

# Catholic 101

## Genuflecting and Bowing

What is this and why do we do it? Well we all know that a genuflection is to “bow the knee;” to bend the right knee to the ground while lowering or bowing the head. This is the most profound and solemn form of bowing. The next solemn form of a bow is what we call a “profound bow” which is to bow from the waste. Finally, the simplest form, or a “simple bow” which is bow only the head. So why do we do these, and when should we do these? When we pray we offer our whole self to God, and we offer ourselves with humility. The whole self seeks to be united with God. Prayer comes from the heart, but a lot of the time it’s expressed through our bodies. This makes perfect sense because it’s through our bodies that we express ourselves, through our voice, or signs, our facial expressions. We jump when we are startled; we open our arms to babies, and on and on. We pray with words. We put into those words, in the best way we can, what we want to say to God. And there is so much that we want to say, that sometimes there are not enough words. Our mystic tradition would tell us that the most meaningful prayer is expressed in silence, because when we stop talking to God, we can listen to what He might want to say to us. So between words and silence are all those forms of “non-verbal” communication. And it’s such a powerful form of communication because it’s almost instinctive. We all know one gesture can be worth a thousand words. In our liturgies, a genuflection signifies adoration, so it is reserved for the Most Blessed Sacrament, as well as a way to venerate the cross within the liturgy we celebrate on Good Friday. (General Instruction of the Roman Missal [GIRM] #274) So in a church, we genuflect to the tabernacle because we believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. A bow signifies reverence and honor that is shown to a person or the signs that represent them (GIRM #275). So we make a bow of the body, or profound bow, to the altar because the altar is a symbol of Christ, and during the creed when we say the words: by the power of the Holy Spirit. Here at Saint Patrick’s that would mean that before we enter our pews we bow to the altar and not genuflect to it, and when we approach the tabernacle we genuflect rather than bow. Of course anyone who is not physically able to do either of these things can simply pause or make a simple bow. A bow of the head is done when the “three Divine Persons are named together, and at the name of Jesus and of the Blessed Mother Mary” (GIRM #3275). For many Catholics these gestures are simply so much a part of who we are and how we pray that we don’t even think about them because the body knows. Above all: sitting, standing, kneeling, bowing, genuflecting are all ways to put our whole heart, mind, soul and body into our worship.