

MEMORANDUM

To: The Priests & Lay Pastoral Co-ordinators, Diocese of Palmerston North
From: Bishop Peter Cullinane
Date: 20 July 2003
Re: Posture in the Eucharistic Prayer

LITURGICAL RENEWAL AND PARTICIPATION

The liturgical renewal authorised by the Second Vatican Council aims to achieve, above all, that *full, conscious and active participation which is required by the very nature of the liturgy* (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, para. 14).

This full, conscious and active participation is much more than just ‘joining in’ the responses and hymns. It means becoming absorbed in the sacred mysteries; taken up into them; given over to them; allowing ourselves to enter into the events of our salvation; surrendering to what God is doing for us and in us.

The various changes that were made in the first years of the liturgical renewal (e.g. translating the texts into English, sharing ministries, redesigning and refurbishing Church buildings, etc) were all just different, but significant, ways of making full, conscious and active participation more possible for everybody. They were means towards a goal. The goal was participation; participation of the whole person, and participation of the whole assembly.

REVERENCE

The postures and gestures we adopt during the liturgy are **statements of faith**. They are ways of saying – with our whole self – what we believe and what we are doing. They em-body and en-act our inner dispositions, and they enable us to act together as *one body, one spirit, in Christ* (Eucharistic Prayer II).

The uniformity and posture to be observed by all participants is a sign of the unity of the members of the Christian community gathered for the sake of liturgy; it both expresses and fosters the mind and spiritual attitude of the participants (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, [2002] para 42).

Posture is not determined by what the individual “feels like doing”, but by what the in its liturgy is doing. Through word, silence, song and posture, we let *the Church’s liturgy* be expressed in ourselves.

The proper posture, and therefore the most reverent posture, is the one that corresponds most closely to what *each part* of the liturgy is about. Even when Bishops’ Conferences make adaptations, these must always be in accordance with *the meaning and the character of each part of the celebration* (GIRM, 2002, para. 43).

SOME EXAMPLES

(a) The people’s of the Pacific Islands have a beautiful way of using dance to highlight what is happening when the Book of Gospels is being brought up in procession. They dance Christ in.

It is a moving (literally) act of faith. It says: in the Gospel, Christ is coming among us and is about to speak to us. By song and dance they show their delight and adore Him.

- (b) The Liturgy of Good Friday opens with an act of prostration. The priest goes down on his face before the mystery of what God was doing through the death of Our Lord, and the people go down on their knees. All this is done in silence. It is as if we were saying: “let all mortal flesh keep silence, there are no words that can express this mystery.”

Later in the same liturgy, we go down on one knee as we say: “We adore you O Christ and we bless you...” Genuflecting is another gesture of adoration.

- (c) The way we use our hands is also significant. For example, at Holy Communion there is a difference between ‘receiving’ and ‘taking’. Our bodily gestures express and shape our inner dispositions.

POSTURE FOR THE EUCHARISTIC PRAYER

(a) The early Tradition

In the early Church, after the liturgy of the word, the whole congregation would rise to their feet for the Eucharistic Prayer.

Later, the practice of kneeling was gradually crept in. But not without opposition. Early in the third century Origen wrote:

Even more than stretching out the hands to heaven, one must lift up the soul heavenward. More than raising up the eyes, one must lift up the spirit to God. For there can be no doubt that among a thousand possible positions of the body, outstretched hands and uplifted eyes are to be preferred above all others, so imaging forth in the body those directions of the soul which are fitting to prayer. We are of the opinion that this posture should be preferred, where there is nothing to prevent it, for there are certain circumstances, such as sickness, where we may pray even sitting or lying.

Another third century writer put it this way:

It is good for us to remember both that we have fallen in sin and that we have risen by the grace of Christ. We therefore kneel on six days for prayer, as a sign of our fallen state. But on the Lord’s day we do not kneel, as a sign of the resurrection through which by the grace of Christ we have been freed from sin and from death.

This custom had its origin in apostolic times as the blessed Irenaeus bishop and martyr of Lyons says in his book *De Paschate*, in which he reminds us that we are not to kneel during Pentecost since it is of the same importance as the Lord’s day”. (Pseudo-Justin, *Quaestiones ad Orthodoxos*, q.115)

The Council of Nicea (AD325) considered it necessary to legislate on this matter:

Since there are some persons who kneel on the Lord’s Day and in the days of Pentecost; in order that all things may be observed in like manner in every church, the holy synod has decreed that all should at those times offer up their prayers to God standing.

In his turn St Augustine put it this way:

The 50 days that are celebrated after the resurrection of the Lord are already the image not of labour but of peace and joy; because during this time the fast is relaxed and we pray standing, which is the image of the resurrection (*Letter 55 to Januarius*, 15:28).

Between the 10th and 13th centuries the congregation became less and less involved in the Mass. The Eucharistic Prayer was prayed in silence, the people usually did not receive Holy Communion, and with the priest standing with his back to the people, their only ritual involvement occurred when he elevated the host and chalice. The people responded by kneeling in adoration. For the people it became a time for their devotions. The Second Vatican Council wanted to restore the older Tradition of full, conscious and active participation in the liturgy itself.

(b) The Second Vatican Council

After the Council, the Missal was reformed (1970), further revised in 1975, and again revised in 2002. The references to posture distinguish between the posture required during the Eucharistic Prayer and the posture required at the Consecration. The following table highlights (with the help of italics) the differences between the second and third editions of the Missal: (G.I.R.M. = General Introduction to the Roman Missal).

	1975 Missal	2002 Missal
During the Eucharistic Prayer	“... the people should stand...” G.I.R.M., 21	“... the faithful should stand...” “... <i>where it is the practice for the people to remain kneeling after the Sanctus until the end of the Eucharistic Prayer, this is laudably retained.</i> ” G.I.R.M., 43
At the Consecration	“they should kneel unless prevented by lack of space, the number of people present, or some other good reason.” G.I.R.M., 21	“they should kneel except when prevented by <i>reasons of health</i> , lack of space, the large number of people present, or some other good reason” G.I.R.M., 43

Note:

- 1) In 1970, the US bishops sought and were given a dispensation allowing their people to remain kneeling during the Eucharistic Prayer, because at that time kneeling was a departure from the norm. At that time, the New Zealand bishops noted that kneeling was the practice in New Zealand but they did not seek any dispensation to authorise this departure from the norm.
- 2) In 1997 when preparing a revised translation of the then current Missal the New Zealand bishops opted to bring our practice into line with the norm, i.e. standing.
- 3) The 2002 Missal’s provision for kneeling during the Eucharistic Prayer allows it; it does not require it. (Now that kneeling is allowed for in the general norms it no longer requires a dispensation.) It is for bishops’ conferences to decide.
- 4) The 2002 Missal adds “reasons of health” to the reasons which are sufficient to justify people not having to kneel at the Consecration.
- 5) Even before the 2002 revision the Congregation for Divine Worship and Sacraments had said that when people are not kneeling for the Consecration *a deep bow and respectful bearing are signs of reverence and adoration to be shown at the time of the Consecration* (1978).

(c) Future Direction

In anticipation of any decision about standing or kneeling, the New Zealand bishops decided at their meeting in May 2001 to give priority to catechesis. Accordingly, they agreed to the following seven points:

1. We reaffirm our commitment to promoting an intensive liturgical catechesis (cf Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter 1988), based on the liturgical books, especially the General Introduction to the Roman Missal, and on the underlying principles on which the Second Vatican Council based its liturgical renewal.
2. Insofar as this involves the postures appropriate to the different parts of the liturgy, they must always be in accordance with “the meaning and the character of each part of the celebration” (G.I.R.M. current norms, para. 21 (revised edition, para. 43)).
3. We recognise the need for buildings and furnishings to be “arranged in such a way that the people can easily take the postures required during the various parts of the celebration...” (G.I.R.M. para. 311), and recognise the time this can require.
4. We accept the need for time and flexibility in the implementation of changes and the need for these to come out of people’s understanding and appreciation of why the Church does what it does.
5. Where congregations are already standing for the Eucharistic Prayer, they should kneel for the consecration, i.e. from the epiclesis until the memorial acclamation, unless this is too difficult for reasons of space health, or any “other good reason.” In such cases a profound bow is “the appropriate sign of reverence and adoration given at the consecration.” (I know that in some places the general disturbance caused by going down and then up again is considered a “good reason” for bowing instead of kneeling.)
6. Those who, for reasons of age or disability, need to sit should do so. Otherwise, sitting is not a posture that best corresponds to “the meaning and character” of the Eucharistic Prayer, at least in our culture.
7. We ask the National Liturgy Commission to prepare catechetical materials relating to the above items.

(d) Catechesis

In n.4 above, the bishops said that change needs to come out of the people’s understanding and appreciation of why the Church does what it does. It is not to be *imposed*.

When the early Christians stood during the Eucharistic Prayer, they knew that their redemption was being commemorated, i.e. made present. And they were all involved.

The Eucharistic Prayer expressed their thanks to the Father for what had been done for them in Christ. His victory over sin and death had become theirs.

Their posture expressed what it meant to be a redeemed people, no longer under the weight of their sins and unsure of God’s mercy, but lifted up with Christ; going with him to the Father. Their standing em-bodied/en-acted what their Eucharistic Prayer was saying. Our own Eucharistic Prayers today echo theirs: *We thank you (Father) for having made us worthy to stand in your presence...* (Eucharistic Prayer II). Mass is not the same as devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, which, of course, is directed to our Lord.

Standing during the Eucharistic Prayer is not a mere description of what is done. It is based on a rich theological understanding of what is happening at Mass.

Good catechesis will necessarily reflect that theology, and an increasingly educated Catholic laity will inevitably come to understand the connection between that theology and standing. Can our practice really be different from our catechesis?

Adopting the same posture as the priest, i.e. standing, also serves to reflect the fact that *the whole assembly* is offering the Mass.

OUR DIOCESE

As far as I can trace these developments, where standing has been introduced in our parishes (and in some other parishes of New Zealand), this has come about for a variety of reasons:

- where church buildings have been refurbished, and where briefs have been prepared for architects, the norm given in the 1975 Missal was the current norm;
- with the encouragement of the Bishops' Conference, many parishes used a programme *Exploring the Liturgy* (1986), in which it was said, echoing the ancient Tradition, that standing is "the posture of Easter people";
- at requiem Masses, some priests have preferred to ask their congregations to remain standing rather than ask non-Catholics to kneel;
- in one parish I personally intervened because I wanted to offset the developing practice of the whole congregation sitting throughout the Eucharistic Prayer.

I am also under the impression that where standing has been introduced, it really isn't a problem for most people. However, it is for some, and so for your assistance, and pending any future decision by the NZCBC, I propose the following guidelines:

- 1) it would be contrary to the mind of the Church for us to be inflexible and rigid on this matter, given that the Missal allows for standing or kneeling for the Eucharistic Prayer (as determined by the Bishops' Conferences), and given the range of reasons for which the Missal excuses from kneeling at the Consecration;
- 2) our guiding principle should be to get as close to the mind of the Church as possible, following the Missal where it is clear, and going back to the principles underlying the liturgical renewal where the Missal gives mixed signals;
- 3) the highest priority should be given to catechesis so that people can understand why they do what they do, and not feel imposed upon;
- 4) where there is conflict between the layout of the church and the postures appropriate for the liturgy, the requirements of participation, and therefore of posture, should be given priority (cf G.I.R.M., para. 311);
- 5) an important goal is for the assembly to act in unison (cf G.I.R.M., para. 42). But those who need to sit when others are standing, and those insist on kneeling, are to be respected and allowed to do so;

- 6) catechesis is to include reminders that our participation, whether by song or by silence, listening or responding, standing or kneeling, is always an expression of our worship;
- 7) those who do not kneel at the Consecration are to be reminded from time to time that they are expected to bow;
- 8) given that Mass is not the only liturgy celebrated in our churches, and given the need for other eucharistic devotions, our church furnishings also need to make it easy for people to kneel, at least in those parts of the church where these devotions are held. (The new church of St Thomas More at Napier South provides for comfortable kneeling but without kneelers!)