

Three Minute Teaching

When Is It Proper to Genuflect?

One must make a distinction at the outset between the church building that has its tabernacle located visibly near or in the sanctuary area, and the church building that has its tabernacle located aside in a Blessed Sacrament Chapel.

The former is rather prevalent in newer or remodeled Catholic Churches. Brought about by a desire to emphasize that community gathered is at the outset the Body of Christ, there follows a desire to stress that the Eucharist reserved in the tabernacle (reserved primarily for the communion to the sick) becomes an object of devotion and adoration. When entering a Catholic Church that has a separate chapel for the Blessed Sacrament the appropriate gesture before going into the pew is a simple bow of the head and shoulders to the altar, where the Eucharist will be celebrated. That is also the appropriate gesture when leaving church, if the tabernacle is not visible.

If one were to enter the chapel in such a church building one would be encouraged to genuflect upon entering and upon leaving in recognition of the sacred presence reserved in the tabernacle.

In our two worship sites the tabernacle in both churches is in the sanctuary area. The appropriate gesture therefore on entering and leaving is to genuflect—touching one's right knee to the floor.

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal, first translated into English in 2003, is still in the process of being implemented not only in this country but throughout the world. That document stresses that the objective of any of the directives is “to serve the common spiritual good of the people

of God, rather than private inclinations or arbitrary choice.” The point being that we gather as community and we are invited to act in unison in our worship of God—when singing or praying, in gesture and in posture. Our challenge as stated in the Acts of the Apostles is to worship “with one heart and soul.”

In addition, in the United States, the Bishops have determined that the sign of reverence to be made before receiving communion is a bow of the head. To genuflect at that point or to kneel is to ignore the bishop’s directive and to give priority to personal preference over communal unity.

Today’s question serves to remind us that external body gestures during liturgical actions continually remind us that human beings worship God not merely through words and thought, but with our entire bodies. With respect to genuflection, it is clear the emphasis is on the quality rather than on the quantity of the gestures.