

## Prostrations

We Dominicans take one vow: obedience. (Don't worry: the other two vows are, of course, included in the Constitutions according to which we vow ourselves to live.) Given what you have learned about me in these articles, you can probably imagine how well I do with obedience, but I digress...

When I came to Paris and was assigned to a new priory – in this case, to the *Couvent St-Jacques* – the superior of the community had to read publicly the official document setting forth the terms of my assignment. While he was reading this, I was expected to make a prostration as an outward sign of my interior submission to my vow of obedience, as a recognition of the legitimacy of his resulting authority over me. At the end of the reading, he clapped once, which was the signal that I was to stand up. I invite you to take a moment to enjoy the image of this ancient body making this prostration – that is, not only getting down on the floor and “sliding into second base”, but also trying to get up again, all while wrapped in three bolts of white cloth.

Now it's my turn: I'm going to enjoy the image of you doing prostrations during the Great Fast which we have begun. Certainly you will be doing prostrations, which are an important part of our lenten practice. (I remember talking about this with Sister Michelle, SSMI at the motherhouse of the Sisters Servants of Mary Immaculate in Sloatsburg, NY. She basically said: the prostrations are so important to me that I intend to keep doing them as long as I can – so keep a crane handy, just in case!) Since we have cranes in very few of our churches, I encourage you to be prudent in doing prostrations – especially those of you who, like me, have started to receive literature from AARP.

Why the emphasis on a practice which, in addition to being strange, is such a challenge for so many of us? As with the prostration I made in front of the aghast friars in Paris, the externals of our lenten prostrations are merely an outward expression of what should be going on inside – namely, our inner conversion. In a sense, the prostrations are a teaching device: by forcing our bodies to take this awkward position of extreme humility, we teach our stubborn wills to submit to the Lord Who, despite what our arrogant self-satisfaction may tell us, knows what is good for us. So, those of you who can “hit the dirt” without risking life or limb, please be encouraged to do so, for this lesson needs to be reinforced again and again. Those of us who are at risk, as we watch and are edified by the efforts of our fellow-parishioners, we should reflect upon the lessons our bodies taught us throughout our years of prostrations.

In the chapel at *St-Jacques*, I was not allowed to linger on the floor long enough to get comfortable; rather, I was summoned to stand and to take my place within the community, sharing life with the friars, working and playing and praying with them. So it is with our lenten prostrations: we must not grovel as if wallowing in our unworthiness; rather, we must let ourselves be raised by the Christ Whose Resurrection and new life we are preparing to claim for ourselves with the upcoming celebration of Easter.

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In a sense, by our prostrations – that is, by the act of going down and coming back up – we are imitating Christ in order to become more like Him. In the letter to the Philippians, we read that

Though He was in the Form of God,  
Jesus did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped at.  
Rather, He emptied Himself and took the form of a servant,  
being born in human likeness.  
And, being found in human form,  
He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death,  
even death upon a cross.  
Therefore, God has highly exalted Him,  
and bestowed upon Him the Name that is above every other name. (Phil. 2:6-8)

As Jesus humbled Himself in view of future glory – not only for Himself, but for us as well – we show by our prostrations and subsequent rising that we intend during this Great Fast to follow Him through the Cross to His Resurrection.

-Fr. Jim Karepin, op