

Worship & Devotion

• Introduction

People have been coming to church for years but never really or fully understood why at various points some nod, some bow, some genuflect and yet others make the sign of the cross. This booklet, which accompanies a sermon, is designed to teach you what the various gestures mean so that you can choose what you personally might find helpful and appropriately reverent.

• Your choice

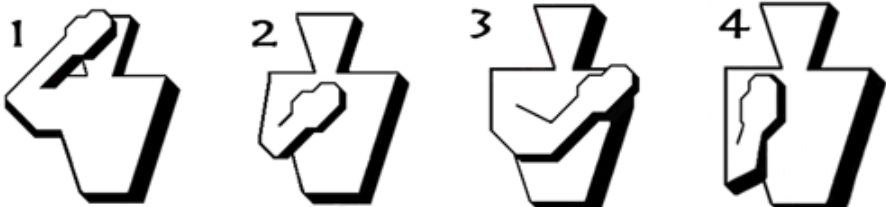
This is not an attempt to prescribe what you should do. It is meant to educate and inform so that you can choose which practices and gestures suit you best.

• Gesture and Faith

Gestures in church without inner meaning, faith and devotion are worthless and pointless. However a gesture which is accompanied by understanding and intention can be a powerful aid to devotion and can also increase ones sense of active participation in the liturgy.

• Sign of the Cross

Making the sign of the Cross on your body is a powerful reminder of Jesus' death and resurrection and that by it we hope to enter his Kingdom. It is also a symbolic reminder of the Trinitarian (3 persons) nature of God. It is the first and last communal action of the Mass, with very ancient roots, mentioned by Hippolytus around 220 AD. It's very simple to do; using your right hand you touch your forehead, chest, left and right shoulders. It traces the shape of a cross on your body.



The sign of the cross is also made at other points in the Mass, normally to draw attention to some significant moment or important liturgical action. The most common points when you might choose to make the sign of the cross are:-

The Sign of the Cross is most commonly made

- **Upon entering the church** or taking a seat to remind us that we've entered a holy place
- **At the beginning** of the Mass to remind us that we are here because of Christ's death and resurrection and that God is three persons in one; Father Son and Holy Spirit
- **At the absolution** when the priest says 'pardon and deliver you from all your sins' to remind us that it is by the cross that sins are forgiven
- **At the announcement of the Gospel** see the later paragraph which explains the triple sign of the cross
- **In the creed** when the words 'we look for the resurrection of the dead' are said to remind us that we hope to rise with the Christ and the Saints by the power of the cross
- **In the intercessions** when we pray for the departed to remind us that they have entered the Kingdom of Heaven by the cross
- **In the Eucharistic prayer** at the words 'blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord' which reminds us of Jesus command to say these words (Matthew 23.39) before we can discern his real presence in the Eucharist
- **In the Eucharistic prayer** when the priest raises the bread and wine after saying the words of Jesus at the last supper. This reminds us that we participate in Jesus death and resurrection by eating his body and drinking his blood
- **Before receiving communion** to remind us once again that it is by the power of the cross that we receive Christ into ourselves
- **At the blessing** to remind us that we're blessed by the trinity
- **On leaving church** to remind us to take our faith into the outside world

• **One Exception: the triple cross at the Gospel reading**

By ancient tradition the reading of the Gospel is preceded by making a triple cross over the **forehead** to remind us to engage our minds, across our **lips** to remind us proclaim (tell others) the Gospel and across our **hearts** to remind us to engage our emotions with the Gospel reading.

• **Genuflecting or Bowing**

Bowing your head or body is a pre-Christian sign of respect and some people bow when they enter church, to show respect to the sacred space. Some people also bow when they pass the imaginary central line of the church, this is normally where the cross is placed to show respect for the cross or altar and the

presence of God in the church building. Genuflecting is touching one knee to the ground and is also a pre-Christian sign of reverence and is normally reserved for the presence of Christ in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. In churches, such as St Dunstan's, where the Eucharistic bread is kept or reserved you might genuflect;

- Before taking your seat or pew
- As you leave your seat to come up for communion
- Returning to your seat or pew
- Just before leaving church



It's also worth knowing that some people will genuflect very definitely in the direction of the reserved sacrament, which is in the tabernacle on the right of the Lady Chapel whilst others simply face forwards towards the sanctuary, obviously when the sacrament is on the central altar the latter is particularly appropriate. Philippians 2.10 'at the name of Jesus every knee shall bend'

• **At the name of Jesus**

Since the time of the first disciples the name of Jesus has long been held in deep reverence and considered to have supernatural powers to heal and exorcise (Acts 3.16, Acts 4.10). Jesus is mentioned by name in several places in the liturgy and some choose to show their devotion and reverence by bowing their heads when his name is spoken aloud. This is also a reminder that we can worship God not just with our minds but also with our bodies. Romans 12.1 'I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship'

• **Honouring the Incarnation**

There is an important phrase in the Nicene Creed of 325 AD which outlines the central tenet of our faith: that God became human in the person of Jesus. Some people bow during the sentence 'he came down from heaven was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and was made man' to emphasise the phrase and show respect to the centrality of Jesus earthly life and humble birth. There is a common misconception that Mary is being honoured here whereas it is in fact Jesus becoming human that is being emphasised and revered.

• **Prayers before Mass**

When you first arrive in church you may want to say a prayer of preparation. Some will know preparatory prayers by heart, if you don't here is a selection:-

We adore you, most holy Lord Jesus Christ,
here, and in all your churches throughout the world;
and we bless you because, by your holy cross,
you have redeemed the world. Amen

St Francis of Assisi

Almighty God,
unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known,
and from whom no secrets are hid:
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
by the inspiration of thy Holy spirit,
that we may perfectly love thee
and worthily magnify thy holy Name;
through Christ our Lord. Amen

Anglican Prayer for Purity

Come, O Holy Spirit,
and with Thy most holy grace gather together,
I beseech of Thee,
all the faculties and all the affections of my soul,
so that, with devout attention and with my whole heart,
I may be able to attend this holy Mass,
and obtain thereby those benefits for which,
albeit unworthy, I ardently hope,
to the greater glory of God and the benefit of my own soul,
through the goodness and compassion
of the same, my Lord and God. Amen

St. Leonard-Port Maurice

• **Wandering minds and going through the motions**

Almost everybody finds their mind has wandered away from what is happening in church or is perhaps suddenly aware that they are just going through the motions without any real engagement or intent; that's part of being human. You can turn over a new leaf and start again at any time; you just need to gently remind yourself of why you are here.

• **It not about you; it's about him**

Lastly it's worth remembering that we're here to worship God; we may not like this or that in the Mass but we're not in church to please or entertain ourselves, we're here to offer God the worship and praise we owe him.