

# How Prayer Looks



## Part 1

# Posture and Gesture

Visitors to Catholic churches immediately notice the look of prayer. They hear readings. They smell candles and incense. They see statues, vestments, and furnishings unfamiliar to them. But very often they remark about how prayer looks. People stand. They sit. They kneel. They genuflect and bow. The ministers move their arms and hands. The experience disorients many visitors. Everyone but them seems to know what to do.

“Why do you do that?” they ask. “Why do we do what?” Catholics may reply. The gestures and postures of the eucharist are so much a part of us that we often don’t notice what is so obvious to a visitor.

Like worshipers in many other spiritual traditions, Catholics use the body for prayer. We express what’s inside us with movements outside. Through movements outside we foster what’s inside.

As the Second Vatican Council explained, “Acclamations, responses, psalms, antiphons, hymns, as well as actions or gestures and bodily attitudes of the people are encouraged to promote active participation. A sacred silence should also be maintained at the proper time” (The Constitution on the Liturgy, 30). And again, “In view of the nature of the liturgy as an activity of the entire person and in view of the psychology of children, participation by

means of gestures and posture should be strongly encouraged in masses with children, with due regard for age and local customs” (*Directory for Masses with Children*, 33).

Gestures and postures are expressions. They work for the body the way words work in a language. Like language, their meaning varies from one culture to another, and often from one family to another. Some of them remain popular for generations; others fade away.

We use culturally defined gestures and postures daily. With a movement of your head you say yes or no. With a shrug of the shoulders you declare uncertainty. You express degrees of affection with a handshake, a touch, or a kiss. You roll your eyes in exasperation. You look up to recall. You wink to acknowledge a secret. You stand when someone enters the room. You stoop to learn from a child. You can do all this without saying a word.

Gestures and postures can express values. In the bible people stood for the elderly (Leviticus 19:32; 1 Kings 2:19). They bowed to greet a visitor (Genesis 19:1; 2 Kings 2:15). They grasped another’s feet to show respect (2 Kings 4:27; Matthew 28:9). They reclined at table for a formal meal (John 13:23).

Such actions enter into public worship, just as words do. The spoken and visible language of a people combine to enhance prayer.

Some signs change over time. Many gestures and postures for prayer in biblical times are uncommon today. Solomon knelt before the altar with hands outstretched toward heaven (1 Kings 8:54), as did Ezra (Ezra 9:5). During the covenant ceremony Abraham fell on his face before God (Genesis 17:2). Moses bowed his face to the earth when God replaced the broken tablets (Exodus 34:8), remaining prostrate in prayer for forty days and nights (Deuteronomy 9:18). A leper petitioned Jesus with face to the ground (Luke 5:12). Jairus fell at Jesus' feet to request healing for his daughter (Mark 5:22; Luke 8:41), as did the Syro-phoenician woman (Mark 7:25). Jesus threw himself on the ground when he prayed at Gethsemane (Matthew 26:39; Mark 14:35).

Some traditions from the early church have fallen into disuse. For example, Christians once prayed facing east. Clement of Alexandria (+215) noted that "the most ancient temples looked towards the west, so that people who stand with their face turned toward idols might be taught to turn to the east" (*Miscellaneous* 7). Tertullian (+220) lamented that some people thought Christians worshiped the sun. "This impression derives from what is well-known," he wrote; "we pray toward the place of the rising sun" (*Apology* 16). Origen (+253) wrote, "We ought to pray turned symbolically toward the east, as if the soul is looking at the rising of the true light" (*Prayer* 32). Basil (+379) agreed: "We all look to the east when we pray, but few people know that, facing it, we are searching for an ancient homeland, namely paradise, which God planted in Eden to the east" (*The Holy Spirit* 27). Today, however, we pray facing any direction.

Nor have we maintained other customs. For example, Cyril of Jerusalem (+387) recommended this at communion: "While your lips are still wet with the blood of Christ, touch it with your hands, and bless your eyes, forehead, and other organs of sense" (*Mystagogic Catechesis* 5:22).

Today the celebration of the eucharist involves an elaborate sequence of movement. Ministers execute quite a number of them.

✠ The priest kisses the altar, extends his arms when greeting, opens his arms to

pray, washes his hands, raises his arms to lift hearts at the eucharistic prayer, imposes his hands over the bread and wine and blesses them with the sign of the cross, elevates the consecrated bread and chalice for all to see, genuflects to the presence of Christ on the altar, breaks and pours the sacred elements for communion, drops a particle of the body of Christ into the blood, and blesses all with the sign of the cross.

✠ The deacon bows for a blessing before proclaiming the gospel, kisses the book afterwards, and mixes water into the wine.

✠ Others greet people at the door. Some carry incense, cross, candles, and the book of the gospels in procession. They hold the sacramentary. They take up the collection and prepare the altar. A song-leader may gesture for all to sing.

The gestures and postures of the assembly fit this context. They demonstrate individual and common prayer. Together we make movements which give the eucharist its strikingly prayerful look. A visitor is likely to ask, "Why?"

The reasons are simple. Prayer is our communication with God. Humans use spoken language and bodily movements to communicate. When we pray we do the same. Every genuflection, bow, and sign of the cross aims to communicate an interior disposition in an exterior way. Our gestures and postures can also help when prayer becomes difficult. They may create the interior disposition we seek. These traditional actions also join us to ages past. Prayer draws us into a spiritual realm beyond time and place. Gestures and posture transport us to where and when there is no there and then, in order to meet God.

# How Prayer Looks



## Part 2

## Our Gestures

**H**ead, knee, waist, hand, tongue—we use these parts of the body and more whenever we participate at eucharist. The instructions for mass, while detailing the responsibilities of ministers, also guide each worshiper. We participate not just with words, but also with gestures.

Compared to the instructions for the ministers, the rubrics for the assembly are simple and few. Our liturgical books expect these cherished gestures because of scriptural precedent, tradition, and expressiveness of the ritual.

**The Profound Bow.** The proper reverence shown to the altar is a bow from the waist. “A bow of the body, or deep bow, is made to the altar if there is no tabernacle with the blessed sacrament on the altar” (*Ceremonial of Bishops* [CB] 68, *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* [GIRM] 275b). “A deep bow is made to the altar by all who enter the sanctuary (chancel), leave it, or pass before the altar” (CB 72). Consequently, on entering the church, if the tabernacle stands apart from the altar, we bow from the waist toward the altar.

We also make a profound bow during the creed at the words “by the power of the Holy Spirit” (GIRM 137).

The profound bow appeared in worship in the Hebrew scriptures. When Moses entered the sacred tent, the people stood and bowed (Exodus 33:10). When the Israelites offered

their first fruits, they bowed to the Lord (Deuteronomy 26:10). When a prince made his offering at the temple (Ezekiel 46:2), he bowed at the gate. The psalmist promised to bow on entering God’s house (Psalms 5:7; 138:2) and hoped all nations would bow before the Lord (86:9).

The early church bowed in worship. Tertullian wrote, “At other times every day, or at least at the first prayer with which we enter the daylight, who would hesitate to bow to God?” (*Prayer* 23). Caesarius of Arles (+542) encouraged the deep bow at the eucharist: “Whenever a prayer is said by clerics at the altar or prayer is enjoined by the deacon’s announcement, you should faithfully bow not only your hearts but also your bodies” (Sermon 77). Even the sick were to curve the back and lower the head (Sermon 76).

**The Bow of the Head.** Prior to receiving holy communion, the communicant bows his or her head before the sacrament as a gesture of reverence. (GIRM 160) At the conclusion of the eucharist, the deacon (or priest) invites the people to bow their heads for God’s blessing. We also use this gesture of humility and respect when pronouncing the names of the Trinity, of Jesus, Mary, and the saint in whose honor mass is celebrated (GIRM 275a; CB 68).

In scripture, bowing the head could signify

fasting (Isaiah 58:5). The deacon's invitation can be found as early as the *Apostolic Constitutions* (c. 370–380): “Bow and receive a blessing” (8:6).

**The Genuflection.** Made by bending the right knee toward the ground (CB 69), a genuflection signifies adoration. “No one who enters a church should fail to adore the blessed sacrament, either by visiting the blessed sacrament chapel or at least by genuflecting. Similarly, those who pass before the blessed sacrament genuflect” (CB 71; GIRM 274).

We genuflect on other occasions. During the creed on the Annunciation and Christmas we genuflect when normally we would bow (GIRM 137). We genuflect toward the cross between the adoration on Good Friday and the beginning of the Easter Vigil (CB 69).

This gesture developed as a variation on kneeling. The genuflections of the priest during mass were adapted by the faithful at other times.

**The Sign of the Cross.** At the very beginning of mass the priest and the faithful make the sign of the cross together (GIRM 124). The sign is made by touching fingers of one hand to the forehead, the heart, the left shoulder, and then the right.

It is a tradition to sign ourselves on entering the church after dipping our hand in holy water as a reminder of baptism (CB 110). At the gospel after the deacon traces the cross with his thumb on the book, we all mark ourselves in the same way on the forehead, mouth, and heart (GIRM 134; CB 74).

Tertullian encouraged this sign to sanctify everyday deeds: “At every step and forward motion, at every arrival and departure, when putting on shoes, at the bath, at meals, when lighting lamps, at the bed, when sitting still—whatever common thing occupies us, we mark our forehead with the sign of the cross” (*The Soldier's Crown* 3). Augustine (+430) wrote, “Unless the sign of the cross of Christ is made on the foreheads of the faithful, or on the very water by which they are reborn, or on the oil by which they are anointed with chrism, or on the sacrifice by which they are nourished, none of these is correctly completed” (*Tract on John* 118).

The gospel signations entered the liturgy between the ninth and the eleventh century.

**Striking the Breast.** When reciting penitential rite A (“I confess to almighty God. . .”), we strike our breast at the admission of our sins.

This gesture of humility and sorrow appears in the parable of the tax collector (Luke 18:13) and the description of those who witnessed the crucifixion (Luke 23:48). Augustine's community beat their breasts as an exterior sign of chastising an interior sin (Sermon 17:1).

**The Presentation of the Gifts.** After the liturgy of the word, we present bread, wine, and gifts for the church and the poor (GIRM 73; 140).

The collection and presentation of gifts for the eucharist and the poor are most ancient. The apostolic community held goods in common (Acts 2:44–45; 4:32–34). Justin (+165) reported that the faithful gathered gifts at the eucharist for distribution to the needy (1 *Apology* 67).

**The Sign of Peace.** The deacon may invite all present to exchange a sign of peace (GIRM 154). Free in its form, it signifies the love of those gathered in the name of Christ.

Tertullian called for a kiss of peace at every religious observance (*Prayer* 18). In Justin the sign of peace concluded the liturgy of the word (1 *Apology* 65). Gradually it moved closer to the Lord's Prayer, attracted by its prayer for forgiveness.

These gestures draw us into the celebration of the eucharist, but none is more expressive than the reception of communion. In this gesture, which involves so much of the body, the whole person expresses the faith of the body of Christ.

# How Prayer Looks



## Part 3

### Our Postures

**W**hen the guest of honor appears, everyone stands. To start dinner everyone sits. At the national anthem all stand. To stand or sit as a group expresses a union of hearts and purpose.

Regarding posture at mass, “A common posture, to be observed by all participants, is a sign of the unity of the members of the Christian community gathered for the Sacred Liturgy: it both expresses and fosters the intention and spiritual attitude of the participants.” (GIRM 42).

**Standing.** The main posture for mass is standing. “The faithful should stand from the beginning of the Entrance chant, or while the priest approaches the altar, until the end of the Collect; for the Alleluia chant before the Gospel; while the Gospel itself is proclaimed; during the Profession of Faith and the Prayer of the Faithful; from the invitation, *Orate, fratres* (Pray, brethren), before the prayer over the offerings until the end of Mass,” except at the places indicated below (GIRM 43). When standing for the gospel all should face the reader (CB 74). We also stand when the deacon incenses people (CB 149). We stand for the eucharistic prayer on occasion when we are prevented from kneeling “by the lack of space, the number of people present, or some other good reason” (GIRM 43).

The scriptures testify that people stood for

prayer. Phinehas stood to pray about a plague (Psalm 106:30). Israel stood to confess sin (Nehemiah 9:2) and to bless God (9:5). Ezra stood to read the scripture and the people stood to hear (Nehemiah 8:5). Jeremiah stood to petition God (Jeremiah 18:20). Jesus knew about standing for prayer (Matthew 6:5; Mark 11:25). He stood to read scripture (Luke 4:16) and to instruct (Luke 6:17). In his parable both the pharisee and the tax collector stood for prayer in the temple (Luke 18:11–13). John envisioned a multitude standing to praise the Lamb of God (Revelation 7:9). As individuals, in groups, as ministers and as assembly, people in the scriptures stood for prayer.

The first Christians stood for prayer to express respect, attention, and readiness; however, they reinterpreted standing as a sign of the resurrection. Tertullian (+220) restricted kneeling: “We regard fasting or kneeling to adore unlawful on the Lord’s Day. We enjoy the same privilege from Easter up to Pentecost” (*The Crown* 3). The Council of Nicaea (325) legislated the same: “Although there are certain people kneeling on Sundays and on the days of the Easter season, it pleases the holy council to perform prayers to the Lord standing, so that all things may be observed harmoniously in all places” (Canon 20). Artwork adorning the catacombs depicts people

standing at prayer with arms raised. Basil (+379) explained, "When we pray standing we remind ourselves of the grace given to us on the day of resurrection, not only because having been raised with Christ we ought to seek the things that are above, but that this day may seem an image in some way of the age to come" (*The Holy Spirit* 27). An anonymous work (c. 400) says, "We do not kneel on Sundays as a sign of the resurrection through which we have been freed from sins by the grace of Christ" (*Questions to the Orthodox* 115). Jerome (+419) wrote, "The Easter season is a time of joy and victory when we neither kneel nor bow toward the earth, but rising with the Lord, we are raised up to the heights of heaven" (*Letter to the Ephesians* Prologue). Our eucharistic prayers recall this custom when they thank God for counting us "worthy to stand" and give praise. Standing, then, expressed faith in resurrection.

***Kneeling.*** In the United States we kneel for most of the eucharistic prayer: "they [the faithful] should kneel beginning after the singing or recitation of the *Sanctus* until after the *Amen* of the Eucharistic Prayer, except when prevented on occasion by reasons of health, lack of space, the large number of people present, or some other good reason." (GIRM 43)

In the scriptures people often knelt for prayer. The Old Testament mentions several examples: 1 Kings 8:54; 2 Chronicles 6:13; Ezra 9:5; Psalm 95:6; Isaiah 45:23; Daniel 6:10. In the New Testament Jesus knelt to pray in the garden (Luke 22:41). Suppliants knelt before Jesus: the rich young man to ask for advice (Mark 10:17), lepers seeking a cure (Matthew 8:2; Mark 1:40), a Canaanite woman desiring health for her daughter (Matthew 15:25), a man for his son (Matthew 17:14), and the mother of the sons of Zebedee for favors for her children (Matthew 20:20). Peter confessed his sinfulness to Jesus on his knees (Luke 5:8). Stephen knelt to pray forgiveness for those stoning him (Acts 7:60). Peter prayed kneeling before raising Tabitha from the dead (Acts 9:40). Paul knelt to pray before his departure, once with the elders of Ephesus (Acts 20:36) and again with disciples in Tyre (Acts 21:5). Paul prayed for the Ephesians on his knees (Ephesians 3:14) and summoned every knee to bend at the name of Jesus (Philippians 2:10). In the bible people knelt in praise, petition,

and contrition, more often as individuals but sometimes in groups.

At mass kneeling has changed over time. At first it was penitential. Tertullian wrote, "On fast and stationary days, no prayer should be celebrated without kneeling and other customs of humility" (*Prayer* 23). Origen (+253) agreed: "It must be known that kneeling is also necessary when petitioners name their sins before God so that they may be forgiven and healed of them" (*Prayer* 31). When Eusebius (+339) told of an army that prayed kneeling, he called it the customary posture for prayer (*The History of the Church* 5:5). Around 950, people knelt for prayers at the deacon's invitation and stood afterwards, a custom we keep on Good Friday. Eucharistic devotions in the thirteenth century influenced the faithful to kneel during the eucharistic prayer and the distribution of communion, which they received only rarely. Because people now receive communion more frequently, today mass no longer calls for kneeling during communion.

***Sitting.*** "They [the faithful] should, however, sit while the readings before the Gospel and the responsorial Psalm are proclaimed and for the homily and while the Preparation of the Gifts at the Offertory is taking place; and, as circumstances allow, they may sit or kneel while the period of sacred silence after Communion is observed." (GIRM 43, 128)

The scriptures record few examples of ritual sitting. David sat to pray about building the temple (2 Samuel 7:18). Jesus sat to teach (Matthew 5:1, 26:55; Luke 2:46, 4:20). Martha's sister Mary sat to hear Jesus (Luke 10:39).

At first, people did not sit at church until the gradual introduction of ledges and pews about the thirteenth century. Instructions for sitting originally pertained to ministers. Now all sit to hear readings and instruction, to prepare for the eucharistic prayer, and to thank God for the eucharist.

Our postures at mass express the significance of our activity. They affirm our solidarity in faith and mission.

# How Prayer Looks



## Part 4

# Adapted Postures and Gestures

**C**ustom has introduced additional postures and gestures which do not appear in the rubrics for mass. Catholic worship so integrates the body that people spontaneously or traditionally add to the repertoire of postures and gestures. The widespread use of adaptations indicates the flowering of a spirituality which fosters prayer not just by speech but also by action. The look of prayer in the Roman tradition continues to evolve as we improvise ways to express our belief.

Some of these adapted postures and gestures are so traditional that many people assume they exist in the rubrics. However both the rubrics and the tradition contribute to the way prayer looks at mass.

The rubrics themselves acknowledge the development of local customs. "It is up to the Conferences of Bishops to decide on the adaptations indicated in this General Instruction and in the Order of Mass ..." (GIRM 390). "These adaptations include the gestures and posture of the faithful..." (*Directory for Masses with Children* [DMC] 33). Thus, some traditions which develop within a region may later enter the rubrics.

**Posture.** Alternate postures appear for various reasons. Sometimes we choose them to express an interior attitude. For example, before mass begins, a worshiper who has located a seat

commonly kneels for a time in prayer and then sits in anticipation for the service to begin. The rubrics give no direction for postures before the eucharist begins.

Sometimes people choose a posture erroneously. For example, Catholics who know well which postures to assume during mass may become disoriented at a funeral or a wedding and neglect what they customarily do.

Sometimes a physical disability prevents someone from joining the posture of others. A person who uses a wheelchair or whose knees ache may not be able to stand or kneel even though they compose their hearts in union with everyone else.

**Hands.** People often use their hands to create additional gestures during the eucharist. For example, in some cultures people conclude the sign of the cross by kissing their thumb. Sometimes people sign themselves where the ritual does not specifically call for it, for example when the minister sprinkles them with holy water or imparts the blessing at the end of mass. Many sign themselves with holy water on leaving the church even though the rubrics give no such direction.

Sometimes the use of hands appears spontaneous. After the priest gestures while saying, "The Lord be with you," a worshiper might repeat the gesture while answering, "And also

with you.” Some strike their breast during the elevation of the consecrated bread and wine or when saying or singing “have mercy on us” during the Lamb of God or the Glory to God. Sometimes the songleader invites everyone to make a gesture with the music. Sometimes people use their hands to applaud.

We also use our hands in different ways to indicate prayer. Some fold their hands, fingers to fingers, thumbs crossed. Others cup their hands together, the fingers of one hand resting between the thumb and forefinger of the other. Some may imitate the traditional gesture of the priest, lifting up arms outstretched to the sides and hands open toward the sky. Others may join hands with their neighbors, for example at the Lord’s Prayer, and raise them during the acclamation which follows it. Examples of lifting hands for prayer abound in the scriptures (Exodus 9:29, 33; Psalms 28:2, 44:21, 134:2; Isaiah 1:15; and 1 Timothy 2:8). Tertullian (+220) wrote, “Not only do we raise our hands, but we stretch them out imitating the suffering of the Lord, and while praying we confess Christ” (*Prayer* 14).

People may at times extend their arms forward, palms down, to pray a blessing for another person. This gesture appears in the book of Exodus to invoke the power of God (14:21, 17:11–12). Clergy often use it for blessings and might invite others to join in extending hands or imposing hands on one who seeks the community’s prayer.

*Eyes.* No rubrics govern the direction of our eyes at prayer, but traditions have developed. When assuming an attitude of prayer, Catholics may bow their heads and lower or close their eyes. During the elevation the priest shows the sacred elements to the people, who direct their eyes toward them. People may also imitate the example of Jesus who raised his eyes to pray at the miracle of the loaves (Matthew 14:19; Mark 6:41; Luke 9:16), the raising of Lazarus (John 11:41), and at the Last Supper (John 17:1). Origen (+253) preferred this approach:

“Although there are countless dispositions of the body, without a doubt the one in which hands are extended and eyes are lifted up should be preferred above all by the one who bears in the body as it were an image of those things which correspond to the soul through prayer” (*Prayer* 31).

*Head.* Catholics often bow the head in prayer. If they stand during the eucharistic prayer they may bow with the priest’s genuflections after the elevations. Some bow at the invitation “Let us pray.” They may also lift the head and face the ministers to hear and heed the scriptures and prayers.

So important are gestures to our prayer, that even unintentional ones may carry more significance than we intend. Standing with arms crossed or hands in pockets; handling umbrellas, purses, or toys; opening up the parish bulletin or diocesan paper—all these send signals of inattention as expressive as the ritual gestures we so richly employ. They can diminish the assembly’s experience of prayer. Even well-intentioned actions may cause confusion, like kneeling after communion and genuflecting to statues or during the sprinkling of holy water.

Even though the rubrics do not specifically direct all the occasions for action, gesture, and posture, Catholics have adapted and adopted many. As our spoken vocabulary grows and changes, so do our postures and gestures.

# How Prayer Looks



## Part 5

# The Communion Rite

**S**ince actions communicate as meaningfully as words do, the highlight of the eucharist, the reception of communion, uses a broad range of postures and gestures. Together they help individuals and the community celebrate our faith in the body and blood of Christ.

The communion rite begins with the Lord's Prayer and ends with the communion prayer. It follows the eucharistic prayer and precedes the rites of dismissal.

*The Lord's Prayer.* We begin the communion rite with the prayer we received from Jesus. It is our most ancient and authentic prayer; it establishes our communion with Catholics of ages past and with all Christians who share our baptism. It also unifies the community gathered around this altar of sacrifice, who will share communion from this table. It is a perfect preparation for the eucharist.

We stand for the Lord's Prayer, assuming the most traditional posture of Christian prayer. Standing affirms our faith in the resurrection, a faith we celebrated in baptism and which opened the door for our sharing in the eucharist.

Our hands, head, and eyes may also express our prayer. Some people fold their hands. Some raise them. Some join them with their neighbor. Some raise their heads; others bow. Some lift their eyes; others lower or close them. When the community adopts the same

posture for prayer we more deeply express our union. But even when people choose different gestures, their hearts may still unite by bringing bodies and minds to attentive prayer.

*Sign of Peace.* The priest extends his hands to pray for peace and unity. Then he extends and joins them to wish peace to us all. He or the deacon may then invite us to share a sign of peace.

We may choose whatever sign feels right. We may kiss. We may shake hands or embrace. Some communities provide ample time to express with many others the abundance of God's love. Others choose a simpler indication of a profound mystery.

*Breaking of the Bread.* Hands break the sacred bread and pour the holy cups. They unveil the symbol of unity. We sing the Lamb of God. The priest places part of the consecrated bread into the chalice.

After the Lamb of God, all kneel unless the local bishop has retained the more universal custom of standing. The priest prays quietly his preparation for communion.

*Communion.* The priest genuflects and raises the bread of life to invite us to the table. We profess our unworthiness and the priest reverently consumes the body and blood of Christ.

A procession forms. We, the body of Christ, form a body in procession, to receive the body

and blood of Christ in communion. We move our entire selves. Processing toward the altar, we demonstrate our willingness to journey in faith, to advance toward God, to accept completely God's will. We sing, uniting our voices even as we unite our bodies in this act of faith and charity.

As we approach communion the ritual asks us to make a reverent bow. (GIRM 160) We stand to receive, again proclaiming our faith in the resurrection, the great mystery toward which this communion beckons.

We may receive the body of Christ in our mouth or in our hands. Either way, we come as beggars, mouths agape, hands expectantly pleading. We do not take the body of Christ from the minister; the minister gives it to us. It is God's gift to us.

Cyril of Jerusalem (+387) wrote,

When you come forward, don't come with arms open or fingers parted. Make your left hand a throne for your right since your right hand is about to welcome a king. In the cup of your palm receive the body of Christ, saying, 'Amen'. Then carefully... consume it, careful not to drop any of it. For what you lose is like the loss of part of your own body. Tell me, if someone gave you gold nuggets, would you not hold them with the greatest attention, careful not to drop and lose any? Should you not then take greater care not to drop a fragment of something more valuable than gold and precious stones?

After communion of the body of Christ, go to receive also the chalice of his blood.... Bow your head to show your adoration and reverence, and say "Amen", and make yourself holy by receiving also the blood of Christ.... Then waiting for the prayer, give thanks to God who has judged you worthy of such great mysteries (*Mystagogic Catechesis* 5:21–22).

We are encouraged to receive also the blood of Christ. Jesus himself asked his disciples to receive both his body and blood at the Last Supper and during his discourse on the bread of life: "Unless you eat my body and drink my blood you have no life in you" (John 6:53). The General Instruction says, "Holy Communion has a fuller form as a sign when it is distributed

under both kinds. For in this form the sign of the eucharistic banquet is more clearly evident and clear expression is given to the divine will by which the new and eternal Covenant is ratified in the Blood of the Lord, as also the relationship between the Eucharistic banquet and the eschatological banquet in the Father's Kingdom." (GIRM 240). When receiving, we bow in reverence before we accept the cup from the minister. We take a sip and return the cup. The ones receiving communion should not themselves dip the body of Christ into the blood of Christ; we do not take—we always receive.

At communion, our hands should be freed from encumbrance—purses, car keys, even hymnals. Nothing should keep us from giving our full attention to communion of the body and blood of Christ.

After receiving communion, we remain standing, singing the hymn, while others continue the procession. Our posture shows our respect for others still receiving communion, expresses our union as a community of believers, affirms our faith in the resurrection, and shows our attention to this action of the eucharist.

*Period of Silence or Song of Praise.* After communion we may be seated or kneel for a period of silence or sing a song of praise. (GIRM 43)

*Prayer after Communion.* Finally we rise for the communion prayer. As the priest opens his hands, we stand with him to pray that this eucharist may have an enduring effect.

During the communion rite, we employ our hands, heads, arms, legs, mouths, voices—indeed our entire selves. So complete is our faith in Christ, so thorough our devotion, so sincere our intention to live what we believe, that we cannot be still. We stand, we bow, we sing, we sit. We celebrate the presence of the one who made us, who lives within us, and who summons us toward our eternal home.