

When Should We Bow and When Should We Genuflect at Mass?

Bows and genuflections are two of a variety of bodily gestures used by human beings over the centuries to honor individuals and objects in religious as well as secular settings. Similar external signs of respect are still common in various contexts. For example, in many cultures, including the United States, people regularly stand when a dignitary enters a room and soldiers salute an officer, both of which gestures are understood as signs of respect.

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM), presents norms about the actions used to express reverence and respect at Mass, and includes directions about when to genuflect (no. 274) and when to bow (no. 275). In addition to these two gestures of respect, reverence, and adoration, the kiss is also used to honor the altar and the Book of the Gospels (no. 273).

The GIRM (no. 298) reminds us of the ancient tradition of seeing the altar as representing Christ, the Living Stone (cf. 1 Peter 2:4). Because of this association, [within the Liturgy of the Mass] a bow of the body is prescribed as the normal gesture made toward the altar, as if toward Christ himself. In particular, all the ministers bow toward the altar when they arrive at the sanctuary [before entering it and] before leaving the sanctuary. The priest or deacon also bows during other moments during the Mass, for example, when preparing to proclaim the gospel. This “**profound bow**” is also made by the entire assembly during the Creed at the words “*by the power of the Holy Spirit ... became man.*”

A bow of the head is prescribed when the persons of the Trinity are named together (as at the sign of the cross), at the name of Jesus, of his mother, and of the saint honored in the liturgy that day. [Also as the] sign of reverence to be made before receiving Communion is a bow of the head.

The genuflection, seen as a sign of adoration [such as before the Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament in a Holy Hour of Prayer], is reserved for the Eucharist, as well as for the Cross between its solemn veneration on Good Friday and the beginning of the Easter Vigil. During Mass, the priest celebrant genuflects during the institution narrative of the Eucharistic Prayer after he has shown the consecrated host to the assembly as well as after showing the chalice, and then after the exchange of peace right before he shows both species to the assembly when he invites them to Communion.

If the tabernacle ... is located in the sanctuary area, the priest and other ministers genuflect when they arrive at the sanctuary at the beginning of Mass and when leaving at the end. During the celebration of Mass, however, [when the center of attention is the altar] they do not genuflect to the tabernacle. Outside the celebration of Mass, it is appropriate to genuflect whenever passing in front of the tabernacle.

On the Annunciation and on Christmas, as a special way to honor the mystery of the Incarnation, the entire assembly genuflects during the Creed in lieu of bowing (no. 137).

External bodily gestures during liturgical actions as well as at other moments of prayer in a church or chapel, by ministers or by any other member of the faithful, continually remind us that human beings worship God not merely through words and thoughts, but with their entire bodies as well.