

Year of the Eucharist

October 2004 to October 2005

Part 35 in a series on
The Year of the Eucharist
from the
Department of Worship & Spiritual Life
Catholic Diocese of Memphis
in Tennessee

The Structure of the Mass The Liturgy of the Eucharist

THE COMMUNION RITE

The Rite of Peace

More commonly referred to as the *Sign of Peace*, this sharing of peace has been part of the Mass in some areas since the fourth century. Immediately after the entire assembly has prayed the *Our Father*, the priest prays,

“Lord Jesus Christ, you said to your apostles: ‘I leave you peace, my peace I give you.’ Look not on our sins, but on the faith of your Church, and grant us the peace and unity of your kingdom...”

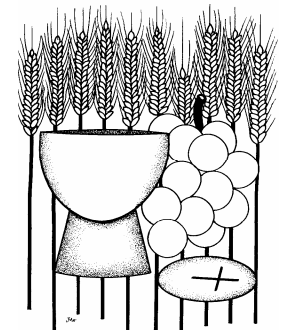
It surprises many people that at this point in the Liturgy, we are not praying for the absence of war in our world, but for the inner peace and unity that flows from living with Christ as the center of our lives. We ask Christ for the peace he promised – that peace which surpasses all understanding no matter what our life circumstances. The priest’s words to the assembly are specific: *“The peace of the Lord be with you always.”* As we extend to those near us our hope for that peace which the world cannot give, we are encouraged to use the same greeting, *“The peace of the Lord be with you always.”*

This moment in the Liturgy is actually a more sober one than most realize. According to the *General Instruction on the Roman Missal*, the Sign of Peace should express peace, communion, and charity. In his book, *To Give Thanks and Praise*, the late Ralph Keifer wrote:

“Far from being a folksy pleasantry, the peace greeting is a token of the support we owe one another as brothers and sisters in faith, whose deepest unity will be revealed only on the last day.”

While a handshake, an embrace or even a kiss can be appropriate, in a 1977 statement of the National Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy, one suggestion was to use two hands when shaking the hands of those near us in order to express a commitment containing a spiritual depth well beyond the handshake exchanged in social or business settings. Considering the underlying meaning of the Sign of Peace, it would be appropriate to re-examine the somewhat popular American practice of holding up the two-fingered sign of peace which we’ve picked up from secular settings. The sense of the Rite of Peace during the liturgy calls for placing our full attention on those near us and offering them a genuine Sign of Christ’s peace. The *Introduction to the Order of Mass* says it well:

“The Biblical concept of peace includes total well-being, a life in harmony with God and with ourselves, with our neighbors, and with the whole of creation. Such peace can only be the pure gift of God. It is won for us by the risen Christ present in the midst of those gathered, and so it is the peace of Christ that is exchanged.”



FROM THE GENERAL INSTRUCTION ON THE ROMAN MISSAL

The Rite of Peace

#82. As for the sign of peace to be given, the manner is to be established by the 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.

The Sign [of Peace] itself is sufficiently strong and expressive and does not need explanatory song or commentary. Thus, no song or commentary should accompany the exchange of the Sign of Peace.

Introduction to the Order of Mass, #129

Text: Judy Gray

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