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In the celebration of Mass we raise our hearts, minds and voices to God, but we are creatures composed of body as well as spirit. Our prayer is not confined to our minds, hearts and voices, but is expressed by our bodies as well. When our bodies participate in our prayer we pray with our whole person, as the embodied spirits God created us to be, and this engagement of our entire being in prayer helps us to pray with greater attention.

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During Mass we assume different postures and we are also invited to make a variety of gestures. These postures and gestures are not merely ceremonial. They have profound meaning and, when done with understanding, can enhance our personal participation in Mass. In fact, these actions are the way in which we engage our bodies in the prayer that is the Mass. Each posture we assume at Mass underlines and reinforces the meaning of the action in which we are taking part at that moment in our worship.

### **Standing**

Standing is a sign of respect and honor so we stand as the celebrant, who represents Christ, enters and leaves the assembly. This posture, from the earliest days of the Church, has been understood as the stance of those who are “risen with Christ and seek the things that are above.” When we stand for prayer we assume our full stature before God, not in pride, but in humble gratitude for the marvelous thing God has done in creating and redeeming each one of us. By Baptism we have been given a share in the life of God, and the posture of standing is an acknowledgment of this wonderful gift.

We stand for the Gospel, the pinnacle of revelation, the words and deeds of the Lord, and the bishops of the United States have chosen standing as the posture to be observed in this country for the reception of Communion, the sacrament which unites us in the most profound way possible with Christ who, now gloriously risen from the dead, is the cause of our salvation.

### **Kneeling**

The posture of kneeling signified penance in the early Church: the awareness of sin casts us to the ground. So thoroughly was kneeling identified with penance that the early Christians were forbidden to kneel on Sundays and during the Easter Season when the prevailing spirit of the liturgy was that of joy and thanksgiving. In the Middle Ages kneeling came to signify the homage of a vassal to his lord, and more recently this posture has come to signify adoration. It is for this reason that the bishops of this country have chosen the posture of kneeling for the entire Eucharistic Prayer and for the time after the Lamb of God (*Agnus Dei*) until Communion.

### **Sitting**

Sitting is the posture of listening and meditation, so the congregation sits for the pre-Gospel readings and may also sit (or kneel) following Communion.

### **Sign of the Cross**

Gestures too involve our bodies in prayer. The most familiar of these is the Sign of the Cross with which we begin Mass and with which, in the form of a blessing, the Mass concludes. Because it was by his death on the cross that Christ redeemed humankind, we trace the sign of the cross on our forehead, lips, and heart at the beginning of the Gospel.

### **Genuflecting**

As a sign of adoration, we genuflect by bringing our right knee to the floor. Many people also make the Sign of the Cross as they bend their knee. Traditionally, Catholics genuflect on entering and leaving church if the Blessed Sacrament is present in the sanctuary of the Church. The priest, deacon, and other ministers genuflect to the tabernacle on entering and leaving the sanctuary. The priest also genuflects in adoration after he shows the Body and Blood of Christ to the people after the consecration and again before inviting the people to Holy Communion.

### **Other Gestures**

There are other gestures that intensify our prayer at Mass. During the *Confiteor* (I confess to almighty God...) the action of striking our breasts at the words “through my own fault” can strengthen my awareness

that *my* sin is *my* fault. In the Creed we bow at the words which commemorate the Incarnation: “by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary and became man.” This gesture signifies our profound respect and gratitude to Christ who, though God, did not hesitate to come among us as a human being, sharing our human condition in order to save us from sin and restore us to friendship with God. This gratitude is expressed with even greater solemnity on the Feast of the Annunciation of the Lord and on Christmas when we genuflect at these words.

Finally, we are asked to make a sign of reverence before receiving Communion. The bishops of this country have determined that the sign which we will give before Communion is to be a bow, a gesture through which we express our reverence and give honor to Christ who comes to us as our spiritual food. This should be our practice as a diocese, as well.

### **Processions**

Every procession in the Liturgy is a sign of the pilgrim Church, the body of those who believe in Christ, on their way to the Heavenly Jerusalem. The Mass begins with the procession of the priest and ministers to the altar. The Book of the Gospels is carried in procession to the ambo. The gifts of bread and wine are brought forward to the altar. Members of the assembly come forward in procession—eagerly, attentively, and devoutly—to receive Holy Communion. We who believe in Christ are moving in time toward that moment when we will leave this world and enter into the joy of the Lord in the eternal Kingdom he has prepared for us.

### **Singing**

“By its very nature song has both an individual and a communal dimension. Thus, it is no wonder that singing together in church expresses so well the sacramental presence of God to his people” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Sing to the Lord*, 2). As we raise our voices as one in the prayers, dialogues, and chants of the Mass, most especially in the Eucharistic Prayer, as well as the other hymns and songs, we each lend our individual voices to the great hymn of praise and thanksgiving to the Triune God.

### **Praying in Unison**

In the Mass, the worshiping assembly prays in one voice, speaking or singing together the words of the prayers. By saying the same words at the same time, we

act as what we truly are—one Body united in Christ through the Sacrament of Baptism.

### **Being Silent**

“Silence in the Liturgy allows the community to reflect on what it has heard and experienced, and to open its heart to the mystery celebrated” (*Sing to the Lord*, 118). We gather in silence, taking time to separate ourselves from the concerns of the world and enter into the sacred action. We reflect on the readings in silence. We may take time for silent reflection and prayer after Holy Communion. These times of silence are not merely times when nothing happens; rather, they are opportunities for us to enter more deeply in what God is doing in the Mass, and, like Mary, to keep “all these things, reflecting on them” in our hearts (Lk 2:19).

### **Conclusion**

In addition to serving as a vehicle for the prayer of beings composed of body and spirit, the postures and gestures in which we engage at Mass have another very important function. The Church sees in these common postures and gestures both a symbol of the unity of those who have come together to worship and a means of fostering that unity. We are not free to change these postures to suit our own individual piety; for the Church makes it clear that our unity of posture and gesture is an expression of our participation in the one Body formed by the baptized with Christ, our head. When we stand, kneel, sit, bow and sign ourselves in common action, we give unambiguous witness that we are indeed the Body of Christ, united in heart, mind and spirit.

### **Some points of clarification for our diocese:**

- ✘ During the *Confiteor* (I confess to almighty God...) one should strike their breast at the words “through my own fault.”
- ✘ During the Creed, one should bow at the words which commemorate the Incarnation: “by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary and became man.”
- ✘ All should stand at the conclusion of the Preparation of the Gifts, just before the priest begins the prayer, “Pray that our sacrifice...”
- ✘ All who are physically capable should kneel for the entire Eucharistic Prayer and for the time after the Lamb of God until Communion.