

How Catholics Worship: What we do and why we do it.

Gathered in Faith



Office of
Evangelization and Worship

All of us from time to time find ourselves gathered in groups, large or small, to celebrate some event which is important to us as a community. In order for such events to flow smoothly and to make it possible for all to participate fully both as individuals and as a group, we assume that there will need to be certain rules or directions which will help us participate as a body. Indeed, we are willing to give up some of our individual habits and preferences for the good of all. Otherwise chaos might ensue.

Our Catholic Church has a long history and much experience in gathering its people to celebrate liturgical feasts: whether it is a small rural Catholic church with an assembly of five families or a papal Mass outdoors with several thousand people, both assemblies will assume that there will be certain rubrics or directions to assist them in their prayer responses, gestures and postures so that their common faith can be visible in their common gestures and expressions as one family in Christ.

The rules which appear in our liturgical books are called rubrics. They are printed in red so as to separate them from the prayers themselves. Nonetheless, they are important inasmuch as they give the presider and the assembly directions for worship.

Because liturgy like other human experiences is a living experience celebrated by living individuals in a particular place at a particular time, we will often find that rubrics change from time to time adjusting to the age and current circumstances and the physical place in which it is celebrated. The Vatican Congregation of Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments is the office which guides the church in its celebration of all liturgies and sacraments.

Where can you find these rules and guidelines for Catholic worship? You will find them in a special section of the Sacramentary (Official Book of Prayers and Rites used by the priest) in the celebration of the sacraments. It is called the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM). It is also available separately in book form from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The General Instruction was first published in 1969 shortly after the Second Vatican Council. It has been slightly modified since the Council. The latest English translation was published in 2002.



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Why the changes? The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council wisely realized that if liturgy is a living reality “it will need to be adapted to the circumstances and needs of modern times” (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy #4). This means that even though our liturgical practices may change from time to time, the fundamental beliefs of our faith which under gird the liturgy do not change.

Moreover, because our Church believes in adapting the liturgy to various cultures and peoples “for the life of the world,” bishops of each country have been given permission by the Holy See to adapt certain parts of the GIRM so that the celebration of mass may be more fittingly celebrated in each land. The bishops of the United States, therefore, have adapted some of these general norms to fit the needs of the Catholic church in our own country. The bishops of the three dioceses of Alaska have further adapted and specified these general norms for our use. It is these that we shall outline and explain more fully in forthcoming articles.

Why is this important? Many of us will remember the changes in the liturgy shortly after the Second Vatican Council. Many Catholics, indeed even many priests, did not understand what changes were coming and why they were being made. There was very little explanation why all this was being done. No one told us why we were asked to “change” so radically from the Latin Mass with the priest’s back to us. Some Catholics are still wondering about it today. For this reason, Archbishop Schwietz has insisted that clear instructions and explanations (catechesis) be given regarding the latest changes contained in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal as adapted for our Alaskan dioceses. The order of our liturgy and the depth of our faith will depend upon a clear understanding of what we are asked to do and why.

Therefore, the bishops of the Alaska Catholic Conference, Archbishop Schwietz, Fairbanks Bishop Kettler, and Juneau Bishop Warfel in consultation with their individual Diocesan Liturgical Commissions and local presbyterates, have promulgated a set of common liturgical gestures and postures for the celebration of the Eucharist in light of the diverse population and the great number of visitors to our state. In the introduction, they say: “We share one Lord, one faith, one baptism as Church. We implement these norms not to correct abuses, but rather we are concerned about uniformity in gestures and postures not conformity. Our hope is that uniformity will help to build community and that together we shall grow as a Christian people, a people of faith.”