

LITURGY BYTES

The Sign of Peace

As life is slowly returning to normal, both at Church and in our daily lives, I have been noticing each week how happy parishioners seem to be at Mass. We no longer must sit in designated spaces or be escorted to our seats. For those choosing not to wear masks, our singing voices are heard once again. However, it is the sign of peace that prompted me to reflect this week. Basically, it is because of the enthusiastic body language demonstrated by the assembly that I have noticed lately at Mass.



The sign of peace or kiss of peace is an ancient liturgical gesture dating back to the early Church which has been part of the Mass from the very beginning. The spiritual symbolism of the act is found in the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus said, "If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift." (Mt 5:23-24)

In the current General Instruction of the Roman Missal, we read of the confirmation of this symbolism. The GIRM explains further: "There follows the Rite of Peace, by which the Church entreats peace and unity for herself and for the whole human family, and the faithful express to each other their ecclesial communion and mutual charity before communicating in the Sacrament." (#82)

The early Christians took to heart Jesus' words (mentioned above) and incorporated the action into their celebration of the Eucharist. From the time of St. Gregory the Great, this gesture was seen as a pre-requisite for the reception of Communion.

This sign of peace was typically given only to those standing next to each other. Later on, it developed that this gesture be descended from the sanctuary and passed onto the people, symbolizing that peace comes from Christ. Another interesting point to note from those early days is the priest would first kiss the altar and then pass on that kiss to his attendants. Moving along in history, by the 17th century the kiss of peace was done only in the Roman Rite to those present in the sanctuary and not passed onto the faithful in the pews.

As we know, after the second Vatican Council the Church took a new look at this ancient custom and restored the original action to include the faithful. This gesture is a highly symbolic act that is meant to point towards the disposition of heart required for receiving the Eucharist. It reminds us that in order to be in full communion with Christ, one must first "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength," and not forget to "love your neighbor as yourself." (Mk 12:30-31)

May the peace of the Lord be with each of you! ~~~~*Michele Hahn*