

My Neighbor Said: “What Should We Do With Our Hands at Mass?”

Any regular Mass-goer will notice a wide variety of postures for prayer in the congregation. Some folks fold their hands; others extend them or raise them to shoulder height. During the Lord’s Prayer, some hold hands with those nearby or even form chains from pew to pew. But which (if any) of these positions is correct?

Whenever there is a question about the Mass, the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM) is the first source to consult. Its authoritative instructions describe what to do during the Mass and how to do it. The GIRM instructs priests to pray “with hands extended” on 28 different occasions; it gives no specific instructions about how the congregation should hold their hands at prayer. But before we leap to the conclusion that “anything goes,” we need to consider several other principles that apply here.

First, the Constitution on Sacred Liturgy of Vatican II (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 1963) specified that “**no one, not even a priest, may add, remove, or change anything** in the liturgy on his own authority” (para. 22 §3). This is restated in the GIRM (Chapter 1, para. 24), and it has never been changed. Insofar as having lay people pray with their hands raised and hold hands during the Lord’s Prayer are actions added to the liturgy, it seems they should not be done.

“Neither may... non-ordained members of the faithful use gestures or actions which are proper to the priest,” according to the Vatican’s *Instruction on Collaboration With the Non-Ordained Faithful* (1997; “Practical Principles,” Art. 6 §2) and the *Code of Canon Law* (907). Insofar as an action that is specified for the priest alone (28 times) is proper to the priest at Mass, it seems that this should not be done by the congregation.

In addition, the practice of holding hands “as a sign of communion” during Mass was officially discouraged by the Vatican as far back as 1975, precisely because “it is a liturgical gesture introduced... on personal initiative; it is not in the rubrics” (*Notitiae* 11 [1975]).

The final principle to be considered is charity. People may be imitating the gestures of the priest or those around them because they don’t know what else to do. And certainly it is appropriate for parents to hold the hands of their children, or each other, at any time.

While it would be preferable to have everyone follow the rubrics of the Mass in the same way, we should not let ourselves be distracted by the postures of people around us. You can never go wrong by folding your hands in front of you and praying—for them and yourself.

For further reading: [General Instruction of the Roman Missal](#) (Chapter 1); [Sacrosanctum Concilium](#); [Instruction on Collaboration With the Non-Ordained Faithful](#); [Code of Canon Law](#), “The Most Holy Eucharist”; “[Should We Hold Our Hands Up While Praying at Mass?](#)” (Catholic Answers); “[Show of Hands](#)” (Catholic Answers).

Do you have questions about God, faith, life, the Church, or other related topics? Drop them into the Question Box next to the Parish Bulletin Board. We will answer them ASAP and post them in FlockNotes and on the Bulletin Board each week.

