



Praying the Mass Anew

*The New Translation of The Roman Missal
and Our Actual Participation at Mass*

4. **Body Language: The Connection of Words and Actions at Mass.**

To fully understand the nature of Catholic worship in the liturgy, we must always be mindful of one extremely important truth: Liturgy involves our whole being. In other words, true worship of God will not only be in mind and heart, nor only in words. Rather, true worship involves our whole person – body and soul. Hence, it is only proper that in our continuing overview of the new translation of the *words* for Mass, we ought to consider our *actions* with our bodies, and how these work together in the liturgy of the Church.

The words of John 1:14 once more can serve us well: “And the Word became flesh, and made his dwelling among us.” These words of truth express how God, who is “pure spirit,” wills to take on our human nature. In this topic of how our bodies are involved in worship, what can be taken from the truth of God becoming flesh (which is a mystery of faith that is referred to as the “Incarnation”) is that our bodies are integral to who we are. Hence, to worship God fully truly requires our whole being – body and soul. In fact, if we do not acknowledge the necessity of our bodies in worshipping God fully, none of the sacraments of the Church would have any meaning, as the sacraments use *material* realities (bread and wine, for example) to communicate and offer us *spiritual* gifts or graces – the divine life of God.

Certainly all are clearly aware that the celebration of Mass contains times of standing, sitting, and kneeling. These actions are not by chance. Each action or gesture seeks to place us in proper frame of mind and heart to encounter God’s presence. For example, during the times that we stand, we use our bodies to help keep our minds attentive to the sung or spoken words of prayer or Sacred Scripture. When we are to kneel, we invite ourselves to become humble of heart, making ready to receive the Lord’s Real Presence in the Eucharist. Sitting, for its part, offers us a way of making our bodies comfortable, that we might listen and meditate with greater ease. Each of these postures, taken alone, has a depth of purpose. When understood in connection with each other and within the whole Mass, they can facilitate our entrance into an encountering of God *with all our being*.

Where do the words of the prayers fit into this praying with our bodies? Consider those prayers that are prayed at the given moments. We stand for the beginning of Mass, uniting ourselves and our intentions with all who are present (and with the whole Church). We kneel during those most sacred of words, spoken first by Jesus himself at the Last Supper, through which bread and wine become his own sacred flesh and blood. In these, or any of the parts of Mass, we

will find that the outward action fits the importance or the intentions of the words, so that *our bodies help our minds and hearts to receive what we hear, and to express what we say.*

Similarly, the gesture of “bowing” is frequent at Mass, as another way of showing reverence. Truly, all are to make “a bow of the head” not only before receiving Jesus in the Eucharist, but for each and every speaking of the holy names of Jesus and Mary, and on the feasts of saints, the name of the given saint – once more connecting our bodies to the spoken word. In addition, all are to make a profound bow,” that is, a bow “from the waist” in praying the words of

the Creed that refer to the mystery of the Incarnation. In the new translation, these words are: “and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.” In this way, *we do not simply say the words*, but our whole being, body and soul, word and action, takes part in our worship of God.

In our continuing exploration of the new translation, might we all keep in mind these truths: that liturgical prayer is not only in words – but it involves our whole being. Our bodies truly do help us to worship God properly, opening us up to a deeper encounter the Word, “who gives his flesh for the life of the world.”

Questions of the Week:

➤ *What is the point of bowing and genuflecting?*

While both acts of bowing and genuflecting, as signs of reverence and adoration, signify how God in heaven came down to earth, and literally touched earth by taking on our human nature, genuflecting is more properly an act of adoration. A bow (of which there is the deep bow from the waist called the “profound bow” and the lesser “bow of the head”) causes us to lower our bodies toward the ground, mindful of Jesus who became “lower than the angels” (Hebrews 2:9). By genuflecting, or in touching our right knee to the ground, while we once more acknowledge God’s loving act of taking on our human nature (literally touching the earth), we more properly give adoration to Jesus, who is our Savior and at whose name “every knee shall bend” (Philippians 2:10). Genuflecting is thus used in adoration of the Eucharist, both on the altar and when reserved in the tabernacle, as an act of adoration toward our Savior and true King, present in the Eucharist.

➤ *What about standing, sitting, and kneeling?*

These postures have varied purposes and histories. Standing is a posture of attentiveness and respect, while kneeling can convey either a disposition of humility and adoration, or of penance (or both together). We sit during times of meditative listening or moments of silent, private prayer.

Through the Middle Ages, and even to this day in parts of Europe, church buildings rarely were built with pews – hence, standing for the whole Mass was/is the normal posture. Sitting has only become an accepted posture because of the presence of pews. Kneeling, as witnessed by the custom of recent centuries of having the people kneel to receive Holy Communion, has entered into the Mass according to further invitation to express adoration and humble receptivity in approaching and partaking of the Eucharist.

Today, we stand for such parts of Mass as the Introductory Rites, the Gospel, the Creed and Prayer of the Faithful, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Concluding Rites as an expression of reverence and attentiveness to the spoken words and responses. Kneeling is reserved for times that are distinguished by the call for adoration (the Eucharistic Prayer, and during Holy Communion), while sitting is used during the readings, the homily, and preparation of the gifts, as these are moments of meditation and listening.