

Ask Fr James

What is the religious significance of kneeling and Bowing in our Catholic Spirituality?

In Catholic spirituality, the Holy Eucharist (Mass) is the highest form of prayer and worship. As we pray and worship either in the liturgy or privately, postures (such as during procession, standing, sitting, bowing, kneeling, raising of hands, etc.,) are important forms of devotional expressions as they reveal deep mutual correlation of our soul and body.

The pious position of the body does not just represent themselves but they are the visible posture of the invisible position of the soul. Our body postures in the actual Presence of God dictates and reveals the way in which our worship presents our prayers. In other words, During prayer, the body shows the icon of the soul and the body takes part in the inner spiritual life. Thus, our prayer and worship must be prepared for and introduced by assuming a careful position of the body.

The traditional gestures of raising our hands during prayer and worship is in line with the instructions of St. Paul the Apostle who urged the believers to pray “lifting up holy hands, without anger or doubting” (1 Tim. 2:8). At Mass, the priests says; “Lift up your hearts” and we respond; “we lift them up to the Lord.” The lifting of the hands reveals the icon of lifting the mind to the heavens.

Also at Mass, when we kneel, we replicate the faith of the Canaanite woman who knelt before Jesus to make her request (Matthew 15: 21-28). Kneeling also recalls the Magi who paid homage (worship) to Jesus by kneeling (Matthew 2.11) and kneeling also recalls the homage accorded the risen Christ when the disciples saw the Lord (Matthew 28.9, 17). The spiritual bending of the knee is a posture of tenderness of a solitary individual and signifies a state of repentance, It shows a broken heart due to a conscience heavy with a multitude of sins, searching for and totally depending on the mercy of God. St. Paul reminds us that “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth”(Philippians 2: 10).

These liturgical body gestures, such as making the Sign of the Cross, kneeling, bowing, sitting and standing, etc., were gestures handed down to us from the faith of the Apostles of Jesus and were traditions from the early Christian communities and have been transmitted over the centuries. These gestures are an intrinsic part of Christian and Catholic spiritual life. Using them in our times connects us to the Apostolic Biblical Tradition.

Thus, it is encouraged in our Catholic spirituality that before starting to say prayers, we should begin by taking care to have a correct position of the body and limbs and in that way, the whole person is immersed into the prayer as even our hands and fingers and all of the body participates in the prayer, even without words.