



Episode 29: Bow before Holy Communion

SUMMARY

People often ask, “What is the proper gesture before receiving Holy Communion?” The answer is actually very clear and simple. It can be found in the General Instruction of *The Roman Missal* at paragraph 160. The communicant makes a bow of the head before receiving the Body of the Lord and before receiving the Precious Blood.

This causes difficulty for some people because one might consider that a more proper, a more appropriate gesture or even a more reverent gesture would be a genuflection. That may indeed be true: a genuflection *can be* a beautiful sign of reverence. On the other hand, that is not what the Church has asked us to do.

Instead, the Church has chosen a gesture that everyone is *able to do*. This is based on the Church’s understanding that in the celebration of Mass, we should manifest in our bodies the great unity that we share in Christ: we are members of his body.

Earlier in the General Instruction the rubrics are explicit in stating that the people should show their unity with one another and avoid any appearance of division. A previous

translation of this text was even stronger saying the people were to “shun (*vitent*) any appearance of individualism or division.”

This gesture of a simple bow was chosen by the Bishops as the sign of reverence precisely because it allows everyone to manifest their unity at the time of Communion.

A bow could be more reverent, but in this instance of preparation for Holy Communion, the Church herself decides what we are to do. Let us follow the prescribed gesture, the bow of the head, in obedience to the Church. What’s more, make the bow of the head *mean a genuflection in your heart*. God will see your reverence and your neighbor will see your obedience.

The Roman Missal

When receiving Holy Communion, the communicant bows his or her head before the Sacrament as a gesture of reverence and receives the Body of the Lord from the minister. The consecrated host may be received either on the tongue or in the hand, at the discretion of each communicant. When Holy Communion is received under both kinds, the sign of reverence

is also made before receiving the Precious Blood.

General Instruction, n°. 160

In the celebration of Mass the faithful form a holy people, a people of God's own possession and a royal Priesthood, so that they may give thanks to God and offer the unblemished sacrificial Victim not only by means of the hands of the Priest but also together with him and so that they may learn to offer their very selves. They should, moreover, take care to show this by their deep religious sense and their charity toward brothers and sisters who participate with them in the same celebration.

They are consequently to avoid any appearance of singularity or division, keeping in mind that they have only one Father in heaven and that hence are all brothers or sisters one to the other.

General Instruction, n°. 95

IN THE TRADITION

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”
Galatians 3:28

“Christ is the bread of those who are in union with His body ... And therefore we ask that our bread—that is, Christ— may be given to us daily, that we who abide and live in Christ may not depart from His sanctification and body.”
Saint Cyprian
On the Lord's Prayer (18)

THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH

✠ “Since through baptism ‘there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor freeman, male nor female,’ but all are one in Christ Jesus, the assembly

which most fully portrays the nature of the Church and its role in the Eucharist is that which gathers together the faithful, men and women, of every age and walk of life.

The unity of this community, having its origin in the one bread in which all share, is arranged in hierarchical order. For this reason it is necessary that “each person, performing his role as a minister or as one of the faithful, should do all that the nature of the action and the liturgical norms require of him, and only that.”

Eucharisticum Mysterium, n°. 16

✠ “To promote active participation, the people should be encouraged to take part by means of acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons, and songs, as well as by actions, gestures, and bodily attitudes. And at the proper times all should observe a reverent silence.”

Sacrosanctum Concilium, n°. 30

IN THE PRAYER OF THE CHURCH

O come, let us worship God
and bow low before the God who made us,
for he is the Lord our God.

Entrance Antiphon
Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The words of Jesus often focus on what is in one's heart. What are some of your favorite passages?
2. How can obedience to the Church's liturgical law be a spiritual exercise?

FOR FURTHER READING

Sacred Congregation of Rites, *Eucharisticum Mysterium: Instruction on Eucharistic Worship*, May 25, 1967.