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Video Guide

Preparing for Worship: Signs, Symbols, and Gestures at Mass

JohnMichael Reyes

National Community of Catechetical Leaders

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Preparing for Worship: Signs, Symbols, and Gestures at Mass

Insights from the Video Presentation

Pope Leo once described Mass as a pause button for our lives. It slows us down and invites us into something deeper. From the moment you walk through the doors, everything has meaning.

First, we dip our fingers in holy water and make the Sign of the Cross. This reminds us of our Baptism and shows everyone exactly who we belong to: God's family. Next, we genuflect to the tabernacle or bow toward the Altar to show deep respect to Jesus, who is truly present in the Eucharist.

Then, after finding our seats and saying hello to our neighbors, we are invited to stand up to sing and greet God in song. When our voices blend together, something amazing happens: We weave together into one single team. In church, we call this team the Assembly.

At Mass, we don't use words alone, and nothing we do is random. God knows that we learn best when we use our entire bodies—our eyes, ears, hands, feet, and voices! They are signs and symbols designed to help us spot God's invisible love and pray with our whole selves.

The Core Sacred Symbols

One of the first signs that we see is the **cross**. We start and end Mass by making the sign of the cross to show that we are part of God's big family. Next time you are inside the church try to be a cross detective. How many different crosses can you find hidden around the church?

Another symbol is the **light** through candles. Candles shine and flicker throughout the church. They remind us that Jesus is the light of the world. Just like light guides you through a dark room, Jesus helps us find our path in life. One important candle to look for is the Paschal Candle. That represents the resurrection and is lit for the 50 days of Easter at every funeral and baptism. Where do you see candles in your church?

Holy water. We use **water** every day, and in church life, we do too. Do you know where the baptismal font or holy water in your church is? When you dip your fingers in a holy water font or the baptismal font, you aren't just washing your hands or fingers, you are tapping into an amazing family history. Holy water reminds us of God creating the oceans, the story of Noah's Ark, and even Moses parting the Red Sea. Ultimately, it reminds us of our own baptism. It reminds us you are part of God's family.

The word of God, the **Lectionary**. This beautiful book on the ambo isn't just an ordinary library book. When it is open and read out loud, it becomes a living symbol of God speaking to you right now.

The **bread** and **wine**. Simple, everyday food that is transformed into something extraordinary. The bread we use is called unleavened bread, meaning without yeast, so it does not rise. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the bread and wine become Jesus himself.

Have you noticed the **colors** in church change? They're not just decorations, they're messages.

Green, the color of grass, trees, and summer leaves. It stands for growth and everyday faith. We use green during ordinary time as we try to grow stronger in following Jesus.

White. You will see this color during seasons like Easter and Christmas. It represents the color of pure joy, light, and celebration.

Red, the color of fire and passion. It represents the energy of the Holy Spirit and the fierce courage of the saints who loved God boldly.

Purple, the color of quiet preparation and active reflection. It appears during Advent and Lent as we get our hearts ready for what is to come. Sometimes this can be distinguished by a deep, dark purple like indigo for Advent and a reddish-hued purple during Lent.

There's also one more color, **rose**. This is used on two specific Sundays of the year, Gaudete Sunday during Advent and Laetare Sunday during Lent. Rose is a color that highlights anticipation that we are halfway through the seasons of Advent and Lent.

These colors tell us what kind of spiritual season we're in before a single word is spoken. You might have noticed these beautiful pieces of fabric as we said each color. The priests and ministers wear special clothing called vestments. They aren't about the person. Vestments help us focus on Jesus. They also help us spot those who are leading us in worship.

One vestment is the **alb**, a long white robe. The word alb literally means white, and it represents the white garment you received when you were baptized. No matter if someone is an altar server, a reader, or a priest presiding at the altar, everyone starts by putting on the white alb. You too can wear an alb. It shows that we are all completely equal as baptized people in one family.

Over the alb, the priest wears a **stole**, a long, narrow cloth draped over the neck, almost like a prayer shawl. It is the primary liturgical vestment of a priest.

And over the alb and stole, the priest puts on a **chasuble**. It is an outermost poncho-like vestment a priest wears celebrating Mass. It comes in different colors, matching the exact liturgical season or feast of the church year. Based on the color of the chasuble shown, can you guess which liturgical season or feast it is used for?

So it's not just things that we see, but it's also how we **move**. That matters for Mass as well. We don't just sit and watch Mass like a movie or a TV show. We use our bodies. At Mass, your body prays, too. Every movement has a meaning.

We make the **sign of the cross**, tracing the cross over our entire bodies, of our mind, heart, and shoulders, is our physical signature proclaiming, "I belong to God."

There's also **genuflecting** and **bowing**. Dropping our right knee to the floor or bowing from the waist are signs of reverence. It is our way of saying, "Jesus, I respect you."

Hands folded in prayer. Pressing our palms together isn't just for looks. It physically quiets our bodies, helps our hands stay still, and focuses our hearts on God.

Lastly, **singing** and responding. Did you know that your voice is an instrument and your voice matters? When we sing and call out the responses, together, we show that we are praying as one single community. So when you hear the priest chant, "The Lord be with you," your response is, "And with your spirit."

Now let's look at some of the primary **assembly actions** that move the Mass forward. These are some of the important actions and movements that we often don't think about during Mass.

We have **processions** where we walk together. This walking may look like it's getting from point A to point B, but actually, it's a symbol of life's journey, reminding us that we are a pilgrim people on a journey to heaven.

Another action is the **presentation of the gifts**, where we bring up the bread and wine alongside our gifts for the poor. Everything we bring, God transforms, us included.

Later, we have the **sign of peace**, where we look each other in the eyes, share a sign of peace to be reminded that we cannot love God without loving others.

And finally, the **communion procession**. This is not just about getting in line and receiving something to eat or drink. It is a sacred and holy moment. We are fed by Jesus so we can carry his love out in the world.

So what does all of this mean for us? All these amazing signs, symbols, and movements are here to help us. They're here to help us see things that are usually invisible, like God's love. They're here to help us hear God speaking straight to our hearts, and they are here to help us show the world what we believe by how we act.

Preparing for Worship: Helping Children Learn the Signs, Symbols, and Gestures of the Mass

Children absorb the Mass's meaning as much through what they see, touch, and do as through what they're told. When signs, symbols, and gestures are explained, practiced, and revisited — not just mentioned once — children begin to recognize the Mass as a language they can actually read, turning attendance into genuine participation and setting a foundation for lifelong sacramental understanding.

1. Teach Gestures Through Practice, Not Just Explanation

Children learn physical gestures best by doing them repeatedly, not by being told about them once.

- Practice the Sign of the Cross slowly, breaking it into steps (forehead, chest, left shoulder, right shoulder) until it becomes automatic.
- Practice the small Sign of the Cross at the Gospel (forehead, lips, heart) and explain simply: "God's word in my mind, on my lips, in my heart."
- Practice standing, sitting, kneeling, and bowing in sequence, asking children to guess why we might do each one before explaining.
- Practice the hand gesture for receiving Communion or a blessing (if not yet receiving) so the movement feels familiar rather than uncertain.

2. Use Show-and-Tell with Real Sacred Objects

Seeing and, when possible, touching real objects makes abstract symbols concrete.

- Arrange a sacristy visit or invite a priest/deacon to show children the chalice, paten, altar cloths, and vestments up close.
- Pass around (or display) a small vessel of holy water, a votive candle, and a censer/incense (unlit) so children can see and smell what they encounter at Mass.
- Let children hold and examine a rosary, a Bible, and a lectionary to connect objects they may see to their proper names and uses.

3. Build a Symbol Match Game

Matching games help children connect an object or gesture to its meaning in a playful, memorable way. Create picture cards of these symbols and their meanings, and have children match them in pairs or small groups.

- Water — cleansing, new life (Baptism)
- Candle/Light — Christ's presence
- Bread and Wine — the Body and Blood of Christ
- Oil — healing, strength, being set apart
- Incense — prayers rising to God

4. Teach Liturgical Colors with a Hands-On Activity

Color is one of the most visually accessible ways children can track the Mass and liturgical year.

- Show samples of vestment colors (purple, white/gold, green, red) and connect each to its season or occasion.
- Have children color a simple liturgical calendar wheel using the correct colors for each season.
- Challenge children to notice and report back on the priest's vestment color the next time they attend Mass.

5. Walk Through the Mass Using a Picture Sequence

A visual walk-through helps children see the shape of the Mass and connect gestures to specific moments.

- Use a simple picture book, felt board, or slideshow showing each part of the Mass in order, pointing out the gestures and symbols that appear at each moment.
- Pause at each image and ask: “What is happening here? What do you see the priest or people doing?” before explaining.

6. Use Role-Play to Reinforce Learning

Acting out parts of the Mass helps children internalize gestures and their meanings through their bodies, not just their memory.

- Set up a simple pretend altar and let children take turns “leading” parts of the Mass using correct gestures (with supervision and clear boundaries about reverence).
- Practice the offertory procession, having children carry pretend gifts to the “altar” to understand the gesture's meaning of offering.

7. Connect Symbols to the Five Senses

Helping children notice what they see, hear, smell, and touch at Mass builds active, sensory awareness rather than passive attendance.

- Make a simple chart or worksheet: “What do I see? What do I hear? What do I smell? What do I touch?” and have children fill it in based on their memory of Mass or a class walk-through.
- Discuss why the Church uses physical signs (bells, incense, holy water, bowing) instead of words alone — our whole body and senses are invited to pray, not just our minds.

8. Create a Symbol Scavenger Hunt

A scavenger hunt turns passive observation into an active, engaging search.

- Before or after attending Mass, give children a simple checklist of symbols and gestures to look for (a candle, the priest bowing, the sign of peace, incense, holy water) and check off what they notice.
- Debrief afterward: “Which one did you notice first? Which one surprised you?”

9. Make a Classroom Symbol Wall or Booklet

A lasting visual reference reinforces learning beyond a single lesson.

- Have children draw or cut out pictures of Mass symbols and gestures, then assemble them into a class wall display or personal booklet with simple captions explaining each one.
- Revisit and add to this display throughout the year as children learn new symbols or terms.

10. Reinforce Learning Through Repetition Across the Year

Understanding signs, symbols, and gestures builds gradually — revisiting them regularly cements the learning.

- Briefly reference a symbol or gesture at the start or end of multiple class sessions, rather than teaching it once and moving on.
- Ask periodically: “What's something you noticed at Mass this week?” to keep attention active between class sessions.

Preparing for Worship: Helping Adolescents Learn the Signs, Symbols, and Gestures of the Mass

Adolescents are capable of engaging the Mass's signs, symbols, and gestures at a much deeper level than rote performance — exploring their history, Scriptural roots, and theological weight. When teens understand why they genuflect, why incense rises, or why vestments look the way they do, gestures they may have performed automatically for years can become genuinely meaningful acts of worship, chosen and understood rather than simply inherited.

1. Ask What They Already Know — and Don't

Starting with teens' existing (often incomplete) understanding respects their experience and surfaces real gaps.

- Ask teens to explain, in their own words, what a gesture like genuflecting, bowing, or the Sign of Peace means — before offering the “correct” explanation.
- Use their answers to identify what they've absorbed correctly, what's incomplete, and where genuine curiosity or confusion exists.

2. Explore the Origins and History Behind Gestures

Teens often engage more once they learn a gesture has deep historical or cultural roots, not just Church convention.

- Explain the origins of gestures like genuflecting (an ancient sign of homage to royalty, adapted for Christ's presence in the Eucharist) or bowing (used across cultures and history as a sign of respect).
- Discuss why the Church continues using ancient gestures rather than modern ones — connecting present worship to centuries of continuous tradition.

3. Dig into the Theology Behind Key Symbols

Teens are ready for real theological depth, not just simple associations (“water = cleansing”).

- *Incense* — explore Psalm 141 (“let my prayer rise like incense”) and Revelation's imagery of incense as the prayers of the saints.
- The *Altar* — discuss its dual identity as both a table (meal, communion) and an altar of sacrifice (Christ's self-offering).
- *Vestments* — explore how liturgical vestments trace back to Roman clothing, preserved and sanctified over centuries.

Have small groups research the deeper meaning behind one symbol or gesture and present their findings to the group.

4. Connect Gestures to Scripture

Rooting physical gestures in Scripture gives teens a textual basis for practices that might otherwise feel arbitrary.

- Connect striking the chest at the Confiteor (“I confess...”) to the tax collector's posture of humility in Luke 18:13.
- Connect the priest's washing of hands at the altar to Old Testament purification rituals and Pilate's (contrasting) washing of hands at Jesus's trial.
- Connect the exchange “The Lord be with you” / “And with your spirit” to similar greetings throughout Paul's letters.

5. Use Compare-and-Contrast with Other Traditions

Comparing Catholic gestures to other Christian traditions or world religions helps teens see both what's distinct and what's universal about embodied worship.

- Briefly compare Catholic gestures (genuflection, incense, holy water) to similar practices in Orthodox Christianity, Judaism, or other world religions, highlighting shared human instincts to worship with the whole body.
- Discuss why physical posture and gesture matter theologically — humans are embodied creatures, and worship engages the whole person, not just the mind.

6. Facilitate a “Decode the Symbol” Investigation

An inquiry-based approach lets teens discover meaning through investigation rather than being told directly.

- Present teens with an unfamiliar or lesser-known symbol (the Chi-Rho, the Alpha and Omega, the Paschal candle's markings) and have them research and present what it represents.
- Challenge teens to find where else in Church history or art this same symbol appears, connecting the Mass to a broader visual tradition.

7. Discuss the “Why” Behind Debated or Misunderstood Practices

Addressing practices teens might question or find confusing directly builds trust and deeper engagement.

- Discuss why the priest faces the altar/tabernacle at certain points, or wears specific vestments, addressing common misunderstandings or critiques teens may have encountered online or from peers.
- Address genuine questions honestly: “Why does it matter if I bow or not? Does God care about physical posture?” — exploring how internal disposition and external gesture reinforce each other.

8. Invite Teens into Liturgical Roles

Actually performing a liturgical role deepens understanding of gesture and symbol far more than observation alone.

- Encourage training and service as an altar server, lector, or sacristan, where teens learn the practical and theological reasons behind specific movements and objects firsthand.
- Have teens who serve in these roles teach peers what they've learned, reinforcing their own understanding while building shared ownership among the group.

9. Use Art and Architecture as a Teaching Tool

Exploring how symbols and gestures are depicted in sacred art and church architecture broadens teens' visual literacy.

- Show images of church architecture (the sanctuary, altar rail, tabernacle placement) and ask what these design choices communicate about the Mass's focus and meaning.
- Examine sacred art depicting Mass-related symbols (the Lamb of God, the pelican, the IHS monogram) and have teens research and explain their origins.

10. Reflect on Personal Meaning, Not Just Historical Fact

Understanding a gesture intellectually is only half the goal — helping teens find personal significance completes it.

- After exploring a symbol or gesture's history and theology, ask directly: “Now that you know this, does it change how you'll experience it at Mass?”
- Invite teens to choose one gesture or symbol to intentionally focus on and bring fuller attention to during the next several Masses they attend, then discuss their experience afterward.