

## Lecture 1: The Significance of Postures in the Catholic Liturgy: standing, Sign of the Cross, striking ones breast, Gospel greeting

### 1. Introduction

Welcome, everyone, to this first session in our series on postures and gestures in the Catholic liturgy. Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium), paragraph 10. It states:

*"Nevertheless, the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows. For the aim and object of apostolic works is that all who are made sons of God by faith and baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of His Church, to take part in the sacrifice, and to eat the Lord's supper."*

The liturgy is the "source and summit" of Christian life, as Vatican II reminds us, and every aspect of it—including our physical gestures—has meaning and purpose. These gestures are not arbitrary; they are outward signs of inward faith, meant to bring us into deeper communion with God and one another.

Throughout the series, we will explore the origins, theology, and practical application of postures in the liturgy, but before diving into specific gestures, let us reflect on why these movements matter.

### 2. Why Gestures Matter in the Liturgy

- **Gestures communicate reverence, devotion, and unity.** As embodied creatures, we use physical signs to express what is in our hearts and minds.
- Gestures are an integral part of how we communicate in daily life, often adding depth and nuance to our words—or even replacing them entirely. Here are a few examples:
  - ❖ **Nodding** – A universal gesture to indicate agreement or understanding. A single nod often confirms what's being said, while multiple nods might encourage the speaker to continue.
  - ❖ **Shrugging** – A way to communicate uncertainty, indifference, or lack of knowledge. It's the physical equivalent of saying, "I don't know" or "I don't care."
  - ❖ **Pointing** – Used to direct attention or indicate a specific object, person, or place. Pointing can be incredibly helpful but can also come across as rude in some cultures, so context matters.
  - ❖ **Thumbs-Up** – A positive gesture indicating approval, success, or agreement. However, it's worth noting that this gesture can have different meanings in various cultures, so always be aware of context.
  - ❖ **Waving** – A friendly way to greet someone or say goodbye. It's a warm, non-verbal cue that bridges distances.
  - ❖ **Handshakes** – A gesture of greeting or agreement, often used in formal or professional settings. The firmness of a handshake can also convey confidence or enthusiasm.

- ❖ **Facepalming** – A modern gesture of frustration or disbelief, where the palm of one’s hand covers their face. It’s widely understood and often used humorously.
  - ❖ **Fist Bump or High Five** – These are casual, celebratory gestures often used to express camaraderie, success, or excitement.
  - ❖ **Crossed Arms** – This can signal defensiveness, disinterest, or even simply comfort, depending on the situation. It’s an example of how gestures can carry multiple meanings based on context.
  - ❖ **Winking** – A playful or conspiratorial gesture, often used to convey humor, shared understanding, or light-heartedness.
- Our gestures show just how dynamic and expressive human communication can be, even without words. This is especially true in worship. Just as words articulate the truths we profess, gestures amplify them. They also unite us with generations of Catholics who have prayed and worshipped in the same ways.
  - Consider Jesus Himself: He often used gestures to convey profound truths. When He broke bread at the Last Supper (Luke 22:19), when He washed His disciples' feet (John 13:5), and when He healed the sick with His touch (Mark 7:33-35)—He used physical actions as sacramental signs. Similarly, in the liturgy, our gestures serve as visible signs of invisible grace.

### 3. The Posture of Standing

- Let us begin with the posture of standing, which is ubiquitous throughout the Mass. Standing signifies reverence, readiness, and the dignity of our identity as children of God.
- We stand during the **Introductory Rites as the priest enters**, during the **Gospel proclamation**, for the **Lord’s Prayer**, and at other critical moments.
- **Standing is deeply rooted in scripture.** In Nehemiah 8:5, we read, *"When Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people; and as he opened it, all the people stood up."* This moment demonstrates standing as a sign of reverence for God’s Word. Difference between listening to the Gospel and other readings. Moreover, standing as a posture of prayer signifies the Resurrection—our hope in eternal life (Colossians 3:1-2: *"If then you have been raised with Christ..."*).
- Standing during the Gospel Acclamation is particularly significant. As we sing "Alleluia," we prepare to hear the words of Christ Himself. This active posture reminds us of the dignity of the Gospel and our attentiveness to its message.
- Standing also unites us with the Communion of Saints. In Revelation 7:9, John describes a vision of *"a great multitude...standing before the throne and before the Lamb."* Thus, when we stand during the liturgy, we join this heavenly worship.

#### 4. The Sign of the Cross

- The Sign of the Cross is the gesture that opens and closes many liturgical moments. It is both a prayer and a profession of faith, summarizing the essence of Christian belief in the Holy Trinity and the redemptive power of the cross.
- The roots of the Sign of the Cross can be traced to **Matthew 28:19**, where Jesus commands, *"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."* Additionally, the cross itself is central to our faith, as Paul writes in Galatians 6:14, *"May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."*
- Examples in the Liturgy: Consider the Sign of the Cross **at the beginning of Mass**. When the priest says, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," **we trace the cross on our bodies, calling ourselves to worship.**
- Similarly, during blessings and prayers, the Sign of the Cross seals us in God's grace.
- In private prayer, the Sign of the Cross is equally powerful. St. Cyril of Jerusalem described it as "a badge for the faithful and a terror to demons." When we cross ourselves, we proclaim Christ's victory over sin and death. We do it at the beginning and at the end of our prayers, signifying that **we want to begin and end everything with God.**

#### 5. The Gospel Greeting

- When the Gospel is proclaimed, the Church asks us to prepare with a specific gesture. After the greeting ("The Lord be with you"), **we trace small crosses on our forehead, lips, and heart**, silently praying, **"May the Word of God be in my mind, on my lips, and in my heart."**
- This gesture echoes Deuteronomy 6:6-9, which instructs God's people to bind His words *"on your forehead and as a sign on your hand."* It emphasizes **internalizing God's Word and sharing it with others.**
- Examples in the Liturgy: This gesture is profoundly connected to our baptismal mission. After hearing the Gospel, we are sent forth to proclaim it through our lives (Mark 16:15: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation"). The small crosses remind us to carry Christ into our thoughts, speech, and actions.

#### 6. Striking One's Breast

- Finally, the gesture of **striking the breast during the Confiteor expresses humility and contrition.** It is a physical **acknowledgment of our sinfulness** and need for God's mercy.
- The most notable biblical example is in Luke 18:13, where the tax collector prays, *"God, be merciful to me, a sinner,"* while striking his breast. This gesture signifies heartfelt repentance and reliance on God's mercy.

- Examples in the Liturgy: Striking the breast is not limited to the Confiteor. During the Lamb of God ("Agnus Dei"), worshippers often lightly strike their breast as they pray for mercy: "Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us." This action amplifies the prayer's sincerity. Also, during the First Eucharistic Prayer, Priest strikes his breast in a humble expression of his sinful unworthiness.

## 7. Conclusion

- Each of these **gestures**—standing, the Sign of the Cross, the Gospel greeting, and striking the breast—are **profoundly rooted in scripture, tradition, and the liturgy**. They remind us that **worship is not merely intellectual but also embodied**. These physical actions unite us with Christ, with one another, and with the generations of believers who came before us.

In future lectures, we will delve into additional postures, such as kneeling, bowing, and sitting. But for today, let us take these gestures into our lives, letting them inspire reverence and devotion beyond the walls of the Church. Thank you for joining, and may God bless you as you grow in faith.