

# The Mass In Slow Motion

Volume 22

## The Sign of Peace

*The Mass In Slow Motion is a series on the Mass explaining the meaning and history of what we do each Sunday. This series of flyers is an attempt to add insight and understanding to our celebration of the Sacred Liturgy. This series will follow the Mass in order beginning with The Gathering Rite through The Final Blessing and Dismissal, approximately 25 volumes. Previous editions are available via the rectory office or our website: [www.hcscchurch.org](http://www.hcscchurch.org).*



The Rite of Peace follows the “Our Father” and the prayer “Lord Jesus Christ you said to your Apostles, ‘I leave you peace...’, by which the Church asks for 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. The manner of expressing this sign of peace is established by Conferences of Bishops in accordance with the culture and customs of the peoples. It is, however, appropriate that each person offer the sign of peace only to those who are nearest and in a sober manner. (cf G.I.R.M. # 82)

Other instructions in the Missal indicate that exchange of peace is shared “if appropriate” and that the celebrant “gives the sign of peace to a deacon or minister.” The instruction adds that the priest may give the sign of peace to the ministers but always remains within the sanctuary, so as not to disturb the celebration.

Hence, we learn some of the following things about the sign of peace:

1. The purpose of the prayer and rite is that the Church asks for peace and unity for herself and the whole world.
2. The faithful express to each other ecclesial communion and mutual charity before receiving Holy Communion.
3. It is for local Bishops conferences to issue norms regarding how this sign of peace is exchanged.
4. One should share the sign of peace only with those nearest to them. Hence, the leaving of one’s pew is generally not appropriate.
5. The sign of peace is to be shared in a sober manner. Hence loud greetings, lengthy conversations, back slapping, long embraces and the like are not appropriate. Sober need not mean a mere handshake (which might be silly for a married couple, for example). But the greeting should be cordial and generally to the point.
6. There is no required expression that the faithful should say. But, if something is said the instructions recommend: “The peace of the Lord be with you always.”
7. The priest is not to leave the sanctuary but is only to exchange the sign of peace with the deacon or other ministers nearest him.
8. The exchange of Peace is optional and is shared “if appropriate.” What would make it inappropriate is not clear but that is left to the discretion of the celebrant. There are times, such as in flu season, at special liturgies such as funerals, or when pressed for time, that the celebrant may chose to omit the exchange of peace.

## The Mass in Slow Motion: The Sign of Peace

Way back in 1977 the Bishop's Committee on the Liturgy also issued some direction on the Sign of Peace which fills out some of this:

*Neither the people nor the ministers need try exhaust the sign by attempting to give the greeting personally to everyone in the congregation or even to a great number of those present...Unless the sign of peace is clearly tailored to a specific occasion, such as a marriage, ordination, or some small intimate group, the more elaborate and individual exchange of peace by the celebrant has a tendency to appear clumsy. It can also accentuate too much the role of the celebrant or ministers, which runs counter to a true understanding of the presence of Christ in the entire assembly.”* (Bishops Committee on the Liturgy: The Sign of Peace, 1977)

Hence, both celebrant and congregation are cautioned against elaborating the sign of peace and are encouraged to sobriety. The sign of peace is not a “meet and greet” but rather it symbolizes the communion and peace of the whole Church in Christ. Because we are one in Christ and all members of the Body of Christ, to exchange the sign of peace with a few is to exchange it with all. Hence, it is not necessary or even desirable (due to disruption) to greet large numbers or to leave the pew or begin conversations.

**What is the History of the Sign of Peace**—Among the early Christians the “kiss of peace” was an important gesture to manifest love and unity, both within the liturgy and outside of it. In numerous places Paul and others encourage the Christians to “greet one another with a holy kiss.” (Rom 16:16, I Cor 16:20, II Cor 13:12, and also I Peter 5:14)

The location in the liturgy of this gesture has been various. Early on it seems to have been exchanged at the end of the service of readings just before the preparation of the gifts. This was in response to the directive of the Lord in Matthew 5:23ff “*wherein we should be reconciled with our brethren before bringing a gift to the altar.*” However, in the Roman Rite, as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, it was moved to the place it is today.

In addition, the sign of peace came to be regarded as a preparation for communion and was exchanged even when communion was received outside of Mass. It was exchanged by all who were to receive communion. Those who were not going to receive communion were instructed not to exchange the kiss of peace. Later, however, the kiss was exchanged by all.

An interesting practice that developed was the use of the *osculatorium*. This was an elaborately carved board that was passed around the congregation and kissed by all. It was thus a way of sharing the kiss through the whole congregation.

However, over time the exchange of peace declined and in the Latin Mass, codified by the Council of Trent, it was exchanged only at the Solemn Mass among the clergy. This is at least partly related to the declining frequency of reception of communion and various other factors such as the stylizing of the embrace. Today the whole matter has been restored more to its original scope.

**A Pastoral Note**—The profound communion we have in Christ and the peace for which we pray should not be understood in a shallow way. Peace here is not the shallow meaning of the world but the richer Hebraic understanding of *shalom* which is a wish for all possible prosperity, the state of a person who lives in complete harmony with nature, self, God and others. Christ is the source of all peace since it is He who enables every person to become fully human which is an absolute prerequisite for true peace founded on the truth of God and man. Our greeting of one another at this moment of the Mass should not be construed as a mere “have a nice day” or “How ya doin’?” Given our membership in the Body of Christ, what He has just accomplished on the altar, and the communion we are about to receive, we both wish and experience *shalom*. The greeting we extend is no mere human greeting, it is the greeting of Christ: “May the peace of the Lord be always with you.”