Procession, Postures & Gestures

In the play *Fiddler on the Roof* the character Tevye says, "We don't know why we do this, it's tradition!" Often Catholics think/act with the same philosophy because when a question about the liturgy is asked the answer often is "we've always done it this way." Many do not realize that liturgy is a set of actions that need arrangement. Since all who gather for the liturgy are called "to take that full, conscious and active part in liturgical celebrations..." (*SCL*, 14), Catholics need to be aware of the overall direction, the movements and the postures involved in the liturgy, as well as their meaning. This knowledge will allow people to understand what is asked of them, be it bodily movement or posture as they participate in the liturgy. It will also allow people, having tried the request of the Church, to make up their own mind as to whether a particular action/posture is appropriate for them. While the hope of a common, unified posture/action is understandable sometimes human independence is stronger. People need to feel comfortable, as well as knowing what and why they are doing something if liturgy is to enhance their gathering to give praise and thanks to God.

**Processions** – Processions in the liturgy are more than just moving key persons or items from one place to another. Along with being ritual expressions of what we are about as people of faith, they symbolize the journey the People of God are on, the journey towards heaven. The image of people on a journey is key to the story of the people of Israel in the Old or Hebrew Testament. In Eucharistic Prayer III the priest prays that God may "strengthen in faith and love" the "pilgrim Church on earth". Processions in liturgy reinforce that image of the ongoing journey Christians believe they are on, a journey towards God and towards heaven.

Processions are definitely part of human life. Some processions take place and we never give them a thought: parents bringing a newborn baby home from the hospital or to the font for Baptism; graduations. Others are more recognizable: parades, weddings, bringing the deceased into the church for the funeral liturgy and their last leaving. A funeral
procession affects strangers as they offer the courtesy of the right-of-way or pausing as it passes, whether driving or walking. 

Proccesions in the Eucharistic Liturgy serve a practical purpose, but also remind us that we/the Church are continually on a journey. It is hoped that a procession, done well, enriches the prayer of the assembly. A good procession is ”a matter of timing and pace. It is a matter of reverence and space.” Every procession has its own character; they are never the same. **The entrance procession**, on most Sundays, brings the gathering of the community to a close as well as moving ministers to the sanctuary. On Palm Sunday or at the Easter Vigil there is a more formal procession that may involve all who are gathered for that particular liturgy. **The Gospel procession** involves processing the Book of the Gospels from the altar to the ambo. In it we honor the Word of God focused on the words and parables of Jesus Christ. In **the procession of the gifts** at the beginning of the Liturgy of the Eucharist, members of the assembly bring forth the gifts of bread and wine that will be consecrated and consumed later in the liturgy. The monetary offering as well as gifts for the poor may be part of this procession. **The Communion procession** brings forward those in the assembly who seek to be nourished by the Body and Blood of Christ. All of these processions call for the assembly to be united in voice and spirit by singing hymns appropriate to the liturgical season and the place in the Eucharistic Liturgy.

A procession of lesser importance, but extremely vital, is **the concluding procession**. This procession moves the ministers out of the sanctuary and the assembly from the church and into the world. However, this final procession takes on more importance at the end of a funeral liturgy when the remains of the deceased is taken from the church to the cemetery for burial and on Holy Thursday, at the end of the Mass of the Lord’s Supper, when the Blessed Sacrament is carried to the place of reservation (not the tabernacle).

**Postures** – Our postures in our liturgical celebrations give meaning and attitude to our prayer. When one **sits** in church it is a posture for attentive listening and meditation. At the Sunday Eucharist the assembly is to be seated for the readings before the Gospel, during the homily and the
offertory procession, and for a period of meditative prayer after all have received Holy Communion. **Standing** represents a posture of respect, honor, and reverence. From the early days of the Church standing is recognized as a posture of those who are risen with Christ. Thus the assembly stands for the Gospel, during the reception of Holy Communion, and for many of the prayers addressed to God. In the early Church **kneeling** signified penance and believers were forbidden to kneel on Sundays and during the Easter Season because the spirit of the liturgy is joyful and thankful. In later centuries, as well as in recent times, kneeling has become a posture of adoration. Some people may choose to kneel rather than sit having returned to their seat after receiving Holy Communion.

The Bishops of the United States received permission to adapt the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*. "In dioceses of the United States of America, they (the assembly) should kneel beginning after the singing or recitation of the Sanctus until after the Amen of the Eucharistic Prayer, except when prevented on occasion by reasons of health, lack of space, the large number of people present, or some other good reason." (*GIRM*, 43.3) Given the architectural shape of the worshipping space of the Newman Center, the lack of kneelers for all present, as well as the age of many of those who gather and the size of the assembly at many Masses, those who participate in the Sunday Eucharistic Liturgy are asked to remain standing during the Eucharistic Prayer. "A common posture, to be observed by all participants, is a sign of the unity of the members of the Christian community gathered for the sacred Liturgy: it both expresses and fosters the intention and spiritual attitude of the participants." (*GIRM*, 42.2)

**Gesture** is defined as movement of the hands, arms, body, head or face that is expressive of an idea, opinion or emotion. When gestures are made fully and consciously they deepen our prayer as people who rely on God in body, mind and spirit.

**Bows** – Bows are not something that comes naturally or easily for Americans. We associate them with monarchy, actions and styles of past times, and they are things that we do not normally do in our current
lifestyle. In the liturgy, bows are used as a gesture of reverence. The *General Instruction* calls for the assembly to **bow to the altar**, the sign of Christ, as we enter and leave the Church (IF the tabernacle IS NOT located in the sanctuary). It calls for a **bow during the Profession of Faith/the Creed**, at the words of Incarnation "... by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man." If the assembly stands during the Eucharistic Prayer, they are to make a **profound bow after each of the elements is consecrated**. The **bow** called for **immediately prior to receiving the Body of the Lord**, as well as when one **receives the Precious Blood**, is a simple bow of the head (not a nod) in front of the sacrament. **Genuflection** – If one genuflects, this movement should be done slowly and with the appropriate focus. One genuflects by placing the right knee on the ground with the upper body held straight. This action should take place in front of or directed to the tabernacle. A genuflection is a sign of reverence to the presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament that is reserved in the tabernacle primarily for bringing Holy Communion to the sick. Genuflection does not take place in the Communion procession. Some other gestures are the **Sign of the Cross** used to begin and end our liturgy and the **signing of one's forehead, lips and heart prior to the Gospel.** There is no mention in the General Instruction as to what the assembly's gesture should be during the Lord's Prayer. Some people choose to use the **orans** or prayer gesture, others choose to hold hands with those next to them, and others choose to do nothing.

Fr. Chuck Cunniff, CSP  
Saint Thomas More Newman Center  
The Ohio State University

**Sources**
Dennis C. Smolarski, SJ  
*Sacred Constitution on the Liturgy*  
*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*
Office of Worship, Archdiocese of Santa Fe, New Mexico