

Genu-Reflection: When to Genuflect or Bow in Prayer

Catholics seem to have many different postures, gestures, and actions of prayer. During this unprecedented time, Msgr. Schooler & I have received many inquiries about prayers that may seem somewhat unfamiliar or perhaps are prayed in a more public way over the Internet or social media. Due to this newfound exposure of the spiritual life in a new way and being able to visually observe more directly certain actions of specific prayers, it is very common to encounter some difficulty when following along. You are not alone and I've included the subsequent reflection to aid and explain a method of following along in prayer.

How may I observe and follow along with various ways of prayer, particularly those that involve bowing and genuflecting?

I will first break this into the two parts, bowing and genuflecting, and begin by reflecting on the action of the genuflection. The genuflection has existed for many centuries: from King Nebuchadnezzar in the Old Testament Book of Daniel to the Magi arriving at the nativity scene. St. Paul writes “(t)herefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:9-11) From apostolic times, genuflecting was a sign of reverence in the presence of Jesus, while also articulating that signs of reverence shall be given even to Jesus' Holy Name, which also include bowing of the head. Genuflecting has, however, become a more formal action specifically associated with prayer in the last thousand years. During Medieval times, subjects of a monarch or those appearing in the royal court would come before the monarch, bending their left knee. This was an act of submission and respect, meaning that the person was placing themselves in the service of the monarch. This showed loyalty and dependence upon another because going down on your knee makes you vulnerable and dependent. In essence, one humbles themselves and is not as strong as they are in full stature when genuflecting on bended knee.

Christians took this sign of submission and respect into prayer and the spiritual life, altering it slightly. Instead of genuflecting on the left knee to a king or monarch, we genuflect on our right knee to show honor, reverence, and service to Christ, the Lord. Typically, the genuflection is used to venerate the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, normally in the Tabernacle when arriving or departing a Catholic Church. This is a beautiful way to begin spiritual preparations for Mass or a time of prayer. We both begin and end spiritual conversations with the Lord in Church by showing a sign of reverence and that we are placing ourselves in the service of the Lord, our King, above all the other things we do that day, week, etc.

On the Solemnity of Christmas & the Annunciation, a genuflection is also used while praying the Nicene Creed at the words of the Incarnation "... and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and became man." This reflects the specific focus of the solemnity celebrated that day and the importance of the Mystery of the Incarnation, that Jesus Christ became man for our salvation! (Note: a solemnity is a higher celebration than a feast on the Church calendar.)

Bowing of the head as a sign of reverence has been a familiar sign in the Church. Pope St. Gregory X wrote in the 1200s: "We wish that at the pronouncing of that Name, chiefly at the Holy Sacrifice, every one would bow his head in token that interiorly he bends the knee of his heart." This connection between names of Jesus, His Sacrifice, and His Presence show a direct link of our spiritual journey, explaining why the Catholic Church shows such dedicated signs of reverence that point to Jesus' Presence alive in the world and acknowledged by actions of prayer

Bowing of the head is a less dramatic sign of reverence; it is one of the most familiar signs of prayer. You should bow your head for 2 main things, an altar and the name of Jesus Christ or the Trinity. Upon entering a Catholic Church, you normally genuflect towards the tabernacle. Jesus' Presence in the tabernacle, if it is located behind or in proximity to the altar and sanctuary area, surpasses the significance of the altar, so no bow after a genuflection is necessary here. However, if Jesus is not present in the tabernacle, such as on Good Friday, or if the tabernacle is located outside of the sanctuary area, such as in a separate chapel, then a bow to the altar would be appropriate. While it is quite rare to encounter the tabernacle outside of the sanctuary area in our present day, there are still Catholic Churches that have their tabernacle housed in a separate chapel for a variety of reasons. As you may recall in the old church at St. Pius X, we had the tabernacle reserved in a separate chapel. The separate chapel allowed parishioners a quiet place to pray with our Lord in the tabernacle.

Finally we ask, "when should I bow my head during prayer?" Simply put, we bow our heads when "Jesus Christ" or the name of the Trinity, "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," are mentioned in any prayer. When praying the "Glory Be" prayer during the rosary, the first part of the prayer calls upon the Trinity, so this may be one common time to bow your head. This may also commonly occur during the Nicene Creed or the Eucharistic Prayer. As you may see at Mass, priests are generally pretty good at bowing at the appropriate times. It's not an absolute requirement to bow your head at any of these times, but it is a good way to grow in your faith and reverence of our Lord. Just remember, it primarily serves as a sign of humility, not something to point out to others! For example, I know that when I celebrate Mass, I rarely bow my head during the Eucharistic Prayer because I'm more focused on the words and actions of Consecration.

On a similar level, Catholics do make a bow at the words of the Mystery of the Incarnation during the Nicene Creed at Mass (with those two exceptions that I mentioned earlier). This also shows respect and reverence to Jesus Christ, our Lord and King, but in a slightly different way as it reflects our spiritual appreciation and connection with Jesus' sacrifice for our salvation.

There are a few other bows as well that I haven't covered, but these are typically accompanied with prayers or devotions, such as a solemn blessing near the end of Mass at the words "bow down for the blessing" or bowing and/or genuflecting during Stations of the Cross. If you have any further questions, ask or email your parish priest!

-Fr. Nathan Maskal