

When should we bow and genuflect at Mass?

Bows and genuflections are two of a variety of bodily gestures used by human beings over the centuries to honor individuals and objects in religious as well as secular settings. Similar external signs of respect are still common in various contexts. For example, in many cultures, including the U.S., people regularly stand when a dignitary enters a room and soldiers salute an officer, both of which gestures are understood as signs of respect.

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal last revised in 2002 (2002 GIRM) presents norms about the actions used to express reverence and respect at Mass, and includes directions about when to genuflect (n. 274) and when to bow (n. 275). In addition to these two gestures of respect, reverence, and adoration, the kiss is also used to honor the altar and the Book of the Gospels (n. 273).

The GIRM (n. 298) reminds us of the ancient tradition of seeing the altar as representing Christ, the Living Stone (cf. 1 Peter 2:4). Because of this association, a bow of the body is prescribed as the normal gesture made toward the altar, as if toward Christ himself. In particular, all the ministers bow toward the altar when they arrive at the sanctuary at the beginning of Mass and at the end of Mass, before leaving the sanctuary. The priest or deacon also bows during other moments during the Mass, for example, when preparing to proclaim the Gospel. In addition, this “profound bow” is made by the entire assembly during the Creed at the words “by the power of the Holy Spirit . . . became man.”

A bow of the head is prescribed when the persons of the Trinity are named together (as at the sign of the cross), at the name of Jesus, of his mother, and of the saint honored in the liturgy that day. In addition, in the U.S., the Bishops have determined that the sign of reverence to be made before receiving Communion is a bow of the head.

The genuflection, seen as a sign of adoration, is reserved for the Eucharist as well as for the cross between its solemn veneration on Good Friday and the beginning of the Easter Vigil. During Mass, the priest celebrant genuflects during the

institution narrative of the Eucharistic Prayer after he has shown the consecrated host to the assembly as well as after showing the chalice, and then after the exchange of peace right before he shows both species to the assembly when he invites them to Communion.

If the tabernacle is not in a separate Eucharistic chapel of reservation, but is located in the sanctuary, the priest and other ministers genuflect when they arrive at the sanctuary at the beginning of Mass and when they leave at the end of Mass. During the celebration of Mass, however, they do not genuflect to the tabernacle. Outside the celebration of Mass, it is appropriate to genuflect whenever passing in front of the tabernacle.

On the Annunciation and on Christmas, as a special way to honor the mystery of the Incarnation, the entire assembly genuflects during the Creed in lieu of bowing (n. 137).

The Psalmist exhorts us to “bow down in worship” (Ps 95:6) and St. Paul reminds us that “every knee should bend” at the name of Jesus (Phil 2:10). Genuflecting toward the tabernacle and bowing toward the altar are physical gestures that bring home to us that our religion is incarnational, and that since Christ became “like us in all things,” all aspects of our humanity should be involved in praising God. External bodily gestures during liturgical actions as well as at other moments of prayer in a church or chapel, by ministers or by any other member of the faithful, continually remind us that human beings worship God not merely through words and thoughts, but with their entire bodies as well.

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