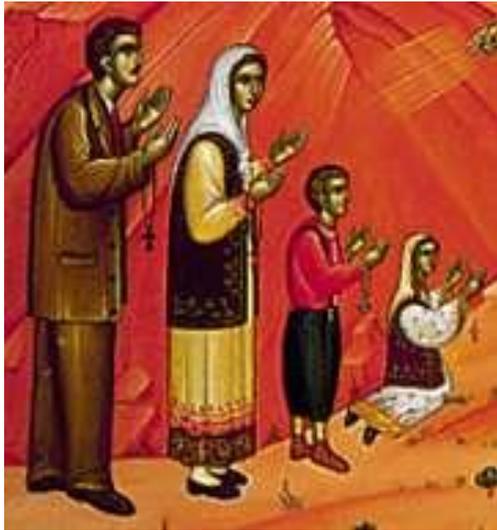


EXPLORING CHRISTIAN FAITH

*No. 17*

# THE USE OF THE BODY IN PRAYER



---

**AN INTRODUCTION TO USING OUR BODIES  
TO DEEPEN OUR DEVOTION**

## **INTRODUCTION**

For many of us, the weekly gathering of the faithful to share in the Eucharist is the focus and centre of our prayer and the expression of our devotion. Since earliest times, those who seek to respond to God's presence in all things have developed many customs and traditions to help them personalise and give expression to their faith. This has happened in every religion and Christians, wanting to 'touch' God at a personal level, have also realised that the way we use our bodies in prayer can have a profound effect on our relationship with God. This short booklet is intended to introduce and explain some of them.

## **BOWING**

A 'profound' (deep) bow remains the custom for Orthodox Christians instead of genuflecting. In the West it is a popular tradition to bow slightly when the name of Jesus (and, sometimes, Mary) is mentioned in the Liturgy. The profound bow can always substitute for a genuflection. Both are symbolic of one's response to the presence of God. These devotional gestures were borrowed from court etiquette and remain in use in this country in the form of the curtsy or bow to the monarch. They are a modified form of a prostration.

## **GENUFLECTING**

This is a profound sign of respect offered to our Lord in His Most Holy Sacrament. One genuflects (briefly kneeling onto the right knee) whenever one passes the Tabernacle, which contains the Blessed Sacrament. A burning white light indicates the presence of Christ in his Sacrament. The Sacrament may also be reserved in an Aumbry (wall safe) or Hanging Pyx (a container usually suspended over an altar). In this way an individual acknowledges the presence of Jesus, realises themselves to be in the proximity of a Divine Mystery and takes to heart that heaven is contained under the form of bread and wine (although it is only the former that is Reserved). One also genuflects whenever the Sacrament passes during Processions of the Blessed Sacrament. It is also customary to genuflect at Midnight Mass on coming to the words in the Gospel of John, "and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." as well as during the Creed when we come to the similar passage. On Good Friday it is customary to genuflect when the death of our Lord is remembered during the Reading of the Passion Gospel.

## **KNEELING**

Kneeling has been a popular devotional position only during modern times. There always was, however, a tradition of kneeling for prayer. St. Paul is described thus when joining with Christians at Miletus (Acts 20:36). Kneeling was gradually introduced into the Liturgy as a sign of penance, supplication, and adoration. Kneeling during Mass was influenced by a growing emphasis on the Divinity of Christ and human unworthiness. In the West it gradually became the normal position throughout Mass from the 9th cent., except during the reading of the Gospel. Since the Liturgical reforms inaugurated by Vatican II, changes were made to restore a more balanced understanding of our relationship with God. Kneeling has never been the norm in the Orthodox world and, with a growing understanding of their spirituality, the church in the West is returning to an earlier, and more universal, use of posture during the Mass.

## **PROSTRATING**

In this rarely used posture, an individual lies full-length on the floor, face to the ground. A posture of deep humility, it signifies our willingness to share in Christ's death so as to share in his Resurrection (*see Rom 6*). It is used at the beginning of the Celebration of the Lord's Passion on Good Friday and also during the Litany of the Saints in the Rite of Ordination, when those to be ordained deacons, priests, and bishops prostrate themselves in humble prayer and submission to Christ.

## **RAISING OF EYES AND HANDS**

These are gestures of prayer. God has traditionally been pictured as dwelling above creation and it is natural, therefore, to raise one's eyes upwards in prayer. Jesus is described as praying in this way: "He looked up to heaven, blessed and broke (the loaves and fishes)" (*Matthew 14:19*). For the same reasons, it was the custom of Christians from the earliest times to pray with the hands raised upwards, often with palms open in a gesture of receiving or giving. There is evidence for this gesture in catacomb paintings. This was always the prayer position of priests at the altar and has been revived among many people today.

## **SIGN OF THE CROSS**

The Sign of the Cross, made by tracing the cross from the forehead to the breast, then from the left to the right shoulder, came into use as a personal

gesture during the Middle Ages. It takes several forms. The 'big' signing, made with the whole hand and touching first the forehead, then the breast, left shoulder and, finally, right shoulder, is often accompanied with the words, "*In the name of the Father, + and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*" Whilst being used at various times at Mass and in other public liturgies, it is a means whereby people can express their personal faith at other times, as well. On entering a church (usually with Holy Water) or beginning a journey, before going to sleep or on waking, at the news of a death or as a funeral passes: a lay person may also make the Sign of the Cross over another person to reassure them of God's love. In whatever circumstance, the Sign is a personalised reminder and acceptance of all that our Faith teaches about the love of God manifested in the Passion of Christ.

## **SITTING**

There is no particular religious significance to the position of sitting. It is a posture of receptive listening and resting. It became popular in the West for the listening parts of the Mass (the Readings and sermon) only after the introduction of pews in the 16th cent.

## **STANDING**

Some people complain that there is too much standing instead of kneeling during Mass. Standing, however, is the most ancient of liturgical positions. It was the ordinary bodily position at worship for almost the first thousand years of Christianity. Standing is a natural expression of respect, reverence and readiness - especially, for example, when someone of importance enters a room. All religions in ancient times used this position at worship. Christianity spread its early roots in a culture where kneeling was the position of servitude and slavery. *Standing straight, tall and free as baptised children of God had special meaning to them.* Only for a brief moment before the Presider's official prayer of the day did people kneel. Even this exception was cancelled on all Sundays and during the Easter season in honour of the Resurrection. During the Eucharistic Prayer and blessings, the posture of the people was one of deep bowing. Standing during the reading of the Gospel has remained the norm for the proclamation of the Word of God affirms the presence of God, just as it is made manifest through the Eucharistic Prayer for which, once again, we stand.