Opinion

Guest Voices



Elevation of the Eucharist is depicted in a stained-glass window at St. Anthony's Church in North Beach, Maryland, July 15, 2021. (CNS/Bob Roller)



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In the United States, Catholics kneel during the Eucharistic prayer while Catholics in the rest of the world stand. Many European churches, especially the older ones, do not even have kneelers.

After the Second Vatican Council, the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM #43) mandated standing during the Eucharistic prayer, but the U.S. bishops asked for an exception. In the United States, we kneel "except when prevented on occasion by reasons of health, lack of space, the large number of people present, or some other good reason."

The bishops believed that American Catholics would be scandalized if they were asked to stand during the Eucharistic prayer. The Vatican granted the U.S. an exception to the universal rule.



(Unsplash/Diocese of Spokane)

While most people see standing as an innovation coming from Vatican II, in fact, kneelers became common in Catholic churches only in the last 200 years. Standing was the traditional practice. Eastern Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians always stood during the Eucharist.

In 325, the Council of Nicaea forbade kneeling on the Lord's Day and in the days of Pentecost. The 1,700th anniversary of the council provides the American church with an opportunity to reexamine our practice of kneeling during the Eucharist, which is out of step with the rest of the church.

In Canon 20, the council noted that "there are certain persons who kneel on the Lord's Day and in the days of Pentecost," but "it seems good to the holy Synod that prayer be made to God standing."

The Lord's Day is, of course, Sunday, the day of the Resurrection. The "days of Pentecost" refers to what today we call the Easter season, the days between Easter

and Pentecost.

The Eucharist, the most important prayer of the church on the Lord's Day, would be covered by this canon. The council did not refer to weekday Masses because they were not common at that time.

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Standing while praying was the common practice in ancient times. Jews prayed standing in the temple and in synagogues. Pagans also prayed standing. One stands when worshipping God, when thanking God or when petitioning God.

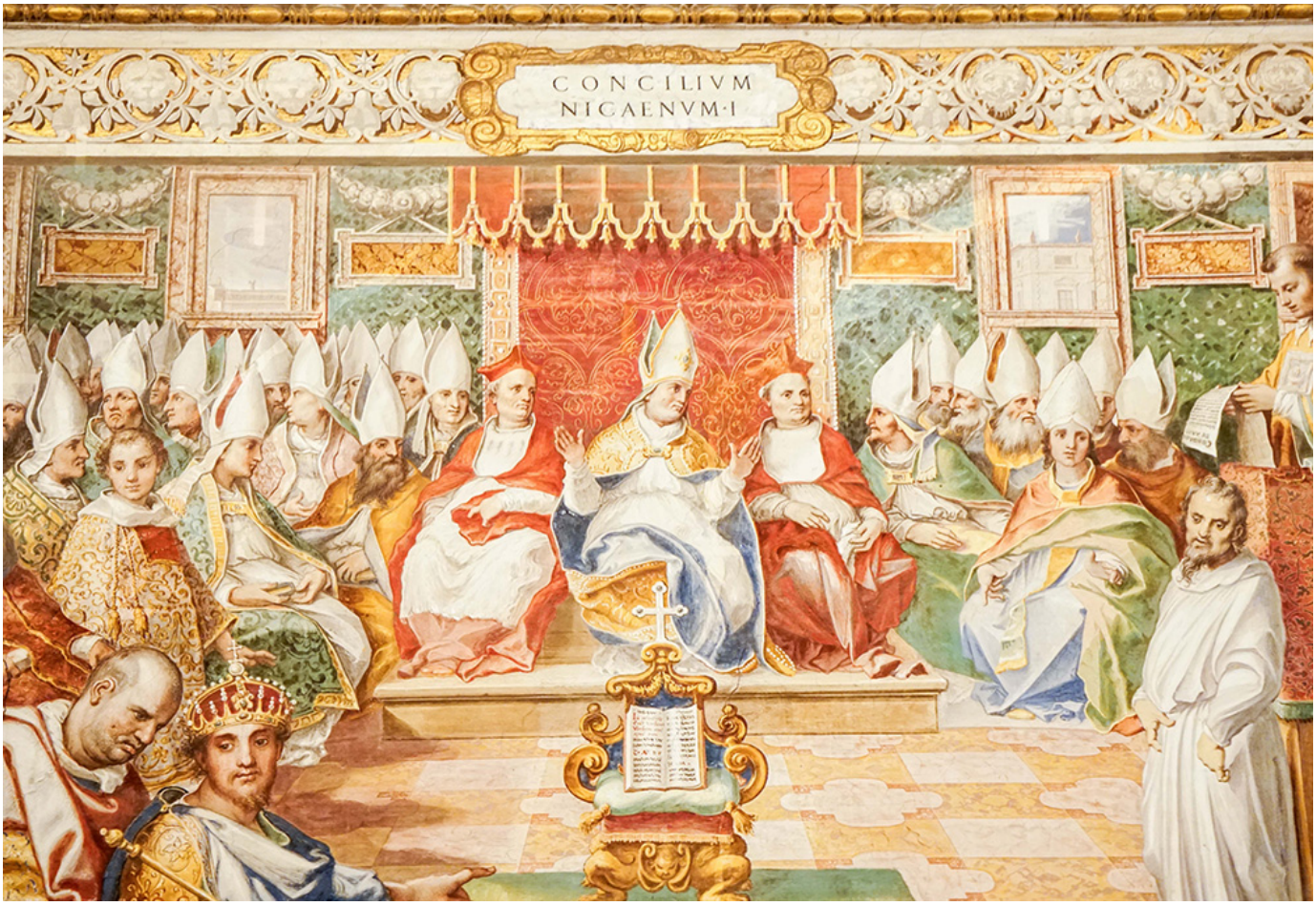
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Standing was seen as a mark of respect and honor. Today, even in non-religious situations, we stand as a sign of respect for judges and other officials.

Kneeling was seen as a sign of penance rather than respect. In the third century, Tertullian wrote, "We count fasting or kneeling in worship on the Lord's day to be unlawful."

The Eucharist is not an act of penance; therefore, one should stand. It might be appropriate to kneel during Lent, but not on Sunday or during the Easter season when Christians joyfully celebrate the Resurrection.

For early Christians, standing was a sign of freedom and Easter joy, because we stand with the risen Lord.



A wall fresco depicting the First Council of Nicaea can be seen in this photo taken in the Sistine hall of the Vatican Library July 19, 2023. The council was held in 325 and its 1700th anniversary coincides with the Holy Year 2025. (CNS/Carol Glatz)

Irenaeus, the second-century martyr and bishop of Lyon, explicitly equates not kneeling on Sundays and Pentecost as a symbol of the Resurrection. In the fourth century, St. Basil said that when we stand on Sunday, the day of the resurrection, "we remind ourselves of the grace given to us by standing at prayer, not only because we rose with Christ, and are bound to 'seek those things which are above,' but because the day seems to us to be in some sense an image of the age which we expect."

Kneeling as a sign of respect or devotion only came later. Catholics began kneeling at Mass in the 12th century at the time that the elevation of the consecrated host was introduced.

By this time, the common people did not understand the Latin prayers, and Communion had become less common. The Eucharist became more like

Benediction, a time to adore Jesus in the sacrament. During Benediction, worshippers kneel.



(Unsplash/Heidi Erickson)

Today, GIRM calls for Catholics to stand during the Eucharist except during the institutional narrative (aka consecration), when they are to kneel. If they do not kneel, they should bow when the priest genuflects after each consecration. Kneeling or bowing during the consecration is a compromise. It shows respect to Jesus in the

Eucharist but still maintains the ancient practice of standing when praying to God. The Eucharist, after all, is a prayer with Jesus to the Father, not a prayer to Jesus.

The GIRM, first published in 1969 and revised in 2002, calls on the congregation to take the same postures during Mass as a "sign of unity." We should all stand, kneel and sit in unison. GIRM states that postures should not be based on "private inclination or arbitrary choice."

The Eucharist is a community experience, not a private devotion where you can do what you want. This might also apply to those who insist on kneeling when receiving Communion. While one may feel called to kneel out of piety, one's personal preferences must be restrained in a common liturgical celebration, otherwise the "sign of unity" is fractured.

The 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea is an appropriate time for the U.S. church to reconsider its deviation from the general practice of standing during the Eucharistic prayer.

Each diocesan bishop could do this on his own if he wants, since even in the United States, standing is allowed for a "good reason." Good reasons would include the desire to be in unity with the universal church or the desire of his people to stand.

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This is a topic that each bishop should discuss with his priests' council. If there is a consensus in favor of standing, he could make that the practice in his diocese. If there are disagreements, he could allow each pastor to decide what is best for his parish.

Some U.S. parishes have decided to stand for their own good reasons, either with the permission of the bishop or with the bishop simply ignoring the practice.

At Mass on Sundays, we recite what the Council of Nicaea said about the faith. We should also listen to what it said about standing.