

## **The Mass (Part XII)**

*by Fr. Tim Church*

### **The Collect**

During the Prayer of the Day (Collect) the priest stands in an ancient posture of prayer called the “orant”. Whenever the priest says certain prayers in his role as presider over the assembly, he stands in this posture. His arms are raised with his palms upward. The faithful also join him in this posture, but only at the Our Father.

The origin of this posture is obviously very ancient. It was evident in courts as subjects presented themselves and their needs to kings. The Old Testament has numerous examples of this gesture:

“I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands, calling on your name.” (**Psalm 63:5**)

**(See Exodus 9:29, 33; Psalm 28:2, 88:10; I Kings 8:38)**

Since this gesture and posture of prayer occurs in many religions, we can make a reasonable conclusion that it is a “natural” gesture, just as a clinched fist may be a natural gesture of war or violence. Uplifted hands have the connotation of a petition or supplication before one who is greater, or above us. There is, however, another, allegorical origin of the posture. Tertullian (late second century) refers to it: “We, however, not only raise our hands, but even expand (open) them; and, taking our model from the Lord’s passion, even in prayer we confess Christ.” (On Prayer, 14) This is a very interesting understanding of this gesture. As the Father sees us standing before him in the posture of the crucified, he sees the Son.

Of course, there are other gestures and postures of prayer, including pressing the open palms together. This seems to have originated in the court ceremonies of feudal Europe, probably mainly from Germany. It is a gesture of fealty or obedience, and is explicitly part of the ordination ceremony of a priest as a sign of obedience to the bishop. Most likely this same kind of expression is related to this posture of “folded hands.” There are only a few directions in the missal for praying in this particular posture, although in the ceremonial book for bishops, he is directed more specifically to keep his hands “joined” “when kneeling at prayer.” There are no directions for the people to join their hands.

A far less common posture of prayer is with arms crossed. Children and others are instructed to cross their arms to indicate a desire for a blessing rather than receiving communion. This is actually a posture of prayer that was very popular in the ninth century and before, and is still common among some Byzantine Catholics and among some youth movements in Europe.

Those who remember the days before the revision of the liturgy will remember that the congregation was directed to kneel for the Collect at the Mass. Originally it appears that kneeling was a more common private posture of prayer, while standing in the orant (hands lifted) was the more common communal posture. Kneeling is still more common as a private posture but is also included in the communal prayers. It was thought that there was a movement almost exclusively toward standing for all the prayers at Mass but the latest

revisions have restored the importance of the kneeling posture. This is obviously a more humble and penitent posture than standing.

The final posture that should be mentioned is prostration, or laying face down on the floor. This is an extreme form of penitence, humility, sorrow and obedience. It is only used by the clergy on Good Friday and by the candidates at the ordination of a deacon or priest.

Finally, the people add their response to the collect with their “Amen.” This is an unchanged or non-translated Hebrew word. It appears in the Old and New Testaments with a variety of meanings, but primarily as a formal assent to the truthfulness of a statement. In our liturgical use, it is more than a conclusion to prayers. It is our solemn agreement that what has been said by the priest expresses for us our own prayer.