

# Episcopal Aerobics

Worship in the Episcopal Church involves our body, mind, and spirit. During the service we move in ways that help us experience the Spirit. Here is a brief guide to how we move during worship and why we do it.

## Bowing

Bowing is a sign of reverence. It is usually done when approaching the altar. Parishioners in the pews often bow when the cross passes by them as it is taken down the center aisle during the procession or recession.

Some people bow whenever the words "Jesus Christ" are said during the liturgy, and when Christ's incarnation is described in the Nicene Creed. In this act, they remember Christ's humility. "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross!" Philippians 2: 5-8.

## Genuflection

A genuflection is the action begun from a standing position in which the worshiper moves his or her right foot back a step, drops the right knee briefly to the floor, and then stands upright again. Most people naturally bow their head while performing this action; some make the sign of the cross. Some hold onto a nearby pew for physical support.

The purpose of genuflection is for the worshiper to honor Jesus Christ present in the Eucharist. Since a tabernacle containing the Blessed Sacrament is in the sanctuary, it is common for worshipers to genuflect before entering and after leaving their place in the pew.

## Kneeling, Sitting and Standing

Both kneeling and standing are postures for prayer.

Many parishioners, upon entering the pew before the start of the worship service, kneel to prayer in order to ready their hearts and minds for the working of the Holy Spirit. Before and after receiving communion, it is a common practice to kneel and pray before joining in singing the communion hymns. Many parishioners may also kneel at the close of the service to give thanks for the outpouring of love that had been experienced in worship and to ask God's blessing and help as they move to share the Christ light in the world.

The Book of Common Prayer (pages 833 and 834) provides prayers that can be said before and after worship and before and after receiving communion.

Kneeling is a common practice when saying the corporate Confession, and when receiving Communion; though standing is an equally valid posture.

We stand for the reading of the Gospel, for the Eucharistic Prayer, and for singing most hymns. This includes the Gloria (Glory to God - a song of praise), and the Kyrie or the Trisagion (requests for God's mercy). We sit for the lessons for the day, and stand for the singing of the Psalm, which

usually comes between the two lessons. We sit for the homily, and then stand for the Creed, which generally follows it.

If there is special music during the offeratory, such as a Choir anthem, we sit. If a hymn is sung instead, we stand.

While folks are going forward to receive communion, people generally sit for the singing of the hymns. The priest or deacon will indicate when it is time to stand again to be ready for the final prayer and last hymn.

## **Procession/Recession**

It is customary to stand at the beginning and ending of the service. We sing at these times almost every service, and even when the processional or recessional is silent, standing is appropriate. Many parishoners bow at the passing of the cross during both processional and recessional.

## **Sign of the Cross**

"God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." Galatians 6:14

The sign of the cross is frequently used in worship and at other times in the life of a Christian.

During worship, the sign of the cross may be made

- Whenever the Trinity is mentioned;
- During the Creed when our baptism is referenced;
- When a blessing is bestowed by a bishop or priest; and
- During the Eucharistic prayer when we pray for our own sanctification.

It is also used when an item is blessed for the service of God - altars, linens, holy water, etc.

In personal devotions, the sign of the cross may be used

- In the morning to seek God's guidance throughout the day, and in the evening to seek God's ;
- Before and after prayer, against distractions;
- Before and after meals, asking God's blessing;
- In dangers of soul, like temptation and occasions of sin;
- In dangers of body like storms, sickness, and travel; and
- Before chief actions and undertakings, to make them pleasing to God and to obtain God's help in performing them.

There are two common forms of the sign of the cross. The first is the large sign of the cross made by touching the forehead, the breast, and the left and right shoulders. The touch of the forehead signifies that God is in our head (in our mind), the touch of the breast signifies that God is in our heart (in our feelings), the touch of the shoulders signifies that God is in our limbs, directing them

as He wills. By the sign of the cross we dedicate to the service of God all the power of our mind, heart, and soul.

The smaller cross is traced upon the forehead, lips and breast. In worship, this form is often used before the Gospel reading.

The practice of making the sign of the cross dates back to at least the second century. It was said to recall the blood of the lambs marked on Jewish doorposts in Egypt on the night of the Passover (Exodus 12:7) and to foreshadow the seal set on the foreheads of the saints in heaven. In the third century, Tertullian had already reported this touching and beautiful Christian practice: "In all our undertakings - when we enter a place or leave it; before we dress; before we bathe; when we take our meals; when we light the lamps in the evening; before we retire at night; when we sit down to read; before each new task - we trace the sign of the cross on our foreheads."

We make the sign of the cross for various reasons:

- It reminds us of the Blessed Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The sign of the cross symbolizes God blessing us. When we make this sign we embrace God with mind and heart and strength, and express our belief that it is the Triune God from whom all blessings flow.
- It reminds us of our baptism. When we make this sign we remember that at our baptism, we are marked with the cross of Christ on our forehead with holy oil, and sealed as Christ's own forever.
- It reminds us that the Son of God died on a cross for all humankind. The cross, which had been a sign of disgrace, became through Christ a thing of glory and power. With the sign of the cross we recall the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and remember the price that Christ paid for our healing and redemption.
- It kindles and feeds our charity. When we make this sign, we recall the limitless love of Christ who died upon the cross for us, and we determine to follow his command to love others as we are loved.

Taken from St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church (Portland, Oregon) website,  
<http://www.stmaa.org>