News

A file photo shows worshippers during Mass joining hands during the Our Father at Detroit's M

A file photo shows worshippers during Mass joining hands during the Our Father at Detroit's Most Holy Trinity Catholic Church. (OSV News/Jim West)



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November 25, 2026

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Liturgical experts and sacramental theologians are criticizing a recent document from the Archdiocese of Portland that says lay Catholics should not hold hands or extend their hands during the Lord's Prayer at Mass.

The Portland Archdiocese's Liturgy Office cites canon law, tradition, two Vatican documents and the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy in its Nov. 6 guidance to local Catholics that they should refrain from extending their hands, known as the orans posture, while praying the Our Father.

"It is a liturgical posture that is proper to the priest. When the priest uses this posture, he is praying on behalf of the people," the Portland Archdiocese's guidance says, adding that only the priest said the Lord's Prayer during Mass before the Roman Missal was changed in 1970.

But several liturgy experts told National Catholic Reporter that the archdiocese's guidance misreads church documents and shows an ahistorical understanding of the orans posture, which they argued the laity has been using during prayer since the first centuries of Christianity.

"In the history of the church, the orans is not [reserved for] the priest," said Capuchin Fr. Edward Foley, a retired professor of liturgy and music at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.

Foley said the orans posture dates further back than the Mass of 1570 — the standardized Roman Rite liturgy promulgated by Pope Pius V. He noted that artwork in the ancient Roman catacombs depicts Christians using the posture, and that St. Paul, in 1 Timothy 2:8, says he wanted men everywhere to pray, "lifting up holy hands without anger or disputing."

The Portland document, Foley, added "is deeply flawed."

"It's very poorly constructed," he said. "It's not consonant with the tradition, it's problematic canonically, and liturgically it misreads what active participation is."

The Portland Archdiocese, led by Archbishop Alexander Sample, a conservative prelate who has supported traditional liturgical practices, such as Gregorian chant, altar rails and receiving Communion on the tongue, published its guidance in the November issue of its Divine Worship Newsletter. The guidance was also adopted as a bulletin insert for parishes.

The archdiocese did not respond to NCR's request for comment.

Msgr. Kevin Irwin, a liturgical studies and sacramental theology professor at Catholic University of America, described the Portland guidance as a "sad commentary on the state of liturgy" according to some bishops and "liturgy police."

"This sort of instruction makes liturgy a trivial pursuit," Irwin told NCR in an email.

Whether to hold or extend hands during the Lord's Prayer at Mass in recent decades has been a matter of debate in some Catholic corners of the internet, with conservative-leaning apologists and canon lawyers often advising against the practice.

But church authorities have allowed the posture. The Italian Missal, approved by Pope Francis and confirmed by the Congregation for Divine Worship in 2019, says that "the arms may be held extended" during the Lord's Prayer while asking that the gesture be made "with dignity and restraint, in a spirit of filial prayer," Msgr. Arthur Holquin, a retired priest of the Diocese of Orange, California, noted in a recent blog.

In 2023, the Filipino Bishops Conference's liturgy commission declared that raising hands and holding hands were "liturgically accepted" during the Lord's Prayer. The commission's reasoning went "to the heart of the matter," Holquin said. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (the primary liturgical document governing the celebration of Mass in the Roman Rite),"neither forbids nor prescribes either gesture, and to forbid or prescribe one would run counter to the GIRM's own intent," Holquin wrote.

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The Portland guidance cites the General Instruction of the Roman Missal to argue that the laity should not extend or raise their hands. While acknowledging that the instruction does not explicitly forbid the lay faithful from using the orans posture during the Lord's Prayer, the archdiocese says the document "gives guidance" as to why the laity "should not use this posture."

"Whenever the GIRM gives the instructions for hands to be extended, it is always with reference to the priest specifically, whether it be the principal celebrant or concelebrants. Neither the deacons assisting at Mass, nor the lay faithful, are ever instructed to use this posture," the Portland guidance says.

The Vatican's document on liturgy does offer instructions to the congregation, such as striking the breast during the Confiteor (the penitential prayer) or standing and sitting at various times during the liturgy. But the document is not comprehensive. While primarily focused on the postures and gestures of the clergy, it overlooks some things for the laity. For example, the document does not actually instruct the laity to bow for a blessing when a priest or deacon gives such a command at the end of Mass.

"It's almost as if [the congregation] is supposed to stare back at the deacon in defiance. It's just a missing rubric," said Fr. Paul Turner, the director of the Office of

Divine Worship for the Diocese of Kansas City-St Joseph in Missouri.

With regard to the Lord's Prayer at Mass, Turner told NCR that the Vatican document "clearly" has the priest pray it with his arms extended, but it has never instructed the laity as to what they should do with their hands at any time during the liturgy.

"It doesn't say it for the Eucharistic prayer; it doesn't say it for the readings or for the collect," Turner said. "There's no instruction on what people do with their hands as there are considerable instructions for the ministers."

In addition to the Vatican document on liturgy, the Portland guidance cites a 1997 Vatican document that said neither deacons nor non-ordained members of the faithful may use gestures or actions which are proper to the priest-celebrant. The document lays out that principle in the context of concerns that a congregation would be reciting aloud the Eucharistic prayers.

Church officials "didn't want lay people in the sanctuary extending their hands in prayer while the priest was offering the Eucharistic prayer," said Turner, who cautioned against extrapolating too much from that 1997 document.

"For example, while distributing Communion, I see some lay people genuflect before receiving Communion," Turner said. "Well, that is a gesture reserved to the priest. Not even a deacon genuflects before receiving Communion."

The Portland guidance also cites *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on Sacred Liturgy, which states that "no other person, even if he be a priest, may add, remove, or change anything in the liturgy on his own authority."

Rita Ferrone, a Catholic pastoral theologian who has written several books on liturgy, including on *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, told NCR in an email that the council fathers at Vatican II had a healthy respect for popular piety and an openness to adaptation.

"I can tell you definitely that you cannot ground Portland's directive in Vatican II. It's not there," said Ferrone, who added that most important in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* is its mandate that the liturgy include the "full, active and conscious participation" of the laity.

"I would argue that [raising hands in orans] has its place along in a panoply of other prayerful habits and expressions that believers bring to the liturgy," Ferrone said. "Some of these may eventually be adopted into the liturgy officially. This happened for the Italian Missal, which includes the orans position as an option. It could happen here. A wise policy allows for the possibility and does not cut it off prematurely."

Ferrone added that the orans posture during the Lord's Prayer "may in fact be 'teaching us to pray' more fully — with body, mind and spirit — a good thing overall."