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## UNDERSTANDING THE MASS AND THE GENERAL INSTRUCTION OF THE ROMAN MISSAL

### What does GIRM say about posture during the Eucharistic Prayer?

In the previous five bulletin inserts on GIRM we discussed, first, what GIRM is and then we discussed what it says about each of the four major divisions of Mass. These next three inserts deal with three specific pastoral issues that seem to cause confusion in many parishes in the United States. Now the task gets a bit more difficult. It will not be enough simply to report what GIRM says because in the cases of these specific issues the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has made additional decisions for the whole conference and some decisions have even been left to a bishop for his diocese. Hence, it is not possible to speak of a uniform practice across the whole country. This causes concern for some and hopefully these bulletin inserts will help everyone understand better.

#### Posture during Mass

GIRM deals with postures during Mass in three specific paragraphs (nos. 42 to 44) and then makes additional comments in other places. In

introductory remarks GIRM states that the gestures and postures of all who participate add dignity and “noble simplicity” to the whole rite, help interpret the meaning of specific elements, and foster active participation. Further, “uniformity in posture” is a sign of the unity of the assembly gathered for liturgy and “expresses and fosters” “the spiritual attitude” of those participating.

Another important general point about posture is that each conference of bishops is granted the task to adapt the general norms of GIRM according to the custom already observed in a conference, making sure that the posture is consistent with the meaning of what is taking place. Therefore, two points about posture must be kept in mind: first, GIRM states a general norm about posture but permits adaptations according to local custom; second, because adaptations are permitted, one cannot expect uniform posture from country to country. In the United States some decisions have even been left to bishops in their individual dioceses, and so one cannot expect uniformity even from diocese to diocese.

Within a diocese, however, the decisions of the bishop are to be observed so there should be a reasonable uniformity of posture from parish to parish. We say “reasonable” because there will always be exceptions; for example, when kneeling isn’t possible because of “health, lack of space, the number of people present, or some other good reason.”

#### Posture during the Eucharistic Prayer

The broadest statement of GIRM concerning posture lays out those times when the assembly is to stand, sit, or kneel (no. 43). The assembly stands during the entire Liturgy of the Eucharist except the assembly kneels at the consecration (unless prevented by health, space, numbers, or other good reason). If a posture other than kneeling is assumed, the members of the assembly are to bow when the presider genuflects after each elevation. Later in paragraph 43 GIRM states that wherever it has been the custom, it is laudable for the people to kneel from after singing the Holy, Holy, Holy to the great Amen.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops approved on November 14, 2001, adaptations to GIRM, a document which was subsequently confirmed by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments on April 17, 2002, and became particular law for the United States on April 25, 2002. Accordingly, the posture during the Eucharistic Prayer adopted by the U.S. bishops is to kneel from after singing the Holy, Holy, Holy until after the great Amen (with the same exceptions as noted above; the bishops reiterated that the faithful should bow after the consecrations, as GIRM specified).



### Why the controversy?

Standing and kneeling are two postures that express very different spiritual sentiments, standing being a posture of respect and kneeling being a posture of humility. For the first millennium of

the Church standing was the norm during all of Mass (there were no provisions in the church space for sitting); the people stood with the presider and usually assumed the presider's gestures (such as bowing or raising one's arms in prayer). By the time Eucharistic piety was heightened in the thirteenth century and the elevations of the Eucharistic bread and chalice were introduced into Mass (because the assembly no longer regularly received Communion), kneeling during the Eucharistic Prayer (called "canon" then) became the norm in the Western Church, a posture which expressed not only the humility of the assembly but also was a way for the assembly to honor the Blessed Sacrament. However, even during the Middle Ages kneeling wasn't always the posture during the Eucharistic Prayer; standing was still prescribed for Sundays, Easter season, and special feasts.

The U.S. bishops have adopted the posture of kneeling during the Eucharistic Prayer. However, circumstances will always dictate that this cannot always be the posture of all. In places where the assembly stands on occasion, perhaps it would be well to remember that this is truly a posture of respect and, indeed, the ancient posture for all during the Eucharistic Prayer.

### For prayer and reflection

My own spiritual sentiment about standing is . . .  
about kneeling is . . .

My honor and love of the Blessed Sacrament is expressed in these ways . . .

I find myself negatively judging another and becoming embroiled in controversy when . . .

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