

On Being Reverent: Bowing & Kneeling

On entering the church, pray:

Lord, I love the habitation of Your house and the place where Your glory dwells. In the multitude of Your tender mercies prepare my heart that I may enter your house to worship and confess Your holy name; through Jesus Christ, my God and Lord. Amen. (*Lutheran Service Book*, front inside cover)

God both demands and deserves our reverence. Whenever the Church is gathered into the house of the Lord, she is brought into the presence of the Creator of the universe and the Savior of all mankind to receive from Him His gifts of forgiveness and life. As such, she humbles herself before the One who humbled Himself to the point of death for her, even death upon a cross. "Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear" (Heb. 12:28)

But what does it mean to be reverent? How do we, as God's people, show reverence to God? Perhaps a definition is in order.

Reverence:

1: *profound adoring awed respect*

2: *a gesture of respect (as a bow)*

The Psalmist writes, "Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!" (Ps. 95:6) One of the ways the people of God have shown Him reverence throughout time is by bowing deeply or genuflecting/kneeling. (*Genuflect: to kneel on one knee and then rise again as an act of respect.*) To do so is a sign of humility. It is a confession that God is God and we are His creatures, that we deserve nothing good from Him but that we receive all good things because of His mercy and love.

The Church catholic, particularly the Lutheran Church, has always recognized this, "Falsely are our churches accused of abolishing the Mass; for the Mass is retained among us, and celebrated with highest reverence. Nearly all the usual ceremonies are also preserved" (Art. XXIV, Augsburg Confession).

Particularly in the Mass (Divine Service), the Lord Christ gives us of Himself, His very body and blood, for us to eat and drink for the forgiveness of our sins. How could we not be filled with "profound adoring awed respect" at the recognition of this gift?

"In the church's worship we meet with God who has called us into His kingdom. Therefore we express our reverence toward Him, His Word, His sacraments, and all persons and things connected with our worship

of Him. The first principle on which the traditional ceremonies are based is reverence." (Paul H. D. Lang, *Ceremony and Celebration*)

Some practical considerations:

- Bowing or genuflecting toward the altar on entering and leaving the church is an act of reverence to God, for the altar is the symbol of God. The same thing is true of bowing to the crucifix (or cross) when it is carried by in procession.
- Bowing the head at the holy name of Jesus every time it is mentioned during the worship service may have been suggested by the words of Scripture in Phil. 2:10. This is an old and reverent custom.
- Bowing the body whenever the words "Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost/Spirit" are said is a humble acknowledgement of the glory of the three persons of the Holy Trinity.
- Bowing or kneeling when the words of the Nicene Creed are said, "And was incarnate by the Holy Spirit...and was made man," expresses reverent awe over God's grace in becoming man in order to redeem us.
- Crossing oneself was practiced by Christians from the earliest centuries and may go back to apostolic times. It is done by putting the fingers of the right hand to the forehead, to the breast, and to the right and left shoulders, with the words, "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." By doing this we profess our faith in the Triune God and in our redemption through Christ crucified.

(Paul H. D. Lang, *Ceremony and Celebration*)

Martin Luther relays the following story in a sermon on the Gospel of St. John: "While the words 'And was made man' were being sung in church, he (the course and brutal lout) remained standing, neither genuflecting nor removing his hat. He showed no reverence, but just stood there like a clod. All the others dropped to their knees when the Nicene Creed was prayed and chanted devoutly. Then the devil stepped up to him and hit him so hard it made his head spin. He cursed him gruesomely and said: 'May hell consume you, you boorish ass! If God had become an angel like me and the congregation sang: "God was made an angel," I would bend not only my knees but my whole body to the ground. Yes, I would crawl ten ells down into the ground. And you vile human creature, you stand there like a stick or a stone. You hear that God did not become an angel but a man like you, and you just stand there like a stick of wood.' Whether this story is true or not, it is nevertheless in accordance with the faith (Rom. 12:6). With this illustrative story the holy fathers wished to admonish the youth to revere the indescribably great miracle of the incarnation. They wanted us to open our eyes wide and ponder these words well." (*Luther's Works*, Vol. 22)