

**Whether it's non-Catholics who attend Mass with their Catholic significant other or folks who are inquiring about the faith; if you weren't brought up with Mass, your first (and second and third...) time can be very confusing—making people feel like they're, “around a secret that I'm not in on.” Here are some answers to some of the really excellent, frequently asked questions that newbie's bring with them.**

### **1. What's with all of the sitting, standing and kneeling?**

**We call it “Catholic Aerobics.” It's how we stay fit. Just kidding! Each posture during Mass has function and meaning. When we sit, we are engaged in active listening, giving our attention to the readings, the homily and some of the prayers. We stand for a couple of reasons—to listen to the Gospel (we sit for the other Bible readings) to acknowledge that we are in the presence of Christ. The Gospel is the Word of God speaking to us in the present. We hear stories about Jesus and the words that He spoke and so we stand in honor of this. Sometimes our standing together shows our unity in prayer (like when we pray the Creed or the General Intercessions) as the Body of Christ, and we stand together as a community preparing to receive the Body of Christ in the Eucharist (see #4). Kneeling is a penitential/reverential posture. We acknowledge our sinfulness and need for God's healing, so we kneel in God's Presence (mostly while the prayers regarding the Eucharist are being prayed) asking for that healing.**

### **2. What's that squiggly motion everybody does in front of their faces before the Gospel is read?**

**This is one of my favorites—particularly because when I tell those who are seeking to convert what this one is all about, I tell them to go home and quiz their Catholics and they almost never know the answer. Before the Gospel is read, when the community stands together to listen, we make the sign of the cross (usually with a thumb) on our foreheads, our lips and our hearts signifying that we are asking God to always keep the Gospel on our minds, on our lips and in our hearts. If we keep the Gospel in these three places, all our thoughts, words and desires will be in line with Jesus. It's a physical reminder to us that we need to not just *hear* the Gospel, but to *live* the Gospel every day of our lives. Many, many Catholics don't know this, and they just make a crazy squiggle in their general head and torso area. They have a good laugh and are happy to learn why they've been doing that their whole lives when it's explained to them by the Catechumens that they love (and now know more about Catholic practice than they do).**

### **3. How does everyone seem to know what's going on and what to expect?**

**This is one of the best things about Catholic Mass. The way we do it in America is the same way they do it everywhere in the world. And the way we do it today is pretty much the way it's been done since the 1<sup>st</sup> Century. That's a long time to get to know how to do something. From the prayers that we say to the Scripture readings that are read, to the postures and responses that we participate in—it's all mapped out; and it's all uniform in every language. This is awesome because, if you're familiar with it, you can just sink in, let go of whatever was weighing you down on your way in, and let the ritual happen. There is a flow, a beauty and a comfort to the routine. Built in to the routine is a cycle of Scripture readings that change weekly (but we know what's coming), songs that change weekly, a homily that should change according to the Gospel and some of the prayers (I'm thinking General Intercessions, here) that change weekly. So, it's never exactly the same, but always the same format. It gets easier as you go along. Also, most parishes have a missalette in the pews that have the whole order of the Mass in it that you can follow along with. Many parishes use Breaking Bread missalettes—if that's the one in your parish, look for the pages with the gray tips and follow along there.**

### **4. What is the wafer you all are receiving, and can I get one, too?**

**The Source and Summit of everything we do as Catholics is the Eucharist, aka: Holy Communion. Jesus said in the Gospel of [John 6:51](#), "I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world." We take this very literally. At the Last Supper Jesus took bread and wine, blessed them and said, "This is my body" "This is my blood" and "Do this in memory of me." ([Luke 22](#)) We take this, with the Gospel of John very literally, too. Jesus' Sacrifice for us on the Cross is what we celebrate at Mass. He made that Sacrifice once and for all, but told us to participate in it, too. Our celebration of this Sacrifice isn't a new one; it brings the one and only Sacrifice into the present. The hosts and wine change from those elements to His True Presence—to the Body and Blood of Christ. It's not a symbol for us. It's a reality. And so, we ask that only those who are united with us in that belief through the Catholic Church participate in receiving Communion.**

## **5. Why do Catholics start their prayers with the sign of the Cross?**

**This practice tends to be particularly uncomfortable and challenging for Protestants who are joining Catholics for worship (or joining the Catholic Church). As Catholics, there are a couple of reasons that we begin all our prayer “In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit” while making the sign of the Cross on our body. First of all, we are calling on the whole Being of God—the Trinity. We are reminded that when we pray, even if we single out one of the members of the Trinity (like praying specifically to Jesus or the Father), we are always engaging a whole God. All Three are always present, all three make up the One God. The other part of this is the act of making the sign of the cross on ourselves. We do this as a reminder that while we are addressing the Trinity in our prayer, we come to God in humility; understanding that we are only saved by the sacrifice that Jesus made for us on the Cross. Our whole relationship with God begins and ends with this selfless act of Jesus, and we are called to imitate the love He has for us, by making sacrifices for others. We communicate with God in the hope of becoming more like God; which means that we have to be as selfless as we can be—like Jesus.**

## **6. Why does everyone dip their fingers in the water when they come into Church?**

**The water in either the Baptismal font or the little fonts fastened to the walls of the entry of the Church is holy water. When we enter the Church, we dip our fingers in the water and make the sign of the cross on our ourselves to recall our Baptism. It is through Baptism that we enter the Church (as Christians) and it is through Baptism that we receive our identity as adopted children of God, and we receive our initial call by God to live differently. We enter our celebration of Mass with this ritual to remind ourselves that we are children of God, in God’s house, sharing the most special meal that God offers us with God’s other children. We say that the Church is the “body of Christ,” and this water reminds us that our parish family and our worldwide family of believers all make up that body. We belong to each other, are responsible to one another and are called to share our faith and our lives with one another. And we are all united and have our sin forgiven through this one Baptism.**

**7. Why does everyone go down on one knee before sitting down when they first come in?**

**This is another one of those things that a lot of Catholics don't know, so I love sharing it. When we enter the Church, after remembering who we are in Baptism, we remember what brings us there—the Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. There is a receptacle in the Church that should be in a very prominent place and is probably made of at least a semi-precious metal. It's called the Tabernacle. It's where we keep Eucharist that was consecrated (changed from bread into the True Presence of Christ) at a previous Mass. We keep it there for emergencies and to bring to the homebound, nursing homebound and hospitals. Since we believe that Jesus is truly present in the Eucharist, we go down on one knee in the direction of the Tabernacle—a gesture called “genuflecting.” Harkening back to the very olden days, we genuflect as an acknowledgment that our King—Jesus—is there. Our response to His presence is what it would always be in the presence of a king—to go down on one knee out of respect, honor and homage.**

**8. Why do Catholic Churches always have a cross with Jesus' body on it?**

**We call the Cross with Jesus' body (a corpus) on it a Crucifix. For Catholics, our appreciation of the Cross is not just the Cross itself, but what Jesus did for us on the Cross. Yes, Jesus is resurrected—he's not still dead on the cross—but it's important for us to enter into the experience of the crucifixion. It wasn't sterile—and it can't be sterile in our memory. Jesus; 100% God, 100% human, really suffered and really died on the Cross. We believe that it is this action (paired with the resurrection) that offers us salvation. We also believe that because of Jesus' suffering, our suffering has meaning, too. When we look at the crucifix, we are reminded that God knows our suffering. We are also reminded that, just as Jesus wasn't alone in His suffering, we aren't either. And, finally, just as Jesus' suffering wasn't the end of the story; neither is ours. God never lets suffering go unchallenged; and the crucifix is our banner for God's ultimate conquering of sin and death through His own suffering.**