



Episode 21: Bows in the Liturgy

SUMMARY

The liturgy is comprised not only of words and music, it also includes gestures. These, too, are sacramental signs because they show in a visible way the hidden devotion of our hearts. A bow signifies reverence or honor to persons or the symbols that represent these persons.

There are two types of bows in the Roman Rite. A simple bow of the head is made during the naming of the Persons of the Blessed Trinity, at the name of Jesus, at the naming of the Blessed Virgin, the saint of the day and even the patron saint. A simple bow of the head is made by the communicant before the reception of Holy Communion.

A profound bow, or a bow of the body is made by the priest on several occasions during Mass: in the preparation of the Offerings, in Eucharistic Prayer I, and sometimes in reverence to the altar.

A profound bow is made by the deacon, when asks the priest's blessing before reading the Gospel.

The profound bow is made by all the ministers and the assembly during the Creed when we say the words that recall Christ's incarnation.

We Catholics put into our bodies what we believe. The profound reverence for God, for Christ, for the mysteries we celebrate is manifest in our bodies whenever we bow.

The Roman Missal

A bow signifies reverence and honor shown to the persons themselves or to the signs that represent them. There are two kinds of bow: a bow of the head and a bow of the body.

a) A bow of the head is made when the three Divine Persons are named together and at the names of Jesus, of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and of the Saint in whose honor Mass is being celebrated.

b) A bow of the body, that is to say, a profound bow, is made to the altar; [...] in the Creed [...]; in the Roman Canon [...] The same kind of bow is made by the Deacon when he asks for a blessing before the proclamation of the Gospel. In addition, the Priest bows slightly as he pronounces the words of the Lord at the Consecration.

General Instruction, n.º. 275

When receiving Holy Communion, the communicant bows his or her head before the

Sacrament as a gesture of reverence and receives the Body of the Lord from the minister. The consecrated host may be received either on the tongue or in the hand, at the discretion of each communicant. When Holy Communion is received under both kinds, the sign of reverence is also made before receiving the Precious Blood.

General Instruction, n° 160

IN THE TRADITION

“God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Philippians 2:9-11

“He is the Lord our God. And what are we? We need to know, if we are to fall down before him without fear. We are the people of his pasture.”

Saint Augustine
Exposition on Psalm 95 (94)

THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH

✠ “The human body shares in the dignity of the ‘image of God’: it is a human body precisely because it is animated by a spiritual soul, and it is the whole human person that is intended to become, in the body of Christ, a temple of the Spirit.”

Catechism of the Catholic Church, n° 364

✠ “We learn from the same Apostle that we must always bear about in our body the dying of Jesus, so that the life also of Jesus may be made manifest in our bodily frame. This is why we

ask the Lord in the sacrifice of the Mass that, ‘receiving the offering of the spiritual victim,’ he may fashion us for himself ‘as an eternal gift.’”

Sacrosanctum Concilium, n° 12

✠ “To promote active participation, the people should be encouraged to take part by means of acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons, and songs, as well as by actions, gestures, and bodily attitudes. And at the proper times all should observe a reverent silence.”

Sacrosanctum Concilium, n° 30

IN THE PRAYER OF THE CHURCH

All the earth shall bow down before you,
O God,
and shall sing to you,
shall sing to your name, O Most High!

Entrance Antiphon, Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Pour out a spirit of compunction, O God,
on those who bow before your majesty,
and by your mercy may they merit the rewards
you promise
to those who do penance.

Prayer over the People, Ash Wednesday

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What do bows, genuflections, and prostrations have in common?
2. How can we connect external actions with our interior devotion?

FOR FURTHER READING

Klemens Richter, *The Meaning of Sacramental Symbols: Answers to Today's Questions*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990).