

What is the Gesture of Reverence for Communion?

Standing for Communion had been an ancient practice in the Western Church and was the on-going practice in many Eastern Churches. For many reasons, including infrequent Communion, kneeling became the common posture in the West when receiving Communion. After the liturgical reforms of Vatican II, the posture of standing when receiving communion began to be re-introduced as the standard practice in many places throughout the world. The Church began to regain the ancient appreciation of standing as a posture that symbolized reverence and the joy of welcoming the Risen Christ. We stand when we welcome the nourishment we receive when the words of Christ are proclaimed to us in the Gospel. It is just as appropriate to stand when we welcome the nourishment we receive when the Lord's Body and Blood are given to us at Communion.

In May 1967, a few years after Vatican II, Rome issued a document addressing devotion to the "Eucharistic Mystery," which formally permitted the bishops of a country to determine practices related to the Eucharist. It suggested that it was appropriate that a communicant, when receiving Communion standing, make an additional sign of reverence, to be determined according to local culture (n. 34). Although the Bishops of the United States did permit the faithful to receive Communion either standing or kneeling, initially they did not want to make a further determination about any sign of reverence, but wisely waited to see what sort of local practices would develop. In many places, communicants genuflected, sometimes unintentionally hitting the person in line behind them. In some places, communicants made a deep bow, a custom followed in some Eastern Churches.

The revised 2002 General Instruction of the Roman Missal specifically notes that the national Conference of Bishops should determine both the posture to be used when receiving communion (either standing or kneeling) and the recommended sign of reverence (cf. 2002 GIRM n. 160). The U.S. Bishops in 2000 determined that standing would be the customary posture for receiving communion in the U.S. At that time they also recommended a "bow of the head" as the sign of reverence before receiving the

consecrated host or drinking from the chalice. The bow, as a sign of reverence, is already mentioned in the 2002 GIRM (n 275) and so it was appropriate to use this simple yet dignified gesture, easily done by communicants of all ages, as the standard gesture in the U.S.

The 2002 GIRM sees the various postures and gestures engaged in by the assembly during Mass as a sign of unity (n. 42). The sign of unity is absent when people use different gestures or postures. Most people would consider it odd if a few individuals refused to stand at the Gospel or to kneel during the Eucharistic Prayer when everyone else participated in such a common posture. Thus, it would be contrary to this vision of unity to prescribe or even recommend a gesture that could not easily be performed by all in a dignified manner. Since many people, because of age or infirmity, find it awkward to genuflect without the support of a pew or a kneeler, the genuflection was not chosen.

We should remember that standing itself is a gesture of reverence. It is our cultural custom to stand when a dignitary enters a room or when we sing the national anthem. The bow of the head is an additional gesture at the moment of receiving communion acknowledging the sacramental encounter with the Risen Lord about to take place.

The contemporary U.S. culture is not one that pays a lot of attention to certain symbols, especially small ones. Yet sometimes what may seem to be a small gesture, e.g., the gift of a single rose on a birthday or anniversary, can have great significance. As we approach the Risen Lord who nourishes us with his Body and Blood in Communion, let us see in our discreet, yet heart-felt bow of the head a way to acknowledge our humility before and reverence toward the One whose death brought life to our world and who continues to offer us life through his Body and Blood.

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