

Stand, Sit, Bow, Kneel: A Short Primer on Liturgical Postures

In our age, we tend to think of ourselves as somewhat disembodied. We are our mind. The body is just something we are stuck in. We might need our bodies, but they are not really *who we are*, just *something we have*. We think of ourselves, whether consciously or not, as what the philosopher Rene Descartes described as a 'ghost within a machine': the ghost is our soul, our true self. The body is just the machinery it operates. Descartes went so far as to say, when asked how dogs whine when kicked if they did not have a soul that most things in his house make noises when he beats on them.

In our day, this belief is taken to a radical extreme, with some people claiming that they are 'in the wrong body,' or that they are a 'man in a woman's body,' or someone 'with a fat or skinny body,' as if the body is nothing but a piece of property that we happen to be born with, but nothing essential to ourselves.

This goes very deeply against the faith of Christianity and the vision of the Bible. The Scriptures never speak of man as being a mere soul or spirit trapped in a body, nor a mere body apart from a soul. Rather man *is* both soul and body united permanently. He is not a full human being if either is missing. For this reason, when we speak of the Fall of Man, man does not just fall spiritually, but also suffers physically. Similarly, when man is redeemed, it is not his soul alone that is saved, but his body also. For this reason, we do not confess *the resurrection of the spirit*, but the *resurrection of the body*.

For this reason, it has always been important to the Church that we do not merely worship with the proper mind or spirit, but also with a proper posture; which is to say, we worship with our bodies as well. In the same way that the Liturgy gives us a sound pattern of words with which to address God with our minds, so too does it prescribe a sound pattern of movements for our bodies to reverence God. And these postures you are likely already aware of: standing, sitting, bowing, and kneeling.

Each of these we are taught to do at specific times (if we are able) as a good confession of our faith; and each posture is meant to express something a little different:

Standing

If the Sanctuary is, so to speak, the throne room of our King, Jesus Christ, then to stand before a king is to express our rights in relation to Him, specifically our rights as a brother, and fellow son of the Father. Therefore we stand when we express this right: during prayer, when we show our right to ask of our Father as His sons; during the Gospel reading, when we show our reception of sonship through the ministry and work of the only-begotten Son; and during the Doxology when we either confess or receive the name of the Triune God by which we are brought into the family of God.

Sitting

To sit in the presence of others is a position of privilege. Traditionally men stand for women when they enter a room, but not women for men. Women remain seated, to show the fairer sex deference and honor. Similarly, when we are seated during the service, it is not merely to rest our legs, but to show that we are given the privilege to dwell in the house of the Lord, and to receive His word as we might listen to a friend, a guest, or a father. For this reason, we are seated during the readings (save for the Gospel reading) and generally during the singing of hymns.

Bowing

In the same way that bowing once expressed both *fear* of another, that someone had the power to strike off your head, yet also expressed *trust* of the same, that you freely offer your head knowing it will not be struck off, so we bow to express both respect and friendship. We bow to the crucifix as it passes by, during the Creed when the Son's ministry on earth is confessed, and before we come before the Altar to take Communion to show this combination of respect and hospitality, or as the Catechism puts it, *fear, love, and trust*.

Kneeling

The posture of kneeling is the posture of reception. It shows our powerlessness to be able to save ourselves, but also our receptivity to be saved by another. In this way, it is the perfect position to be in to receive and embrace the saving gifts of God. For this reason, Christians, when kneelers are available, and their knees can take it, kneel during Confession and Absolution, as they receive forgiveness, as well as during the Consecration of the Sacrament and its Distribution, as we receive Christ's body and blood.