

Posture and Prayer¹

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Introduction

Debate over posture in the eucharistic prayer remains an issue in the Roman Catholic Church in the United States. In 1969 the United States bishops voted to continue the pre-Vatican II posture of kneeling immediately after the Sanctus through the end of the prayer. The bishops reiterated this decision in their discussion of the document “The Sacramentary: Order of Mass. Adaptations for the Dioceses of the United States of America.”² At the same time, since 1969 some parish communities have inaugurated standing during the eucharistic prayer.³ The reasons for this will be treated below. Not surprisingly, in certain dioceses parishes are coming into conflict with those local ordinaries who insist on obedience to the 1969 decision. For the communities that have discovered the profound relationship of posture to prayer, the demand that kneeling replace standing creates unsettling difficulties.

The question of how kneeling during the eucharistic prayer became the regular posture of the congregation has been well explored by John K. Leonard and Nathan D. Mitchell.⁴ A canonical interpretation of why a local community has the right to change the kneeling rubric, based upon the Vatican II call for full participation, has been offered by John Huels.⁵ This present study assumes the fact that posture affects how we understand prayer and at the same time fosters dispositions with regard to our role in public, liturgical prayer. With these assumptions in mind it is the conviction of this author that the decision of the American bishops to continue the same posture that had obtained in the pre-Vatican II church in effect helped sustain a eucharistic piety pertaining more to the arena of individual devotion than to the corporate liturgical spirit demanded by the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*.⁶ Ironically, this decision affected not only the liturgical enactment of the eucharistic prayer but also the entirety of the communion rite following it.

The Order of Mass

When the new Order of Mass was promulgated in 1969, *the General Instruction of the Roman Missal* that accompanied it treated the posture of the congregation from the eucharistic prayer until the end of the mass as follows:

Unless other provision is made, at every Mass the people should stand . . . from the prayer over the gifts until the end of the Mass, except at the places indicated later in this paragraph . . . They should sit, . . . if this seems helpful, during the period of silence after communion. They should kneel at the consecration unless

prevented by the lack of space, the number of people present, or some other good reason.⁷

Further precision was provided by the journal *Notitiae*.⁸ The phrase “kneel at the consecration,” was interpreted as follows:

They also stand throughout the eucharistic prayer, except the consecration. The practice is for the faithful to remain kneeling *from the epiclesis before the consecration until the memorial acclamation after it* (emphasis added).

Thus, in the rubrics of the *editio typica* of the Roman missal the general posture throughout the major portion of the liturgy of the eucharist, including the eucharistic prayer, was standing. Three exceptions were made: the assembly was to sit during the preparation of the gifts, kneel from the first epiclesis through the anamnesis of the eucharistic prayer, and if opportune, sit after the entire congregation had received communion.

Implementation in the United States

In their November, 1969 meeting the American bishops voted on the provisions of GIRM. They made one change in terms of posture during the eucharistic prayer:

. . . no. 21 of the *General Instruction* should be adapted so that the people kneel beginning after the singing or recitation [sic] of the Sanctus until the Amen of the eucharistic prayer, that is before the Lord’s Prayer.⁹

Since 1969 then the rubric on kneeling during the eucharistic prayer has differed from the Roman rubric. Parochial assemblies in the United States continued in effect to do what they had been doing. These same assemblies ignored (and continue to ignore) the rubric on standing during the communion rite: most congregations kneel following the Lamb of God and continue to kneel while communion is being distributed.¹⁰ As with standing/kneeling during the eucharistic prayer standing/kneeling during communion speaks rather clearly of a eucharistic piety more devotional than liturgical.

The American bishops were asked to re-confirm the 1969 kneeling rubric in 1995. In the “Adaptations” a slight variation on the 1969 rubric was proposed. It reads:

Number 21 of *the General Instruction of the Roman Missal* should be adapted so that the people should kneel beginning after the singing or recitation [sic] of the Sanctus until after the Amen of the eucharistic prayer “unless prevented by lack of space, the number of people present, or for some other good reason (GIRM, no. 21).” In these cases, the people should remain standing and bow as a sign of reverence when the priest genuflects after the words of institution for the consecration of the bread and for the consecration of the wine.¹¹

But this slight change was withdrawn.¹²

Liturgy or Devotion

Why did the American bishops change the Roman rubric in the first place. Several reasons have been offered. First of all, although liturgical change was in the air at the end of the 1960's and in the beginning of the 1970's, there was some concern about how much the American church could accept at any one time. John Huels notes that the bishops'

reasoning was political: Because this was a time of rapid and major changes in the liturgy, they feared that the people would not absorb any more liturgical changes.¹³

A second reason supporting the bishops' decision was that such kneeling during the eucharistic prayer was particularly suitable to the piety of the American people. This latter explanation provided the basis for retaining the practice of kneeling in the 1990's:

The Committee on the Liturgy recommends that the Conference remain with the decision made in 1969, because this seems to reflect the piety of a significant number of Catholics in the United States.¹⁴

And this piety is related to a "gesture of humility" that

reflects the appropriate attitude before the Real Presence, an aspect of spirituality strongly felt in recent centuries.¹⁵

This explanation, supporting what can only be termed an individualistic eucharistic devotionism, would seem to apply not only to the mandated practice of kneeling or genuflecting during the eucharistic prayer but would also seem to justify the ignoring of the Roman rubric imposing standing during the communion rite. Thus kneeling is clearly understood to be a gesture of humble worship of the real presence in the Blessed Sacrament. Posture and piety reinforce one another.

Posture and Prayer: Who Decides?

Since 1969, some parish congregations have accustomed themselves to the practice of standing during the eucharistic prayer, as in many other countries of the world. Of the majority of parishes that still kneel, a few have begun standing during the final doxology of the eucharistic prayer, in order that the acclamatory "amen," giving full voice to the priest's proclamation of the prayer in their name, may be more rousing. When bishops try to change the practice of the minority of congregations that have learned to stand for this great prayer, problems arise, including a good deal of anger and frustration.

The question needs to be asked: is such a congregation in defiance of their bishop? Or is it more a question of a change in a community's view of the eucharist, no longer corresponding to a "spirit of humility" during the priest's recitation of the eucharistic prayer? If the latter situation obtains, then literal observance of the American rubric might involve a crisis of conscience.

The governing principle in all liturgical celebration is Vatican II's profound insight into the nature of liturgy, that it is the worship of the gathered church. This realization is expressed in such phrases as "full, conscious, and active participation" (CSL 14) and described in a particular way as taking part in liturgy by way of "acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons, and songs, as well as by actions, gestures, and *bearing*" (CSL 30, emphasis added). John Huels notes that these are the key criteria for "assessing whether an adaptation is acceptable or not."¹⁶

The recovery of a more authentic eucharistic theology has occurred over the past fifty years, a theology strongly ecclesial in nature. No longer is the eucharistic prayer viewed as the sole preserve of the ordained minister. Rather it is *the* prayer of the church. Although voiced by one authorized to do so, it is the public prayer of the assembly, beginning to end. From the opening dialogue, which in part acknowledges that the priest prays the prayer at the behest of the assembly ["It is right to give {our} thanks and praise"] to the final "amen" which is the assembly's acceptance of the prayer¹⁷ and its challenges,¹⁸ the prayer is in "we" language. In terms of posture, both eucharistic prayers I and II image the people's participation by the language of standing.¹⁹

As with all prayer forms such as collects and the various consecratory and blessing prayers of the liturgical rites, the appropriate posture for the assembly is traditionally standing in the "orans" position.²⁰ As assemblies discover their role as participants in the eucharistic prayer this should not be seen as an abuse but as an evolution in the commitment of a congregation to its role within—and outside—the liturgy of the church. Certainly a community's decision to stand cannot be seen as a challenge to the bishops and their authority. Rather, it is the story of a particular community fully and consciously participating in worship.

Whose Prayer is It?

Liturgical theologians have insisted upon the importance of the eucharistic prayer in the life of the church, but to many worshippers instead of being the highpoint of the liturgy, along with the gospel, it has been called the "great black hole" in liturgical celebration. In those Sunday celebrations where a priest is not available, as envisaged in *Sunday Worship in Absence of a Priest*, it would seem that the great prayer of consecration would be sorely missed. And yet, many do not even note its absence. Now it would be wrong to say that the only reason for this is the posture of kneeling during the prayer, because other causes are also at work—lack of understanding of the prayer by priests, poor proclamation, little or no use of music, etc. But surely, one of the factors is

that of kneeling during the prayer. A member of the assembly could well ask: “how is this my prayer if I am kneeling in humble adoration?”

It is true that from the late middle ages on the eucharistic prayer came to be viewed as the preserve of the priest, especially as a particular theology of consecration was emphasized in theology and piety, locating the transformation of the elements solely in the pronouncement of the words of Jesus by a priest. The practical expression of this medieval theology was realized liturgically by:

1. The kneeling of the assembly;
2. The silencing of the Roman Canon, especially that part of it which began after the conclusion of the *Sanctus*;²¹
3. The actions of the priest, who stood with his back to the people, engaged in such gestures as multiple signings of the cross, signaling that he was doing something to the eucharistic elements, and elevated host and cup for the worship of the people;
4. The distancing of the people from the liturgical rite, both in terms of physical distance from the sanctuary and decreasing sacramental participation in both bread and cup.

Our contemporary view of the eucharist very much involves assembly and ministers together, each very much engaged in their appropriate role. The eucharistic prayer is the prayer of the entire church. All participate in it. As already mentioned, in the early centuries of the church the entire assembly stood with hands uplifted while the presiding minister voiced the prayer in its name. This gesture and this posture richly symbolized the role of the baptized in this great prayer.

Posture and Prayer and Liturgical Structure

One may surmise that when the American bishops voted to continue the pre-Vatican II practice of kneeling after the *Sanctus*, they may well have been unaware of some of the implications of their vote. After all, until 1969 there was only one eucharistic prayer in use in western Roman Catholic worship, the “canon.” Among the many anaphoras found in other rites the Roman Canon has a unique character and structure. All this was about to change in 1969: as the American bishops were voting the kneeling rubric, the church was allowing a number of new eucharistic prayers, none of which matched the structure of the Roman Canon.

In particular three things differentiate the new prayers from the prayer which alone was used in the western mass for some 1500 years and that was the only prayer known by those scholastics who created the classic medieval theology of the eucharist:

1. Most importantly, all the new prayers include the explicit invocation of God to send the Holy Spirit to hallow the elements.²² There is no prayer for the Holy Spirit in the Roman Canon.
2. Thanksgiving as the context for the prayer is more clearly evidenced in the new prayers than in the Roman Canon, where any notion of thanksgiving is found only in

the preface, the rest of the prayer following the Sanctus being in the form of intercession.

3. All the new prayers are generally clearer in their structure than the Roman Canon. Thanksgiving for God's wonderful works, particularly for the salvation wrought by Jesus Christ, leads to the consecratory sequence of epiclesis, institution narrative and command, anamnesis, and epiclesis for communion, which is followed by intercession, all concluding in doxology.

Since the new eucharistic prayers are quite different from the Roman Canon (Eucharistic Prayer I), it is my contention that voting a posture shift after the Sanctus in every one of the [now] 10 eucharistic prayers indicates a lack of appreciation for the way the various eucharistic prayers are structured. It seems to cast all of them in a pre-Vatican II, medieval mold, where everything that occurs before the congregation kneels—dialogue, preface, Sanctus—is but introductory to the real prayer, that which the priest says while the people kneel in humble adoration.

Although some, including this author, would hope that standing would be the posture for the entirety of any eucharistic prayer, still if one compares the Roman rubric on kneeling to the variation voted by the American bishops, it is immediately evident that in the former there is respect for the structure of the prayers, whereas in the structure of each of the new eucharistic prayers is ignored.

Let us look at some examples:

1. Eucharistic Prayer IV: this prayer continues to develop the notion of thanksgiving after the *Sanctus* (in all of the other Roman eucharistic prayers the narrative of salvation history in the context of thanksgiving is completed with the concluding *Sanctus*). The praise of the God of creation which opens the prayer and is concluded by the song of the angels, continues with thanksgiving to the God of redemption manifested in all of salvation history and particularly in the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. To kneel after the *Sanctus* places a change of posture exactly where it does not belong, in effect forcing an entirely incorrect understanding of this prayer on the consciousness of the believer. Here if one knelt at the first epiclesis and arose after the anamnesis, the central part of the prayer would be outlined and one would stand for the intercessions inaugurated by the invocation of God that the Spirit may make us one.
2. Eucharistic prayer II or III: to kneel before the post-sanctus that leads to the invocation of the Spirit is to force a change of posture at the very moment of transition from the Sanctus to the central consecratory section. In effect, this places the wrong emphasis on the post-sanctus.
3. The two Penitential Prayers and the Prayer[s] for Various Needs and Occasions: these prayers are shaped in a similar fashion to II and III. But because of their content, and especially the way various parts fit together, kneeling at an inappropriate moment confuses those who are praying, the assembly as well as the presider.
4. The children's prayers: with their extended acclamations, the children's prayers raise an issue in addition to what has already been said. Can one enter into acclamation

kneeling, especially since kneeling has been defined as a “gesture of humility” while acclamations are strong shouts of joy and affirmation. This fact is expanded in the children’s prayers—and, it is devoutly hoped, that such participatory responses will occur in all blessing and consecration prayers that are the prayers of the assembly as well as the priest—with the many acclamations that are a structural element in the prayer. Automatically kneeling after the Sanctus does not respect either the prayers’ structures or the exuberance with which the church hopes children will enter into eucharistic celebration.

In conclusion, then, it would seem that, along with all the other objections voiced by liturgists and canonists to the United States practice, the episcopal vote contradicts the very structure of the church’s eucharistic prayers. And posture shapes the way we pray, no matter what meaning and purpose is assigned to the actual prayer.

Devotional and Liturgical Posture

In the journal, *Notitiae*, quoted earlier, in the interpretation of the kneeling and standing rubrics of GIRM relative to both the eucharistic prayer and the communion rite, it is insisted that this is no way is

to be considered trivial, since their purpose is to ensure uniformity in posture in the assembly celebrating the eucharist as a manifestation of the community’s unity in faith and worship. The people often give the impression immediately after the Sanctus and even more often after the consecration by their diverse postures that they are unmindful of being participants in the Church’s liturgy, which is the supreme action of a community and not a time for individuals to isolate themselves in acts of private devotion.²³

Although this paragraph is clearly dedicated to the necessity for uniformity in ritual posture and gesture, the reason given—that liturgy is corporate and that liturgical celebration is not the time for private devotion—would seem to call into question the United States bishops’ decision vis-à-vis kneeling during the eucharistic prayer. As noted above, the reason given for the bishops’ vote was that they felt Americans desired to kneel as a gesture of humility, that this was an appropriate attitude before the blessed sacrament (even though this way of speaking of the eucharistic prayer pertains more to the reserved sacrament and eucharistic adoration), and that this reflected American Catholic piety. But such explanations pertain more to the “private devotion,” rejected in the commentary on GIRM printed in *Notitiae*. They do not seem to engage the American Catholic in corporate liturgical celebration. If this is true, then it may well be that we have not yet reached that insistence that the entire assembly, one in heart and mind, be caught up in the eucharistic sacrifice:

. . . it is of the greatest importance that the celebration of the Mass, the Lord’s supper, be so arranged that the ministers and the faithful who take their proper part in it may more fully receive its good effects . . . This purpose will best be

accomplished if, after due regard for the nature and circumstances of each assembly, the celebration is planned in such a way that it brings about in the faithful a participation in *body* and spirit that is conscious, active, full, and motivated by faith, hope, and charity. The Church desires this kind of participation, the nature of the celebration demands it, and for the Christian people it is the right and duty they have by reason of their baptism (emphasis added).²⁴

¹ First published in *Worship* 72 (January 1998) 67-78.

² Committee on the Liturgy, National Conference of Catholic Bishops (Washington, DC, November 1994). [Hereafter, referred to as Adaptations.] The American bishops considered this document in their June, 1995, meeting, and voted on it in their November, 1995 meeting. See. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Committee on the Liturgy Newsletter*, Volume 31 (1995), 27-28, 41-42. [Hereafter referred to as BCL Newsletter].

³ I am particularly emphasizing parish communities and their Sunday worship. Many religious communities, especially male communities, stand as a matter of course during the eucharistic prayer within their religious houses or in their churches.

⁴ John K. Leonard and Nathan D. Mitchell, *The Postures of the Assembly During the Eucharistic Prayer* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994).

⁵ John Huel, "Unauthorized Liturgical Adaptation," *More Disputed Questions in the Liturgy* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1996), pp. 22-25.

⁶ See, e.g., *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* 48 (DOL 48). (Hereafter cited as CSL.)

⁷ SC Divine Worship, *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 4th edition, 27 March 1975, no. 21 (DOL 1411) [hereafter cited as GIRM].

⁸ *Notitiae* 14 (1978) 300-301, no. 1.

⁹ Appendix to the General Instruction of the Roman Missal for the Dioceses of the United States 21.

¹⁰ The signal to shift from kneeling to sitting is a non-liturgical action, the closing of the tabernacle door!

¹¹ Adaptations, p. 135.

¹² See the *BCL Newsletter*, volume 31 (1995), p. 44, where one of the resolutions of the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions, which met in October of 1965, requests the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy to "provide a mechanism along with appropriate documentation by which the National Conference of Catholic Bishops may discuss the issue of posture during the eucharistic prayer, for the purpose of reexamination of their 1969 decision or, at the very least, *the reintroduction of the text withdrawn by the Bishop's Committee on the Liturgy in June*" (emphasis added).

¹³ Huels, p. 22. Huels reminds us that at that time other episcopal bodies were not as concerned about change as were the American bishops: "The bishops of Belgium the Netherlands, France and Quebec opted for standing throughout the eucharistic prayer. In Spain and Italy, the bishops accepted the *universal norm*—standing throughout except for the consecration (ibid., emphasis added).

¹⁴ Adaptations, pp. 137-138.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 137.

¹⁶ Huel, pp. 15-16.

¹⁷ . “When he has finished the prayers and the thanksgiving, all the people give their assent by saying ‘AMEN’,” Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 65.3.

¹⁸ “And we call this food “thanksgiving;” and none may partake of it unless they are convinced of the truth of our teaching, and have been cleansed with the washing for forgiveness of sins and regeneration, and live as Christ handed down,” *ibid.*, 66.1

¹⁹ In particular, note the “circumstantes” of eucharistic prayer I, the former Roman Canon. “Those who stand around” clearly refers to the posture of the assembly offering the prayer.

²⁰ Interestingly enough, it is this position that the bishops voted affirmatively in the case of the Our Father: “The people may extend their hands, using the ancient traditional gesture of communal prayer (the ‘orans’ gesture), during the Lord’s Prayer.” Since this change in the rubric is due to a desire to “correct the recent development [of holding hands during the Our Father], by proposing a more appropriate and traditional gesture during the Lord’s Prayer,” there probably should be no surprise that such a more “appropriate and traditional” gesture (standing and extending the hands) was not envisaged for any of the other prayers, such as the eucharistic prayer! See *Variations*, pp. 138-139.

²¹ It is important to be aware of the fact that medieval theologians did not think of the eucharistic prayer as did the early church or the post-Vatican II church. For the medievals, the Roman Canon began with the “Te igitur” which followed the *sanctus*. The opening dialogue and “preface,” expressing the motive of thanksgiving, were not given all that much importance. This meant that in reality the congregation had no part in the eucharistic prayer, including the final “amen.” (it might be remembered that the final “amen” is vigorously commented on by Justin Martyr as the moment when the assembly shouts its approving “so be it”). Kneeling, a gesture of penitence and adoration, was quite clearly a perfect symbol of the assembly’s involvement, or lack therein, in the prayer of the priest “confectior.”

²² The epiclesis. Whether or not the Roman Church should have split the present epiclesis in two, placing the consecratory section before the institution narrative and the prayer for communion after the memorial prayer (the anamnesis) is certainly a moot point and needs extensive discussion.

²³ *Notitiae* 14 (1978) 300-301, no. 1

²⁴ GIRM 2-3 (DOL 1392-1393).