

- Why do we bow before receiving Communion?
- Why do we use the bible readings we do?

## Q&A on the Mass

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*This month's Faith Formation Monthly will be dedicated to answering questions about why we do what we do at Mass. Dr. Christopher Burgwald, Director of Adult Faith Formation for the Diocese of Sioux Falls, will answer seven common questions about the Mass. Christopher and Germaine Burgwald have three children and are members of St. Lambert Parish.*

### Why do we genuflect when we come into Church?

The first thing we need to address is why we gesture at all... one might ask, why don't we just sit in the pews for the entire Mass? We use bodily gestures because they are symbolic ways of doing and communicating things. Think about the idea of body language... you can often tell what someone is thinking based on their body language. Or consider a soldier who sometimes must stand at

"attention", and other times can stand "at ease". Someone's posture indicates what they are doing or thinking. In other words, gestures are a natural and regular part of human interaction and communication; using gestures is, in a sense, part of what it means to be human. The Church takes this up as well: in the Mass, we use various gestures to communicate what we believe. In this case,

genuflection is a gesture used in adoration of God. When we come to Church, we are coming into God's presence in a very real way, because He is present in the tabernacle, under the appearance of the Eucharistic bread. When we genuflect, we genuflect towards the tabernacle, because Jesus Christ, God made man, is dwelling there, in our very midst.

### Why do we sit, stand, and kneel at various times during Mass?

As noted above, gestures are part of human interaction and communication, and the Church takes them up into her own worship. The gestures we use in church come from a variety of cultures, the first and foremost being the Jewish culture in which Christianity began. In that tradition, sitting was the posture one adopted when being taught, and so we sit during the readings from the Bible and during the homily. In that tradition, standing is the posture taken during prayer, and so at Mass—unlike what we might do when praying before Mass

or at our bedside—we stand when we are called to pray or to proclaim our faith. (We also stand at the Gospel reading because it is the words of Jesus which are proclaimed at that



time, and the posture of standing indicates greater reverence than does sitting.) Kneeling is a posture for adoration, and so we kneel when God becomes present on the altar during the Eucharistic prayer, when the bread and wine are transformed into Jesus Christ. So our gestures mimic our words, meaning that what

we are doing mentally and/or vocally—listening, learning, praying, adoration, etc.—is echoed by what we are doing bodily.

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## Why do we use the bible readings we do?

The readings used at Mass were revised after the Second Vatican Council in the 1960's, and now follow a three-year cycle. This means that the readings for each and every Sunday are pre-determined; in fact, it is possible at anytime to know what readings will be used on any Sunday in the future. The cycle follows this pattern: at each Sunday, there are three readings: the first from the Old Testament (except during the Easter season, when the first reading is from the Acts of the



Apostles), the second from one of the New Testament letters or the Book of Revelation, and the third from one of the Four Gospels. In addition, there is always a responsorial psalm proclaimed, chanted, or sung at Mass after the first reading. Over the course of this cycle, the majority of the Bible is read: if we attend Mass every Sunday, we will hear almost every word of the Gospels, the vast majority of the rest of the New Testament, and a substantial portion of the Old Testament.

## Why is the bell rung during Mass?

The bell is rung at the moment of consecration: the moment during Mass when the bread (and then the wine) becomes the body and blood of Jesus Christ. The tradition of ringing a bell at that moment comes from a time when the prayers said by the priest at that moment were said quietly, perhaps inaudibly to most of the congregation; the ringing of the bell called attention to

the fact that the consecration was occurring at that moment, so that the people would know that this was the moment of consecration. Although the Eucharistic prayer is no longer said quietly, many parishes (like St. Lambert) continue to ring the bells at the moment of consecration, to remind the people of what is occurring.

## Why do we pray the same prayers all the time?

Just as gestures are a natural part of being human, so too is ritual and repetition; think about the beginning and end of each day: almost everyone has a particular routine which they go through, which might involve personal hygiene, eating, etc. By doing things in the same order, we are able to more easily go about our day. The same is true of the prayers of the Mass which remain the same week to week: by using the same prayers, it is actually easier for us to enter into the prayers than if they were always new. Consider this: when someone is saying something we've never heard before, we need to pay attention to what is being said and internalize it. If it's a prayer that's being said, and a prayer that we are supposed to make our own, then we must listen, understand, internalize, and make our own the prayer being said; by the time we do that with one particular thought in the prayer, the person leading the prayer is probably a couple thoughts ahead, and we're playing catch-up! On the other hand, if we already know what the prayer is, then the listening, understanding, and internalizing portions of the process are either significantly shortened or altogether unnecessary: we already know what is going to be said, and so we are more easily able to truly pray the prayer. In other words, ritualized prayer makes praying easier.

## Why don't we say or sing the Gloria or Alleluia sometimes?

During the Advent and Lenten seasons, both the Gloria and the Gospel Alleluia are omitted, because these seasons are penitential seasons. Because these prayers are in a sense more joyful, they are not used during the solemnity of these two penitential seasons.

## Why do we bow before receiving Communion?



Prior to the Second Vatican Council, Catholics knelt at a communion rail to receive Holy Communion; recall that kneeling is a posture of adoration, and hence it was fitting that one would kneel when receiving Jesus Christ. After

the Council, however, we were allowed to stand to receive Holy Communion, but the Church still asked that some sign of reverence be made prior to receiving Jesus. Because many Catholics were not aware that such a sign was called for, a few years ago the bishops of the United States

reminded us that we were to make such a sign of reverence, and further indicated that that sign was to be a reverential bow made prior to receiving Jesus in Holy Communion.