

## 38. Sacred Postures: Standing, Sitting, Kneeling

### Roman Missal: Sacred and Postures (2011)

1. Gestures and Postures: *The gestures and bodily posture of both the Priest, the Deacon, and the ministers, and also of the people, must be conducive to making the entire celebration resplendent with beauty and noble simplicity, to making clear the true and full meaning of its different parts, and to fostering the participation of all.* Attention must therefore be paid to what is determined by this *General Instruction* and by the traditional practice of the Roman Rite and to what serves the common spiritual good of the People of God, *rather than private inclination or arbitrary choice.*<sup>1</sup>

2. Standing: “the faithful should stand” during<sup>2</sup>

- a. Entrance, Greeting, Penitential Act, [Gloria], Collect
- b. Alleluia, Gospel, Creed, Prayer of Faithful
- c. Pray Brethren to the Holy, Holy, Holy (*Sanctus*)

3. Sitting: “the faithful should sit” during

- a. First Reading, Responsorial Psalm, Second Reading
- b. Homily
- c. Preparation of the Gifts at the Offertory
- [d. Sacred Silence after Communion]

4. Kneeling: “they should kneel”<sup>3</sup>

- a. After the *Sanctus* (Holy, Holy, Holy)
- b. Until after the Amen of Eucharistic Prayer (U.S.A.)
- [c. Exceptions: “ill health, lack of space, large number, an. reasonable cause”]
- d. After the *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God)

## Scripture

### Standing in Front of the Tabernacle of Moses

<sup>7</sup> Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp; and he called it the tent of meeting. And every one who sought the LORD would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp. <sup>8</sup> *Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people rose up, and every man stood at his tent door, and looked after Moses, until he had gone into the tent.* <sup>9</sup> When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the door of the tent, and the LORD would speak with Moses. <sup>10</sup> *And when all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the door of the tent, all the people would rise up and worship, every man at his tent door.* (Exodus 33:7-10)

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<sup>1</sup> *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* no. 42.

<sup>2</sup> *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, no. 43.

<sup>3</sup> *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* no. 43: “However, those who do not kneel ought to make a profound bow when the Priest genuflects after the Consecration.”

### **Kneeling in the Temple of Solomon**

<sup>54</sup> Now as Solomon finished offering all this *prayer and supplication to the LORD*, he arose from before the altar of the Lord, *where he had knelt with hands outstretched toward heaven...* (1 Kings 8:54)

<sup>3</sup> For *the LORD is a great God*, and a great King above all gods. <sup>4</sup> In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. <sup>5</sup> The sea is his, for he made it; for his hands formed the dry land. <sup>6</sup> *O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!* <sup>7</sup> For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture... (Psalm 95:1-8)

### **Sitting in the Jewish Synagogue**

<sup>1</sup> Then said Jesus to the crowds and to his disciples, <sup>2</sup> “*The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat* (Greek *kathedra*; Latin *cathedram*); <sup>3</sup> so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach, but do not practice... <sup>5</sup> They do all their deeds to be seen by men... they love the place of honor at feasts and *the best seats in the synagogues...* (Matthew 23:1-6; cf. Luke 4:20)

And [Jesus] closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, *and sat down*; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. (Luke 4:20)

### **Sitting in the Early Church**

<sup>1</sup> My brethren, show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. <sup>2</sup> *For if a man with gold rings and in fine clothing comes into your assembly* (Greek *synagōgē*), and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, <sup>3</sup> and you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “*Have a seat* (Greek *kathou*; Latin *sede*) *here, please,*” while you say to the poor man, “Stand there,” or, “Sit at my feet,” <sup>4</sup> have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? (James 2:1-3)

### **Standing and Kneeling in the Heavenly Liturgy**

<sup>2</sup> At once I [John] was in the Spirit, and lo, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne! <sup>3</sup> <sup>4</sup> *Round the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders* (Greek *presbyteroi*), *clad in white garments, with golden crowns upon their heads...* And round the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures...: <sup>7</sup> the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. <sup>8</sup> And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all round and within, and day and night they never cease to sing, “*Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,* who was and is and is to come!” <sup>9</sup> And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives for ever and ever, <sup>10</sup> *the*

*twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever... (Revelation 4:2-4, 7-10)*

## Tradition

### **Jewish Tradition: Sitting in the Synagogue (1<sup>st</sup> Century)**

Philo of Alexandria: Accordingly, on the seventh day there are spread before the people in every city innumerable lessons of prudence, and temperance, and courage, and justice, and all other virtues; during the giving of which *the common people sit down, keeping silence and pricking up their ears, with all possible attention, from their thirst for wholesome instruction; but some of those who are very learned explain to them what is of great importance and use*, lessons by which the whole of their lives may be improved. (Philo, Special Laws 2.62, Do Yonge trans.)

### **Kneeling in Prayer and Supplication (with Exceptions) (3<sup>rd</sup> Century)**

Tertullian: *As to kneeling, prayer allows different customs* in that there are some, a very few, who do not kneel on the Sabbath... According to our traditions, only on the day of the Lord's resurrection should we refrain not only from kneeling but from every expression or act of worry... The same holds true for the time of Pentecost, which is characterized by the same joyous celebration. *In other respects, who would hesitate to prostrate before God every day for at least the first prayer at daybreak? During the times when we observe the fasts and the stations there is to be no prayer except when kneeling and with humility. For we not only pray but beseech and offer satisfaction to God our Lord.*<sup>4</sup>

### **Standing Only on Sundays and Pentecost (325 AD)**

Council of Nicaea (1<sup>st</sup> Ecumenical Council): Since there are some who kneel on Sunday and during the season of Pentecost, this holy synod decrees that, so that the same observances be maintained in every diocese, *one should offer one's prayers to the Lord standing.*<sup>5</sup>

### **Standing and Listening to the Gospels in Church (4<sup>th</sup> Century)**

Apostolic Constitutions: During the reading of the Gospel all the presbyters, the deacons, and the people stand while observing a great silence, for it is written, "Be silent and listen, O Israel" [Deut 27:9]. Also, "But you, stand here near me and hear" [Deut 5:31]... *Should the deacon find some not sitting in their proper places, he—like a lieutenant—will reprimand them and lead them to their assigned places...* [I]n the church the young people sit by themselves if there is room; if not, they remain standing. The elderly sit in order. As to the children who remain standing, fathers and mothers are to take charge of

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<sup>4</sup> Tertullian, *On Prayer*, 23. In Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, 1:134.

<sup>5</sup> Council of Nicaea (325 AD), Canon 20. In Norman P. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (2 vols.; Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1991), 1:16.

them. The younger women are also apart if there is room; if not, they stand behind [the rest of] the women; let those who are married and have children be placed by themselves. Virgins, widows, and elderly women remain standing or are seated in front of all the others. The deacon attends to the places so that each person upon entering the church goes to his or her own place and does not sit near the door. *The deacon likewise watches over the people so that no one whispers, nods, laughs, or makes sings, for in church it is necessary to be attentive, sober, and alert, with ears attentive to the Lord's word.*<sup>6</sup>

### **Seats in the Great Basilica (4<sup>th</sup> Century)**

Eusebius of Caesarea: “having thus completed the temple he adorned it with thrones, very lofty, to do honour unto the presidents, and *likewise with benches* (Greek *bathrois*) *arranged in order throughout in a convenient manner*; and after all these he hath placed in the midst the holy of holies even the altar, and again surrounded this part also, that the multitude might not tread thereon, with a fence of wooden lattice-work...<sup>7</sup>

### **The Roman Custom of the Laity Sitting (5<sup>th</sup> century)**

St. Augustine: In certain overseas churches [=Italy] *not only are bishops seated to address the people, but seats are available for the people too*. Thus it can be avoided that a frailer person, worn out by standing, would be distracted from his highly salutary purpose or even forced to leave.<sup>8</sup>

### **Kneeling in Prayer and Penance (13<sup>th</sup> Century)**

William Durand: In the church both knees are to be bent... for to Christ every [knee] shall be bent [Phil 2:10]. Indeed, Solomon, praying for the people, fixed both his knees to the earth, and stretched his hands to heaven [1 Kings 8:54].<sup>9</sup>

## **Mystagogy**

### **Standing as a Sign of the Resurrection (Greek *anastasis*)**

St. Gregory of Nazianzus: *The attitude you will assume, standing, immediately after your baptism, in front of the bema [a raised platform], prefigures the glory to come*. The psalmody with which you will be received is a prelude to the singing of hymns in heaven. The lamps that you will light will evoke the procession of light in heaven with which we will meet the Bridegroom, we, shining and pure souls... [Matt 25:1-13].

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<sup>6</sup> *Apostolic Constitutions* 12.17.5. In Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, 2:221.

<sup>7</sup> Eusebius, *Church History*, 10.4.44. Translation LCL.

<sup>8</sup> Augustine, *On Catechizing the Uninstructed* 13,19. In Augustine of Hippo, *Instructing Beginners in Faith* (trans. Raymond Canning; Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 2006), 49. The identification of these churches as “The churches of Italy” is made by Raymond Canning.

<sup>9</sup> William Durandus, *Rationale of the Divine Offices*, 5.2.45; trans. Monti, *A Sense of the Sacred*, 84.

### **Sitting and Listening Like Mary**

St. Isidore of Seville: Nor should you think there is little usefulness generated from hearing the reading. (3) Perchance the prayer itself may grow stronger when the mind, filled by a recent reading, runs through images of divine things that it has recently heard. *For even Mary the sister of Martha “who listened” more intently to “what he was saying, and sat at the Lord’s feet,” having neglected her sister, was strengthened by the voice of the Lord [who said] that she had “chosen the better part” [Luke 10:39-42].*<sup>10</sup>

### **Every Knee Shall Bow at the Final Judgment**

Origen of Alexandria: *A person should kneel when confessing before God one’s own sins, when requesting healing and forgiveness; this is the attitude proper to those who humble themselves and who submit themselves...* Spiritual kneeling, so named because every being submitting to God at the name of Jesus and humbling oneself before him is, I believe, signified by the apostle when he says, *“At the name of Jesus, every kneed should bend in heaven, upon earth, and under the earth...” [Phil 2:10].*<sup>11</sup>

### **Questions for Discussion and Reflection**

1. Why do we change postures so often during Mass? What are the three major postures, and what do each of them mean?

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2. Why did the early Church forbid kneeling on Sundays and during Pentecost? What did this postures signify?

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3. What is the mystical meaning of standing, sitting, and kneeling? Name one figure from Scripture with whom each posture identifies us.

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<sup>10</sup> Isidore of Seville, *On the Ecclesiastical Offices*, 10.1-3. In Isidore of Seville, *De Ecclesiasticis Officiis*, 33.

<sup>11</sup> Origen, *On Prayer*, 31.3. In Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, 1:255.

**For Further Reading**

1. Joseph A. Jungmann, S.J. *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development*. 2 vols.; trans. Francis A. Brunner, C. SS. R. Reprint. Notre Dame, Ind.: Christian Classics, 2012 (orig. 1951).