

Mass Parts 27/52:

Kneeling



When going over Mass postures in part 9 of this series, we saw that kneeling in adoration is reserved for the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. While they stand during the Eucharistic Prayer in Europe and other parts of the world, in the United States we kneel. From the end of the “Holy, Holy, Holy” to the end of the Great Amen, we kneel in recognition of Jesus *becoming* present on the altar in front of us.

In ancient times, kneeling was seen as an act of homage to a greater lord, normally a deity or even a human superior. In medieval times, a vassal knight would kneel before the king, placing his hands between the king’s hands, and pledging his fealty and obedience. When I was ordained a deacon and priest, there were many promises to make. All but one promise was made standing up as a group facing the bishop. The final promise was made individually. We each knelt in front of the bishop, placed our hands between his, and promised “respect and obedience.” Standing in a position given by God, I recognize the bishop as my spiritual father.

The practice of kneeling in *adoration*, however, is reserved for the presence of God. As God spoke through the Prophet Isaiah: “By myself I swear, uttering my just decree and my unalterable word: to me every knee shall bend; by me every tongue shall swear.” (Isa 45:23). It is to the creator and ruler God, the father of all, that we kneel in homage and adoration. St. Paul recognizes this posture in his letter to the Romans: “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bend before me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.” (Rom 14:11). What is important for the history of the theology of the nature of Christ is Paul’s continued connection of Jesus with God. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul extends the divine to Jesus, where he states “that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth.” (Phil 2:10). We are kneeling to recognized the Real Presence of Jesus; Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity; in the Eucharist.

Recognizing the abiding presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, we also genuflect each time we pass in front of the tabernacle. There was a movement in recent history that saw bowing to the tabernacle was good enough. Once the Mass has begun, we bow to the altar as the primary symbol of Jesus. The altar takes over from the tabernacle as the place of focus. Outside of the Mass, however, we kneel to the tabernacle. Bowing is reserved for those that are unable or find it difficult to kneel. Before entering your pew when you arrive in church, take the time to teach your children to genuflect towards the tabernacle. When driving past a church, renew the practice of tracing the cross on your forehead. The smallest practices can have an effect on our devotion to the Eucharist and be a witness to others of our beliefs.

-Fr. Kopp

Next Week: Epiclesis