

We are a ritual people. Every day is filled with ritual, whether it is starting the day with a cup of coffee, blowing out candles on a birthday cake, or standing during the seventh-inning stretch at a baseball game. By its very nature, ritual is so mundane we do not even realize we are participating in ritual action. Many people wake up, work out, shave, and brush their teeth while still half asleep.

Liturgy is filled with ritual. Ritual itself may be considered the point of contact with God, as we join together to listen to the word of God and celebrate the Eucharist.

Synonyms for ritual include: rite, ceremony, custom, habit, practice, sacrament, and procedure. Ritual is: a formalized, predetermined set of symbolic actions performed in a particular place at a regular, recurring interval. Ritual includes actions such as recitation, singing, group processions, and manipulation of sacred objects whose purpose is to express some fundamental truth or meaning, evoke spiritual, mystical or emotional responses from participants, and/or engage a group of people in unified action to strengthen their communal bonds.

Ritual Actions

We make the Sign of the Cross, bow, genuflect, and offer the Sign of Peace. We stand, sit, and kneel, with each posture holding a different meaning.

We stand in praise or at attention. Sitting may be prayerful listening, and kneeling may be a symbol of humility, praise, or adoration.

We have ritual offertory and Communion processions. We receive the Body and Blood of Christ in our hand or on our tongue. When the Mass is ended, we leave in peace to take Christ to the world in our actions and speech.

Ritual sound

We sing hymns, antiphons, Mass parts, and Psalms. We speak ritual responses in dialogue with the priest and ministers during the opening and closing rites, in response to the sacred scripture readings, and throughout the Eucharistic Prayer. We engage in ritual, sacred silence as we pause after the readings, the homily, and Holy Communion.

Combining sound and action

When we make the Sign of the Cross, speech accompanies the action. We can do this gesture with no thought, or with profound reverence. This is one of the first prayers small children learn. It is innate. We sign the forehead on infants at Baptism, and on the shoulders, hands, heart, and feet during the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens during the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. Liturgy engages all of our senses. Think for a moment on all that you see, hear, smell, touch, and taste within the liturgy.