

“The gestures and bodily posture of both the Priest, the Deacon, and the ministers, and also of the people, must be conducive to making the entire celebration resplendent with beauty and noble simplicity, to making clear the true and full meaning of its different parts, and to fostering the participation of all” (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal* 42).

We assume many different bodily postures at Mass. In fact, I once heard a comedian jokingly refer to this practice as “Catholic calisthenics.” We’re up, we’re down, we’re standing, we’re kneeling. It is easy to see how the casual observer could be confused by all of this activity. Yet each posture has its own purpose and expresses the meaning of the part of the Mass to which it is joined. Our common postures also promote the unity of those gathered at worship as well as our unity with the whole Church as the postures are the same (or at least they should be) whether we celebrate Mass at St. Boniface or St. Peter Cathedral, in the United States or in Italy, although there is some allowance for local variation in the instructions for the Mass.

The three basic postures at Mass are standing, sitting, and kneeling. Standing is a posture of respect (think for example of a courtroom when all stand as the judge enters). It also signifies the risen life that Christ shares with us and our straining upwards for the things that are above. We stand as a sign of respect and an expression of our hunger for heavenly food as we begin the Mass and come together in the presence of Christ, at the Gospel as we hear directly the story of Christ’s life, as we profess our faith and offer our petitions to God, as we begin the high point of the Mass, the Eucharistic Prayer, as we prepare for and receive Holy Communion, and as we conclude the Mass and go forth to live the risen life that our communion with Christ brings.

Sitting is a posture of listening and reflection (think for example of the famous sculpture by Auguste Rodin, *The Thinker*). We sit to listen to God’s Word and to reflect on its meaning in our lives in the homily. We also sit during the offertory and preparation of the gifts to reflect on the tremendous gift we are about to celebrate in the Eucharist and again after communion to reflect on what receiving that gift means for our lives.

Kneeling is a posture of humility and homage (think for example of the image of a knight kneeling in homage before his king). This is why we kneel in homage before our king, Jesus Christ, at the most sacred part of the Mass, the Eucharistic Prayer. It is at that moment that he becomes sacramentally present on the altar, and so we humbly kneel and offer him our lives as he becomes present for us and offers us his own, risen life.

In the Mass, we raise our hearts and minds to God, but we are more than our hearts and minds. As embodied souls, we must raise our whole life to God, and that means our bodies as well. By assuming the liturgical postures of standing, sitting, and kneeling when called for at Mass, to the extent that we are able, we more fully express the unity and meaning of our worship and offer to God more fitting praise.