

CATHOLIC CALISTHENICS: GESTURES, POSTURES, AND SYMBOLIC MOVEMENTS IN MASS



'In the liturgy of the New Covenant every liturgical action, especially the celebration of the Eucharist and the sacraments is an encounter between Christ and the Church' (CCC 1097). Pope Benedict XVI stressed the need for formation and instruction about the Holy Eucharist ("mystagogical catechesis"), and religious signs and gestures are an important part of this.

The Sign of the Cross

The most often used Catholic sign is crossing oneself. It is, in itself, a full and complete prayer. The sign of the cross is made by touching the hand to the forehead using the Trinitarian formula (in the of the Father) the sternum, (and the Son) left shoulder, (and the Holy) and the right shoulder (Spirit). According to the rubrics, congregant cross themselves:

1. At the beginning of the Mass
2. At the Rite of Sprinkling (*Asperges*)
3. When the celebrant says, "may Almighty God have mercy..." immediately prior to the First Reading.
4. Upon receiving Holy Communion.
5. At the conclusion of Mass.

However, rubrics aside, there are additional times one may cross oneself at Mass:

6. Upon entering/leaving the church (using holy water)
7. Upon entering/leaving a pew
8. When crossing the church and happening upon the Blessed Sacrament/tabernacle
9. Whenever the celebrant passes during the entering/exiting processions.
10. Whenever the celebrant gives a blessing at Mass
11. Before and after saying private prayer before and after Mass including personal devotions (e.g., the Rosary) and fulfilling the requirements of one's penance.

In addition, you may "put on the armor of God" (Ephesians 6:11) by crossing yourself each time your mind wanders, or a passing thought causes you to momentarily forget the reason you're at Mass.

Gospel Greeting

Upon hearing the name of the Gospel that is about to be read at Mass, the faithful use the ancient form of crossing themselves with three small crosses (Latin: *tres cruces*) using the thumb upon the forehead, the lips and over the heart. You may wish to add the following silent prayer when doing so: "May the Lord be on my mind, on my lips and in my heart."

Genuflection

We show respect and reverence to the Blessed Sacrament by facing the tabernacle and bending our right knee to the floor.

1. We genuflect on coming and leaving the church and when we enter or leave our pew.
2. There's no need to genuflect when leaving the pew to receive Communion.

Bowing

1. We may bow in reverence to the crucifix as it passes during the Recession.
2. We bow during the Creed at the *Incarnatus* ("and was made man")
3. If a thurifer stands before the altar and bids the congregation to stand, we should bow toward him as he incenses us.
4. We may bow when saying, "Lord, have mercy" during the *Kyrie*.
5. We may fold our hands and bow as we pray the Our Father.
6. At the consecration of each element, bow and silently say, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28).
7. One should bow when receiving Holy Communion, if received standing.

Bowing at the Name of Jesus

Bowing the head at the name of Jesus and when the names of the Trinity are pronounced (the Doxology, or "Glory Be"). This is a custom which has gone by the wayside with the modernist putsch however, I believe it's one that is ready for a comeback. Bowing at Jesus' Name is found in Philippians 2:10: "*That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth.*" The action was mandated at the Second Ecumenical Council of Lyons convened by Pope Gregory X in 1274. Subsequently, a partial indulgence has been attached to the sign of reverence, and I say, every little bit helps. It's interesting to note that both priest characters in the 1973 *Exorcist* — Fathers Damien Karras and Lankester Merrin — bowed at the Holy Name of Jesus during the exorcism.

Striking the Breast

1. One strikes at one's breast three times during the Confiteor ("Through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault.")
2. In reciting the *Agnus Dei* ("Lamb of God"), we should strike the breast at the words "Have mercy on us."

Kneeling

1. The word "kneeling" (Greek: *proskynein*) occurs 59 times in the New Testament — 24 in the Book of Revelation which represents the heavenly standard by which our earthly Mass is based.
2. We kneel after the *Agnus Dei* ("Lamb of God"). Those who can't kneel should make a profound bow when the celebrant genuflects after the consecration.
3. Kneel during the Eucharistic Prayer.
4. Kneel in prayer when you return to your pew after Communion, until the priest sits down, or until he says, "Let us pray."

Sitting

1. We sit at the First and Second readings and the responsorial Psalm before the Gospel.
2. We sit during the homily.
3. We sit during the Preparation of the Gifts at the Offertory.

Standing

We stand for the:

1. Entrance procession
2. Rite of Sprinkling (*Asperges*)
3. Creed
4. Alleluia chant before the Gospel
5. While the Gospel is proclaimed
6. during the Prayer of the Faithful.
7. We stand as the celebrant says, "Pray brethren that our sacrifice..."
and remain standing to respond, "May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands ..."
8. The Lord's Prayer
9. The congregation remains standing until the end of the Sanctus ("Holy, holy").
10. Stand for the concluding prayers.
11. Remain standing until all ministers have processed out.

Sign of Peace

Remain standing if you wish to exchange a sign of peace — a bow, handshake or a kiss accompanied by the words "Peace be with you.")

