



# Boston Catholic Journal



NIHIL NISI IESUM

Dedicated to Mary, Mother of God

Salus Animarum Suprema Lex Esto (Canon Law 175)

The Salvation of Souls is the Supreme Law in the Church

## How should we Hold our Hands at Mass?



... and does it really matter?

**We don't seem to know what to do  
with our hands during Mass!**

Catholics, it would appear — *both Traditional and Post-Vatican-II* — no longer have any idea about what to do with those awkward appendages called their hands during Mass. Any attempt to arrive at an understanding of the apparent absence of *ritual uniformity* in the *outward* expression of prayer as a manifestation of *inward* spirituality has doggedly eluded me. Our knees seem to instinctively know — *or used to know* — what to do in the way of kneeling and genuflection. It nevertheless remains that apart from *haphazardly* blessing ourselves, we seem to have no idea what to do with our *hands* during Mass, especially during prayer at Mass. Indeed, how is a Catholic *supposed* to hold his hands during prayer? Is there an agreed upon form? And what is more, does it matter? Pope John Paul II clarified this:

**Stop Pretending to be a Co-priest or a Concelebrant at Mass!**

**“It is a grave abuse”**

*“In Eucharistic celebrations deacons and non-ordained members of the faithful may not pronounce prayers — e.g. especially the Eucharistic prayer, [openly or silently] with its concluding doxology — or any other parts of the liturgy reserved to the celebrant priest.*

*Neither may deacons or non-ordained members of the faithful use gestures or actions which are proper to the same priest celebrant. [e.g. holding arms or hands raised up and open, cupping ones hands in prayer as the priest does, holding arms raised up and open in imitation of the priest]*

*It is a grave abuse for any member of the non-ordained faithful to “quasi preside” at the Mass while leaving only that minimal participation to the priest which is necessary to secure validity.”*

*John Paul II 1997 “On Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priest”*

We must always bear in mind Christ’s admonition: *“When you pray, you shall not be as the hypocrites, that love to stand and pray in the synagogues and corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men.”* (St. Matthew 6.5)

This confusion did not exist prior to much of the *even greater* confusion engendered by corrupt “interpretations” of the Second Vatican Council and that ever-elusive “*spirit of the Council*” that often egregiously flies in the face of genuine Catholic theology, doctrine and dogma. If anything was *absolutely certain* it was equally *absolutely tentative*. Hence the confusion that still has us scratching our heads sixty years later, terribly unsure about what authentically constitutes a Catholic in light of this overwhelming and often illogical exegesis. Even the simplest things have become cause of contention, doubt, and uncertainty.

Like a man doubting his own identity and reaching out to others *who do not know him* to confirm it — the “Second Vatican Council” reached out in the broadest “inclusive” terms, to strangers who did not know the Church ... and even detested it,

to reassure them that *after* Vatican II the Church was *no longer what it had always claimed to be*, but now — *finally enlightened after 2000 years of misunderstanding itself* — and having been corrected by Vatican II, is *now what it ought to have been*. This, despite the 1,981 years of constant teaching between Pope Linus, 67 A.D. — *the next pope after St. Peter himself* — and Pope Pius XII in 1958. That is to say, after almost 2000 years ...

“*Do you, yourselves, not know who you are?*” Protestants asked incredulously. “Are you not *certain*? Then surely *we* will tell you.

Now that you are enlightened, *you are becoming us*, whose revolt against you, you have finally accepted and endorsed. We are ... *all of us* ... since Vatican II leveled the playing field ... the *all-inclusive* “People of God” — despite differences and contradictions in doctrine, dogma, *and even our religions themselves!*”

This was the clarion, the evangel, that became the “Spirit of Vatican II”. No one left out in cold — no matter *what* Christ said about no one coming to the Father except through Him (St. John 14.6).

*Our* prayers became the prayers of *others* (“*for Thine is the Kingdom and the power ...*” *a gloss* uttered only by *Protestants* prior to Vatican II); and we even greeted one another, and our own priests greeted *us*, in Yiddish, with “*Shalom!*.” We sang *their*

songs, who did not sing *ours* ... Martin Luther but not Saint Gregory. We prayed their vernacular who did not pray in our Latin. We stripped our churches in an ecumenical impulse to shared sterility. We de-canonized our saints while adulating their “Reformers”. They gained Paradise, one and all, and we lost Hell. They attained to effortless and egalitarian *sanctity* while we relinquished the notion of *sin*. It is odd. We became like unto them who disdained to become like to us — *who have become like to them!*

All things uniquely Catholic were deconstructed, de-emphasized, demoted, demolished or abolished. Entire devotions and Solidarities vanished as inimical to “ecumenism.” Confessionals disappeared or became therapy rooms (by appointment). Our priests faced the people like our formerly “separated brethren”, and turned their backs to God. The “People of God” metamorphosed into God Himself — *to whom* was lifted the Sacrifice and Oblation that had anciently been lifted up to God!

Is it really any wonder that we have even forgotten how to pray as Catholics? It is this, and not all the incalculable devastation wrought by the “*spirit of Vatican II*” that we wish to address now. Perhaps it is this collective amnesia that has become the last vestige of a unique and once universal culture that we called Catholicism. Something simple and utterly Catholic — in *how* we pray as Catholics.

## Praying 101

How do Catholics pray? It is a modest and simple beginning to recovering what was lost. Something small and apprehensible, like a mustard seed. The Teaching Sisters taught us that we held our hands in the form of a steeple, palms pressed together, fingers pointed up to God, and the right thumb over the left forming a Cross (We were also taught, incidentally, to bow our heads at the Sacred Name of Jesus — always and everywhere, without exception — but this, too, quickly disappeared after 1962 ... Saint Paul notwithstanding.<sup>1</sup>) It is simple enough a question, unlike seeking comprehensible reasons for now having:

- **Three** different “*Forms of Greeting*” in the *Novus Ordo* Mass — from 1 in the Latin Mass of 2000 years
- **Three** different “*Forms of the Penitential Act*” in the *Novus Ordo* Mass — from 1 in the Latin Mass of 2000 years
- **Ten** different “*Eucharistic Prayers*” in the *Novus Ordo* Mass — from 1 in the Latin Mass of 2000 years
- **Four** “*Forms of Dismissal*” (when they are not improvised) — in the *Novus Ordo* Mass from 1 in the Latin Mass of 2000 years

Out of breath, yet?

No one wishes to be conspicuous, or to presume to set themselves apart from others in a way that would invite their being deemed affectatious or hypocritically holy. *Since the emphasis on minimizing ritual at large* (when was the last time you knelt, let alone bowed as indicated in the missal upon reciting the words in the Nicene Creed “**And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us**” since the *Novus Ordo* of the Second Vatican Council? We have never once — repeat, not once — observed this in any *Novus Ordo* Mass anywhere in the world, even while *the missal explicitly* directs both priest and congregation to bow upon enunciating these words.

Since *this repudiation of ritual at large*, a dichotomy — a kind of sundering of sorts — has resulted between posture and intention, a disjunction between the body and the soul. We refuse — or fear — to allow our body to conform to our soul: what our bodies display and signify is not in accord with what is in our hearts; we are divided within ourselves; our minds, our hearts, pray, say, fervently believe, one thing — but in our bodies there is nothing indicative of it, nothing in union with, expressive of, what is in our minds. As it were, our minds worship, bend before the will of God ... *but our bodies do not?* “That is my own affair”, you say. “What I pray and how fervently I believe is my business alone; it is between God and me.”

This is true. That is to say, it is true of *private prayer* — but not of *public worship*, in which we act as one body and in which our unity with our neighbor as members

of the one Body in Christ is signified, enacted, through a common ritual that is a collective statement of otherwise utterly unique parts in that One Body. What we express with our bodies, our postures, our verbal prayers, *is a communion in that One Body that we cannot express, attain to, through our individual and private prayers.*

There is a difference between how we pray privately and publicly. We do not bring our own private idiosyncrasies to Mass. We worship, pray, not simply as ourselves, but as members the Communion of Saints (you will pardon me if I defer from using the much-abused trope “People of God”), as a spiritual body larger than our own physical bodies. We pray as a Church, together, united in one belief, one creed, commonly, and such **common worship can only be coherently united through ritual, through a shared ritual that expresses the unity of our belief.** Through the active participation in ritual, we become visibly one; before God and to each other! Do you not see it?

## **Rituals are Enacted by Bodies**

At our homes, behind closed doors, we can and should pray as God inspires us and teaches us. The ways are myriad. But at the Most Holy Sacrifice of the Mass we pray not only with our individual assent and fervor, but as a body of believers greater than the particular bodies that our individual souls inhabit. *What unites this mass of*



*individuals with different aspirations but the same object of worship? Ritual. What we do in common; what is a visible, almost sacramental reality, our collective affirmation of what we believe through the common form of shared ritual. **Rituals are enacted by bodies, not minds**, even as they are a visible manifestation of the invisible mind. Rituals present shared, that is to say, commonly (as “in common”) accepted realities to the mind through the bodies of others, specifically through the visible acts of the bodies of others.*

So, what to do about those awkward hands that appear so vexsome during Mass? Where do we put them? The *Caeremoniale Episcoporum* (1985) in the paragraph *De manibus iunctis* is clear about the Catholic posture concerning the folding of the hands during Mass and prayer:



“When it says with hands *folded*, it is to be understood in this way: palms extended and joined together in front of the breast, with the right thumb over the left in the form of a cross” (#107, n.80)”

Another form, long in tradition, and also reverent while standing (pressed gently against the waist), as well as in kneeling, is hands *clasped* in prayer with thumbs forming a Cross ... although we hasten to add that this form is not *uniquely* Catholic:



Now, as to whether it really matters or not. Surely God hears our earnest prayers no matter how we fold our hands in prayer, or even if we fold them at all. However, we do know that people who do not know God or love Him do not do this. I personally have never observed an atheist, skeptic, or agnostic pray at all. I have no evidence of it. There is nothing in either their posture or their words to convey to me not just an attitude of prayer, but the actuality of prayer. In a word, there are gestures and postures, that we assume as Catholics that others do not. They are signs distinctly, uniquely — and historically — associated with Catholics. It is what Catholics do. It is part of our identity of being a Catholic. We have Crucifixes with the *Corpus* Figure of Christ on them, rather than plain Crosses. We have Rosaries. Up to 40 years ago

we bowed our heads whenever the Sacred Name of Jesus was uttered. We struck our breasts in reciting the Confiteor, made the Sign of the Cross before we went into the water or upon any undertaking. These things do not necessarily identify us as Catholics, but they are unmistakably *signs* of Catholics.

What is more, because we are Catholics we do, in fact —or ought to — behave differently at Mass than we do at home, or in a pub. We do not (or ought not) cross our legs, lean back over the pew behind us, or wear gym suits or baseball hats. Reverence precludes this. Or are we lacking in due reverence to God and Church? Our voices are decidedly more subdued at the local bank, and our actions much more restrained than they typically are in *Novus Ordo* Churches. I urge you to go to a Tridentine (Latin) Mass to experience the stunning difference. And yet, oddly enough, the problem of those vexingly awkward hands persists in both. Why?

## **Disdain for Ritual**

It is likely that the ritual and custom has been forgotten altogether in the passing of two generations alone. We see the proper posture of prayer illustrated in all our religious statues (those that still remain) and sacred art. But somehow, we are obtuse to the inspiration that such statuary and art is intended to invoke. We have somehow come to believe that such postures of prayer are, in fact, factitious, strained, unreal

— that the people — of whom the statues are likenesses only — prayed differently than portrayed by the artist or sculptor. Perhaps only Saints prayed that way. But are we not all called to emulate the saints? Why are we so afraid of the odor of sanctity? Is there anything more beautiful than a Catholic conformed to Christ, to the Saints who were conformed to Christ? We fear being seen as Pharisees, hypocrites. Are there some? Yes, some. Are there Catholics possessed of sanctity conferred upon them by God? Yes, some. Perhaps many. But we are so afraid of the judgment of the world (which should mean nothing to us)! Even of the judgment of our own brothers and sisters in Christ. Rather than being pleasing in the sight of God and Holy Church, we would please men?! Saint Paul is absolutely clear about this: *“For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? If I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ.”*<sup>2</sup>

## **What, then, should be our posture of prayer at Mass — and is it really important?**

While standing we see hands hanging limply, stuffed into pockets, clasped behind backs, leaning, palms down, upon the back of the next pew. While sitting they are stretched out on the pew behind them in a grand and expansive gesture of detached (and irreverent) relaxation, or caressing and massaging the backs or necks of their

spouses, girlfriends, or boyfriends, folded across their chests as if in deliberation or impatience, or as objects of sudden and peculiar interest to them as they almost clinically examine their cuticles and fingernails. While kneeling, the uncertainty of what to do with their hands is particularly acute and most obvious. They are either limply hung over the backrest of the pew in front of them, unjoined, crossed at the wrists as if relaxed, or loosely clasped in a manner reminiscent of piety, but diligently casual enough not to openly express it.

Going to Holy Communion they are at one's sides, behind one's back, swinging in a natural gait, and, of course, casually folded, usually to the maximum extent allowed by the length of one's arms. Are we embarrassed to hold our hands properly in prayer? Are we afraid to be thought sanctimonious, putting our devotion on display? We all kneel the same way: on our knees. Why cannot we hold our hands the same way — expressing *unity* in all things in worship, instead of the strident cry for *diversity* in all things? Look at our children at their First Holy Communion. See how their hands are folded *as an example to us*! Is that our way, then? Teach our children one thing, and do another? Do only statues, following our First Holy Communion, give us this example? And what is the value of a statue if it does not inspire us and call us to emulate Mary and the Saints? Do you not know that you are called to be a saint, too?

## ***Diversity engenders division!***

Do not be your “own individual” at Mass. *The Mass is not about “you” — it is about Christ* — and also about unity through Him, with Him, and in Him! “*Ut unum sint*” ... Christ prayed, “That they may be one”.<sup>3</sup> Have we not had enough of “diversity” at Mass, and for far too long? Diversity engenders division! The very etymology of the word derives from the Latin *diversitatem*, or “contrariety, contradiction, disagreement”. “Diversity” has been *the unrelenting mantra of the “spirit” of the Second Vatican Council* ... as it has been implemented — and to what grievous an aftermath! The “unity” so sought after became “diversity” and diversity became division in every parish. No?

## ***There IS Beauty in Uniformity***

Contrary to the prevailing mind-set, there is beauty in oneness in purpose and expression. Can you imagine a stadium filled with people, each singing their *own version* of the National Anthem — and each a different tune? What is Dvorak’s New World Symphony if every symphony orchestra played it, not according to the composer’s notation, but to their *own* improvised notation? Whatever cacophony it becomes, it does not remain, and will not be recognized, as the *New World Symphony* composed by Dvorak. There is beauty, clarity, and united purpose in harmony, in

union, in oneness — when everyone is on the same page and not on a page of their own choosing. Do you not see this?

### 出る杭は打たれる。 “Deru kugi wa utareru”

The Japanese use an aphorism that is particularly apropos of this discussion: “*The nail that sticks out gets hammered down.*” What is incongruous and not in harmony is discouraged. The trumpet player who plays too loudly when his part is to be subdued, is corrected. The cellist who spontaneously enters into a rhapsodic frenzy independent of the composition and notation — ignoring the conductor — is scolded. The desire to “stick out”, to “be observed”, to call attention to oneself by not comporting oneself in harmony with all those around, is nothing less than vanity and self-aggrandizement.

The absence of folded hands in prayer (and especially going to Holy Communion — which, of course, the entire congregation does since none are sinners any longer, or at least after Vatican II) is the absence of reverence before the holy. Would you so insolently stride up to Christ Himself (which you do) with hands carelessly hanging like limp appendages at your sides, or stuffed into your pockets? This speaks much about your faith — or lack of it. We would not so casually greet a president or prime

minister. Why? It would be presumptuous and insolent —and you know it! But our Blessed Lord ...?

## **The Speed-Blessing**

While we are at it, and as an aside, but not without relevance, when you bless yourself, realize in Whose Name you bless yourself: The Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. In the name of God Himself! Why do you make the Sign of the Cross so hastily and often so sloppily? Think of what you are doing! Of Whom you are invoking! Priests are often as guilty of this as laymen. The SIGN OF THE CROSS (before which the devil flees and under which Constantine conquered) you do as if it had no meaning, no significance. *The Sign of the Cross should be made slowly, reverently, purposefully, thoughtfully — in recognition of Him Who in that act anoints you!* Why the speed-blessing? Is the Name of God, the Sign of the Cross through which you have been purchased and redeemed at so incalculable a cost ... so trite? One observer of Saint Bernadette was deeply struck by the way she made the Sign of the Cross while praying before Mary at Lourdes. It was slow, each name uttered with love, and totally, surpassingly, reverent! Should our signing ourselves with the Cross be less reverent?

Not just what you pray, but *how* you pray, will be a witness to the reality of God to



others, not because you wish it to be, but simply because it is so. In this sense you yourself, unknowingly, become something of a sacramental.

## **Other Forms of Holding one's Hands in Prayer**

Given what we have just said, it is nevertheless the case that some people (since Vatican II) *choose* to hold their hands in prayer in an idiosyncratic expression of their own *personal* and peculiar iteration. Let us look at two physical attitudes of prayer that we are likely to encounter at the *Novus Ordo* Mass:

- **The *Orans*** (literally, “praying” in Latin) **posture**. Here the supplicant holds one hands extended upward in *imitation of the priest* at the Altar who does this *according to the rubrics* in his Sacramental and priestly faculty in *representing* the congregation. This has largely, and *illegitimately*, come into practice through so-called “*Charismatic Catholics*”, or the “Charismatic Renewal” (yet another faction and another “renewal” in the Church, and which provides “workshops” for learning *glossolalia*, or “*speaking in tongues*” — the *not-so-spontaneous* (because it is *taught, studied, learned, and practiced* in these “workshops”) uttering of verbal nonsense — indecipherable even to other “Charismatics”, but presumably understandable by God before Whom they hold themselves to *spontaneously* aspire ... in what

has in fact been *taught, studied, learned, and practiced!*).

It is noteworthy that *concelebrants* of the Mass (other priests) and *deacons* refrain — *in compliance with the rubrics of the Mass* — from using the *orans* posture; only the main celebrant is instructed to do so who, once again, *in himself* represents all those present at the Mass. This quasi-priestly *orans* gesture is yet another instance of the increasing permeability between the Sanctuary and the pews: we commonly see this *when the priest illicitly leaves the Sanctuary to be democratically immersed in the pews as just “one of the guys” rather than an alter Christus set apart*, and the laity (mostly women) swarm the Sanctuary in every “Ministry” (hence having “Ministers”) fabricated since Vatican II. Prior to Vatican II Catholics had *Priests* and Protestant had *Ministers*. We now have both, and many more “Ministers” than Priests.

Is the **orans posture** uniquely Catholic? No! Until the “Charismatic Renewal” that renewed nothing, it was confined to emotionally-imbued Protestant revivalist meetings, American Pentecostals, and Evangelicals. Yes, there are some ancient Catholic murals depicting people praying in the *orans* posture — just as it is found in pre-Christian pagan illustrations and

engravings in Egypt and Mesopotamia. In a word there is nothing at all distinctively Catholic in this posture of prayer. Is it bad? No. No form of genuine prayer is bad. Is it liturgically, correct? No. It is the proverbial [“Deru kugi wa utareru”](#), the nail sticking up *calling for attention* (St. Matthew 6.5), when our attention should be directed to God Alone in the Most Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.



**Muslim** custom  
of praying with hands  
cupped and open

- **Hands Cupped.** We are uncertain of the origin of this posture of prayer which *most likely derives from the Muslim tradition of the 19th Rakat of the Salat* in private prayer: “Say prayers with hands cupped and palms up at chest level.”<sup>4</sup> There is no precedent in Catholicism — or Christianity — for holding ones hands in this manner during prayer. Presumably it is an attitude of receptiveness to God's blessings as a cup receives water. This is a charitable interpretation. According to *AllExperts*, in Buddhism, “hands are a little

*cupped rather than strictly palm-to-palm, because they are supposed to represent a lotus bud — that pure, beautiful flower that grows up out of the mud!”*<sup>5</sup> Once again, there is not only nothing distinctly Catholic in this attitude of prayer, apart from the idiosyncrasy of the one praying, but no apparent association with Christianity at all. Once again it is [“Deru kugi wa utareru.”](#)

*Ut unum sint!* “That they may be one.” Such a beautiful — and since Vatican II — elusive desideration!

---

<sup>1</sup> Philippians 2:10

<sup>2</sup> Gal. 1.10

<sup>3</sup> St. John 17:21

<sup>4</sup> <https://sufism.org/foundations/salaat/salaat-2> / <https://unsplash.com/s/photos/muslim-prayer>

<sup>5</sup> <https://en.allexperts.com/q/Buddhists-948/2008/4/Prayer-Hands.htm>

Geoffrey K. Mondello  
Editor  
Boston Catholic Journal

