

Reflecting on our Catholic Practices

Making the sign of the cross: The most common Catholic gesture is the sign of the cross. It symbolically reaffirms two essential Christian doctrines: The Holy Trinity — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and humankind’s salvation through the cross of Christ. The sign of the cross as a marking was found on early Christian inscriptions, the catacombs and at places of worship. In the Latin, Roman Catholic (Western) Church, Catholics make the sign of the cross by using their right hand to touch the forehead, then the middle of the breast, then the left shoulder, and finally the right shoulder. As they do this, they say: “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.” This one complete gesture makes a cross. This gesture is done in a smaller way over the forehead, lips and chest when the gospel is about to be proclaimed. The meaning being that the Word of God be known in our minds, professed from our lips and lived in our lives. (You might be interested in knowing that Eastern Rite Catholics make a similar sign of the cross during the liturgy but go to the right shoulder first and then to the left. This is part of the Eastern Catholic culture, a culture and faith that is totally united with us in the West, or Roman Catholic Church.)

Genuflecting: This word means to “bend the knee”. In medieval Europe, it was customary to go down on one knee before a king, queen or person of special rank. This secular mark of honor gradually became an action of reverence in the church. People began to go down on one knee in honor to the King of kings—the Lord, Jesus Christ. Catholics genuflect in front of the Holy Eucharist in the tabernacle for we believe that the Holy Eucharist is the real body and presence of Jesus. Extraordinary Ministers later bring Holy Communion to those who are homebound. So, Catholics show the ultimate form of respect by genuflecting before Him.

Bowing and Kneeling: Both bowing and kneeling are signs of reverence. Kneeling is a particular sign of reverence in the Western culture and Roman Catholics kneel at the most sacred points of the Mass. In the United States, Catholics kneel throughout the Eucharistic Prayer and other times. Again, you should know that Catholics in some Eastern Rite countries stand as their normal posture for reverence.

Bowing during the Mass occurs particularly during the recitation of the Creed and the reception of Holy Communion. During the Creed we offer a simple bow from the waist when we hear the words of Jesus’ incarnation: “and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man”—not just born, but first conceived by the power of the Spirit. This phrase acknowledges Jesus’ initial act of salvation for us. Before receiving Holy Communion, we have a simple head bow of reverence to the Christ whom we are about to receive. As the priest, deacon or extraordinary minister says, “the Body of Christ,” the communicant gives a head bow and says “Amen.” Amen is word that comes from the Aramaic and Hebrew languages, and is used in many languages to say: “So be it” or “I believe” or “Truly it is”. Just as a reminder, the “Amen” should be audible, not mumbled. Also, our response of “Amen” to the words “the Body of Christ” should not be substituted by another response like “Thank you” or “Yes, we are.” The response should simply be “Amen” as this is a scriptural response in faith as we receive Holy Communion reverently on our hands or tongue.

Striking the breast during the penitential rite: This is a sign and gesture of sorrow for sin. In the early church, both St. Augustine and St. Jerome testify that the striking of the breast means that you wish to bring to light what is concealed in the breast, and by this act to cleanse your hidden sins. The striking of the breast is a humble sign of sorrow and repentance.

Sign of Peace: To understand the meaning of this gesture consider the context in which Jesus offers peace to his disciples. The source of this greeting is found in the Gospel according to John (14:27) when the Lord, sharing the Last Supper with his disciples, instructs them: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you.” Jesus is gathered with his twelve disciples in the upper room around a table, and Jesus has just washed their feet. He is surrounded by conflict, but in the midst of this he offers peace. Not the temporary peace that this world is about to take from him, but his reconciling peace which will restore humanity. The peace we offer others is not our personal peace, or a worldly peace, but Christ’s peace. And again, as in the context of the “Amen,” the extension of peace to others should not be replaced by other cordial greetings like “Hi”, but rather a mutual exchange of the sign of peace. “Peace be with you” we say, and the other responds the same.

Use of incense: Believe it or not, the use of incense is referred to over 150 times in the Bible! The Church sees the burning of incense as an image of the prayers of the faithful rising to heaven. This symbolism is mentioned in Psalm 141:2: “*Let my prayer be incense before you; my uplifted hands an evening offering.*” In the N.T. Book of Revelation 8:3-4, we hear these words: “*Another angel came and stood at the altar, holding a gold censer. He was given a great quantity of incense to offer, along with the prayers of all the holy ones on the gold altar which was before the throne. The smoke of the incense along with the prayers of the holy ones went up before God from the hand of the angel.*” Incense is a sacramental, used to sanctify, bless, and venerate. Incense may be used at the priest’s discretion during the Mass, and the Church gives us these directives: During the entrance procession; at the beginning of Mass to incense the altar and the cross; before the Gospel reading; after the bread and the wine are placed on the altar to incense the offerings, the cross, the altar, the priest, and finally the people. You will also see incense being used at the commendation rite of funerals and other special occasions.

Gestures that you see the priest doing during the Mass are the *Orans* position of prayer with arms extended—offering up the prayers of the community. Also, you see that the priest has particular times when he kisses the altar, the gospel book, bows or genuflects—all out of reverence to the sacrifice of the Mass that he is offering in prayer with the community.

My friends, the above are some of the most common practices and gestures used during the celebration of the Mass. These done with the Catholic community gathered in prayer convey the unity of the Church in its teaching and worship. Fr. Dave