hearts. There is nothing passive about kneeling in humility and adoration. When the knees act in response to a heart that loves Christ, there is unleashed a force so strong it can change the face of the earth. Grace is the name we give to this force.

### **The Devil Has No Knees**

According to Abba Apollo, a desert father who lived about 1,700 years ago, the devil has no knees; he cannot kneel; he cannot adore; he cannot pray; he can only look down his nose in contempt. Being unwilling to bend the knee at the name of Jesus is the essence of evil. (Cf. Is 45:23, Rom 14:11) But when we kneel at Jesus' name, when we bow down in

service of others, and when we bend the knee in adoration, we are following in the footsteps of the Magi, we are imitating Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Saint Maximilian Kolbe, and all the saints and angels in heaven.

"Come, let us bow down and worship. Let us kneel before the Lord who made us".

### **Why We Kneel during Mass**

Our knees play an important role in our life in Christ, in our service to others and in our worship of the Lord. Kneeling has always held such a prominent role in the prayer of the Church.

Now, let us consider the other two postures that our knees perform in the Sacred Liturgy: standing and genuflecting.

At key points of the Eucharist, we use our knees to express attentiveness, reverence and love. As we enter and as we exit a church where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved, we genuflect as a reverential greeting of Christ, who is truly present, Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity.

This action toward Christ in the Tabernacle prepares us to begin to pray as we enter the church and makes us ready to witness to Christ as we leave it. Indeed, to bend the knee before Our Blessed Lord in the Tabernacle also shows a desire to bend our will to God's plan for us each and every day.

### **Standing out of Love for Christ**

While we remain seated to listen to God's word in the first readings of the Sacred Scriptures at Mass, we rise to our feet and stand for the proclamation of the Gospel. Our standing in attentive and prayerful expectation is often accompanied by the singing of an acclamation, a procession with the Book of the Gospels and the use of incense. We always stand, too, at times of intercessory prayer, to show how we anticipate that the Father will hear and answer the petitions we bring with confidence before Him.