

Lecture 3: Understanding the Meaning of Gestures in the Catholic Liturgy

Introduction: What Liturgy Means

- Let us begin by the reminder of the profound meaning of liturgy, rooted in the Greek word *leitourgia*, which translates to "public work" or "work of the people." Liturgy is not individual; it is communal. It is the Church's sacred act of worship, where we unite as the Body of Christ in glorifying God.
- This shared act requires reverence, humility, and adherence to the prescribed gestures and postures that are imbued with deep meaning and tradition. Personal gestures or innovations, while well-intentioned, risk detracting from the unity and sacred rhythm of the liturgy.

1. Sitting: A Posture of Receptivity and Reverence

- *Scriptural Background:* In addition to Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus (Luke 10:39), sitting is also associated with instruction and learning in Scripture. For instance, Jesus "sat down" before delivering the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-2), a deliberate posture signaling the gravity of his teaching.
- *Meaning:* In the liturgy, sitting is not merely an act of resting, but it signifies receptivity and attentiveness. It is not a casual act but a posture of respect toward the Word of God and the one proclaiming it. The faithful are seated during the readings and homily to listen, meditate, and internalize the Word. It is a moment to open both the mind and heart to the Word of God and its transformative power.
- *How to Sit in the Liturgy:* Sitting should reflect reverence. This means sitting upright, with the body straightened, symbolizing the dignity of receiving the Word of God. A casual or slouched posture might inadvertently suggest indifference to the profound message being conveyed.
- *Why We Should Not Sit with Legs Crossed:* Crossing the legs can convey a casual or indifferent attitude, which is out of place during the sacred act of worship. While such a posture might be comfortable in everyday settings, during the liturgy it risks detracting from the sense of respect and attentiveness owed to the presence of God and His Word. An open and composed posture underscores our readiness to engage fully with the divine message being proclaimed.
- *Why It Is Used:* This posture underscores our role as disciples who come before God not only to worship but to learn, reflect, and respond to His call. This posture serves as a physical expression of the interior disposition of a disciple—attentive, reverent, and open to receiving the Word of God, the homily, or other moments of reflection during the liturgy.

2. The Exchange of the Sign of Peace

- *Scriptural Background:* The call to peace is deeply rooted in Scripture. Jesus tells his disciples, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you" (John 14:27). This offering of peace echoes throughout the New Testament, symbolizing reconciliation and unity.

- *Meaning:* The sign of peace during the liturgy embodies this divine call. It signifies our **intention to be reconciled with God and our neighbors** before we approach the altar of sacrifice.
- *Why It Is Used:* By exchanging the sign of peace, we acknowledge our **shared identity as children of God** and our commitment to communal unity. This gesture prepares us spiritually and relationally for the Eucharist.
- *How to exchange the sign of peace:* In order to **avoid a disruption to the rite**, the priest celebrant may exchange the sign of peace **only with others in the sanctuary** (GIRM 154). In the dioceses of the United States, for a good reason, on special occasions (for example, in the case of a funeral, wedding, or when civic leaders are present), the priest may offer the sign of peace to a few of the faithful near the sanctuary (GIRM 154, USA Adaptations). Similarly, **the assembly should retain its visible character of being one body in Christ** and not be disrupted by excessive movement. Thus, **“it is suitable that each person offer the sign of peace only to those nearby and in a dignified manner”** (GIRM 82).

3. The Orans Gesture

- *Scriptural Background:* The orans posture, with **hands uplifted in prayer**, is seen in several pivotal moments in Scripture. Moses raised his hands in intercession during the battle against Amalek *“As long as Moses kept his hands raised up, Israel had the better of the fight, but when he let his hands rest, Amalek had the better of the fight. Moses’ hands, however, grew tired; so they took a rock and put it under him and he sat on it. Meanwhile Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on one side and one on the other; so that his hands remained steady until sunset. 13And Joshua defeated Amalek and his people with the sword.”* (Exodus 17:11-12), and Solomon lifted his hands in prayer at the dedication of the Temple (1 Kings 8:22). Jesus himself used this gesture as he prayed in John 17, the High Priestly Prayer.
- *Meaning:* The orans posture **signifies supplication, openness to God, and the offering of prayer**. In the liturgy, this posture is uniquely reserved for the celebrant, as he acts *in persona Christi*, offering prayers on behalf of the congregation.
- *Why the Faithful Should Not Use It:* The Church, through the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM), reserves this posture for the priest to **maintain clear distinctions in roles**. When the laity adopts the orans posture, it not only causes confusion but also detracts from the celebrant's unique role in the liturgical celebration. (e.g. driving a bus)

4. Holding Hands During the Our Father

- *Clarification:* Holding hands during the Our Father is **not a prescribed posture in the liturgy**. While it may appear to foster unity, this gesture is an innovation not rooted in the Church's liturgical tradition.
- *Reasoning:* The beauty of the liturgy lies in its shared, **universal expressions**, which unite the faithful across time and space. **Personal additions, like holding hands, compromise this unity by introducing individualistic interpretations.**

- *Focus on Unity*: Standing as one body during the Our Father is a profound enough symbol of our unity in Christ. By adhering to the liturgical norms, we preserve the communal and sacred nature of this prayer.

5. Singing and Responding

- *Scriptural Background*: The act of singing as praise to God is woven throughout Scripture. The Psalms repeatedly exhort us: "Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day" (Psalm 96:2). After the Exodus, Moses and the Israelites sang a hymn of thanksgiving to God (Exodus 15:1-21). The apostles sang hymns at pivotal moments, including during the Last Supper (Matthew 26:30). Paul even instructs the faithful to "[address] one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart" (Ephesians 5:19).
- *The Purpose of Music in the Liturgy*: The music and singing in the liturgy serve a sacred purpose—they are **acts of communal worship and are not intended for entertainment or performance**. While the music should indeed be beautiful to reflect the glory and majesty of God, its beauty is directed towards uplifting the hearts of the congregation and glorifying the Lord, not towards entertaining or impressing an audience.
- *Unity in Worship*: **Singing is a uniquely unifying act**. It allows all participants in the liturgy to join their voices as one, demonstrating our shared faith and devotion. Music transcends language, culture, and individual differences, making it a powerful tool to unite the assembly in prayer and praise. Through singing together, **we harmonize not only our voices but also our hearts**, expressing as one body our thanksgiving, supplication, and adoration.
- *Joining Heaven and Earth*: In the liturgy, **we join with the choirs of angels in heaven in glorifying God**. The Book of Revelation vividly describes this heavenly worship: "*And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!'*" (Revelation 5:13). Our singing on earth echoes this eternal praise, reminding us that the liturgy is a participation in the heavenly banquet.
- *Why It Is Not About Performance*: In the liturgy, **there is no "audience" and no "performers"; rather, the entire assembly**—priest, choir, and congregation—joins in worship as active participants. By shifting the focus away from performance, we preserve the sacred and communal nature of liturgical singing, ensuring that it remains an offering to God rather than a display for others.
- *Meaning*: **Liturgical singing fosters active participation**, engages the assembly's heart and soul, and transcends earthly concerns to unite us with the heavenly liturgy. It expresses joy, thanksgiving, sorrow, and hope—all directed towards glorifying God as a community of believers.
- *Applauding during the liturgy*: While there may be rare occasions where applause is appropriate (e.g., after a special announcement or recognition), it is **generally discouraged during the Mass, as it shifts the focus from worship to human achievement**.

6. The Danger of Introducing Personal Gestures into the Liturgy

- *The Meaning of Liturgy*: As emphasized earlier, the liturgy is the public and communal act of worship, governed by the Church's authority. It is **not an occasion for individual expression but for collective participation.**
- *Unity Over Individual Expression*: Personal gestures, while well-meaning, **risk disrupting the unity and focus of the liturgy.** They can create distractions and detract from the sacred symbolism of the prescribed gestures and postures.
- *A Call to Obedience*: By conforming to the liturgical norms, **we demonstrate our obedience to the Church** and our commitment to the communal worship of God. This humility and discipline allow the liturgy to fully convey its divine purpose.

Conclusion

In closing, let us strive to understand and embrace the prescribed gestures of the liturgy as expressions of our shared faith and worship. By doing so, we honor God, deepen our participation in the sacred mysteries, and strengthen our unity as the Body of Christ.