

To Bow or to Genuflect? That is the Question!

Paul Turner

The rules for bows and genuflections are found in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal 274-275. A genuflection is made to a tabernacle. A low bow is made to the altar.

If the tabernacle is not located in the sanctuary, then the ministers who process do not genuflect at the beginning and end of mass.

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The deacon or reader holding the book of the gospels for the entrance procession makes no reverence but proceeds directly to the altar and places the book there. If that person then leaves the sanctuary, it would be fitting to make the reverence that the other ministers in procession make (a genuflection to a tabernacle located in the sanctuary or a bow to the altar if the tabernacle is elsewhere).

No other genuflections are made to the tabernacle during the course of the mass. For that one hour, all reverences go to the altar instead. This is important because it emphasizes the significant role that the altar plays during the sacrifice of the mass.

The Ceremonial of Bishops says in 72 that a deep bow is made to the altar by all who enter the sanctuary, leave it, or pass before the altar. Therefore, the following should make a bow to the altar during the mass: readers entering and leaving the sanctuary, ushers before taking up the collection, and communion ministers entering and leaving the sanctuary.

A sacristan making multiple passes before the altar and tabernacle before or after mass may reasonably be excused from making multiple reverences. Outside the liturgy, a reverence at the beginning and end of one's work would be praiseworthy.

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