Liturgical Q & A:
The Gesture of Reverence During Communion

Question: I've heard that now we are supposed to make a "reverent gesture" of some kind as we receive Holy Communion. Why? How is it to be done?

Response: Gestures of homage and reverence for the Body of Christ are as old as the magi, those "wise men" we hear about in the Christmas story. That's what St. John Chrysostom, the "Golden-Mouthed" bishop of Constantinople, told his congregation 1600 years ago: "The wise men paid homage to Christ's Body when it was lying in the manger." But he reminded his hearers that "Unlike the wise men, you do not merely see Christ's Body; you know his power as well, and the whole divine plan for our salvation...Let us then awaken in ourselves a feeling of awe, and let us show a far greater reverence than did those foreigners...."

The Church has constantly desired a deep reverence on the part of all who receive Jesus Christ in Holy Communion. The outward gestures in which inner reverence has been expressed have differed from place to place and changed throughout history. I remember that before the Second Vatican Council, I found myself entering the Communion procession with other communicants in my parish church's center aisle; then we and the entire congregation would recite the Act of Contrition. After rising, we would move to the Communion rail, kneel, and carefully receive the host on the tongue (taking the host in our hands and receiving the Blood of Christ from the chalice were unthinkable for laypersons in those days). The priest uttered a large mouthful of Latin words as he almost raced from communicant to communicant down the row.

After the Second Vatican Council, standing in the aisle to receive Holy Communion became a widespread and customary way to receive Communion, either from a priest or deacon, or, after 1973, from a layperson who had been instituted as an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion. A simpler, shorter formula, "The Body of Christ," invited each communicant to speak a sincere "Amen" to the presence of Christ in the Eucharist and in the assembly that shares it. Receiving the Body of Christ in the hand became an approved option, as did receiving the Precious Blood from the cup, first on a limited basis, but now allowed at any Eucharist celebrated in our country. Clearly the way in which we Catholics receive Communion has changed since Vatican II, but one thing should be changeless: our reverence and care in receiving the Lord Jesus in this holy sacrament.

This is why the bishops of the United States have approved an adaptation to the new *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM). This document recommends that if people receive Communion standing, they should "make an appropriate gesture of reverence" (#160), to be decided by the conference of bishops. In their adaptation to this document, our bishops have prescribed standing as the posture for receiving Holy Communion in the United States, a posture which was confirmed by the Vatican. And the U.S. bishops have also prescribed a "gesture of reverence." First, some words about standing.

Certainly throughout history and in Western culture, kneeling has been and genuflecting have expressed a reverence and humility before great personage, for example, before the queen of England. But today, in our contemporary American culture, standing is a

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more general and customary posture of respect and honor: for example, we rise from our seats when the President of the United States enters a room. Also, standing is a "resurrection" posture: it is how we Easter people symbolically express our sharing in the life of the risen Christ who stood triumphant over sin and the grave. Standing to receive Communion should look and feel different from standing in the check-out lane.

Perhaps such considerations have led our bishops to request unity in standing as we receive the Lord Jesus in Holy Communion, so that our bodies express what we believe in our hearts: the risen Lord is given to us as the pledge of our risen life with him.

The United States bishops have also declared that, "when receiving Holy Communion in the hand, 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 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 make before receiving the Precious Blood" (adaptation to the new GIRM for the United States #160).

Thus, the "reverent gesture" is to be a bow of the head before the sacrament. We come forward to communion in the usual manner. We approach the communion minister reverently and come to a complete stop, so as to focus on what we are about to do. Showing the consecrated host, the minister says, "The Body of Christ." We bow our head and then after we have raised our head respond, "Amen." The minister offers the sacrament to us, and we reverently receive the Body of Christ either in our hand or on our tongue. When receiving the sacrament in our hand, we place one hand, palm up, on top of the other hand. Ancient writers called this gesture *making a throne for Christ the King*. After receiving the sacrament in our hand, we take a short step to the side, stop for a brief moment and then reverently take the consecrated host using the hand which is under the hand holding the host, place it in our mouth and consume the host.

Likewise, when we receive the Precious Blood from the cup, we approach the cup and after the minister has said "The Blood of Christ," we bow our head and then after we have raised our head respond, "Amen." We then take the chalice into our hands, drink, and return the chalice to the minister who wipes the rim of the chalice using a cloth purificator.

The practice in some places of a communicant taking the consecrated host and then dipping it into the consecrated wine (self-intinction) is prohibited by liturgical law. It is also potentially irreverent as drops of the Precious Blood can fall onto the floor.

This "reverent gesture" is not simply a nod of the head but an unhurried bow of the head. Through our bow of the head we profess our faith in the Eucharistic presence of Christ, and express our reverence.

Sports teams regularly practice familiar drills and plays so that they won't be sloppy during the game, but correct and smooth. Like good coaches, our country's bishops have given us helpful ways and reminders to make our receiving of Holy Communion more reverent.

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