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THE SIGN OF PEACE

Introduction

The sharing of the peace of the kingdom was the risen Lord's first gift to the apostolic Church after his resurrection. His greeting "Peace be with you" extended the conviction of the risen life; it was a life made whole by the loving care of the Father.

When the early Church gathered for liturgy a desire for peace marked its deepest longings. It was the peace of the risen Christ. The early community of believers saw the peace of Christ come to their lives for the building up of a new world. That world signed by peace was the will of the Father.

The peace of Christ must also be present in our lives today; it must be found at the very heart of our prayer. Indeed, there are many times in the liturgy when we express this conviction. The word of God calls us to peace. The Lord's Prayer petitions the coming of the kingdom. The deepest human longing for peace and God's reign is expressed in the eucharistic prayer: "In the midst of conflict and division, we know it is you who turn our minds to thoughts of peace" (Eucharistic Prayer for Masses of Reconciliation II). When we eat and drink the body and blood of the Lord, we further extend the unity of the kingdom and its promise of peace. Whereas there are other similar expressions of this hope, the sign of peace in the communion rite stands out as a prime example.

The purpose of this statement is to look at the history of the sign of peace and the various expressions and meanings it has had. It is further the intention of the statement to present a rationale for a ritual gesture which, rooted both in the human longing for peace and in the conviction that true peace comes from the Lord

Jesus, is now an important part of the revised eucharistic liturgy of the Church.

Early Tradition

The practice of extending a kiss of peace as a sign of respect or friendship is found in the Old Testament and firmly rooted in Jewish tradition. This practice is witnessed to in early Christian ritual, a borrowing from Jewish custom. For example, in the New Testament the kiss was a courteous preliminary to any ceremonial gathering, especially a meal. To omit it could cause remark or concern as when Christ said: "You gave me no kiss, but she has not ceased kissing my feet since I entered" (Luke 7:45). In the writings of St. Paul the kiss is recognized as a token of Christian communion (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12). In 1 Peter 5:14, there is mention of an embrace: "Greet one another with the embrace of true love."

The practice of the kiss of peace in the liturgy is first mentioned at Rome by Justin Martyr (c. 150 A.D.) and is found in the Syrian Apostolic Constitutions (around the end of the 4th century). It was used in various prayer services and in the eucharistic celebration.

In the early Roman liturgical tradition the sign of peace, or the kiss of peace as it was called, followed the celebration of the liturgy of the word. When the liturgy of the word became permanently joined to the liturgy of the eucharist, the general tendency was to associate the kiss of peace with the presentation of gifts. The admonition in Matthew about reconciling oneself with one's brother before bringing a gift to the altar encouraged this positioning of the kiss of peace in the Mass. At a later stage, however, the kiss of peace was shifted to the conclusion of the eucharistic prayer, and finally, especially after St. Gregory the Great, it became an appropriate extension of the Lord's Prayer in preparation for communion. It was felt that since communion establishes and deepens the fellowship of Christ's Body, the Church, this gesture of peace and

unity should be exchanged by all present before the actual participation in the body and blood of Christ. The revised Order of Mass retained this place for the sign of peace in the eucharistic liturgy of the Roman rite.

The Gesture as a Sign in the Entire Assembly

Early liturgical documents of the Church indicate significant variations in the particular manner of extending the sign of peace. In the earliest sources (*Ordines Romani*) it appears that the *pax* did not originate with the celebrant and then proceed in an orderly manner to the rest of the assembly. Rather each member of the clergy exchanged a sign of peace with his neighbor while the faithful extended it among themselves. One source expressly states that as soon as the priest has said *Pax Domini* and all have responded with *Et cum spiritu tuo*, "the clerics and people offer the sign of peace among themselves where they are standing" (*Capitulare ecclesiastici ordinis*, Andrieu III, 124). Little need was felt to move around; each offered the sign of peace to the persons nearby.

Whereas the earliest guidelines regarding this rite stated that at the given signal those in the nave of the church greeted each other with the kiss, later formulations of the instructions introduced an inconspicuous but important change (Mabillon, PL 78, 945B, and later MSS). The kiss of peace was made to proceed from the altar and, like a message or gift, handed on from the celebrant "to the others and to the people." With this in view it was only logical that the kiss of peace should come from the celebrant via the deacon as if from Christ himself. The celebrant was first to kiss the altar, or according to other sources, the missal, crucifix, chalice or the consecrated gifts, before extending the sign of peace to the others.

This amended procedure aptly agreed with the mentality of the middle ages and its tendency to clericalize everything in the liturgy. The assembly of the faithful, kept as a clearly distinct and separate body, was to be content with watch-

ing, assisting and receiving. Accordingly, the sign of peace was to be received from a cleric and, even when communicated among the laity by means of the pax-board (a small tablet made of wood, ivory or metal with the figure of Christ, a saint or symbolic figures engraved or painted on it), it was understood as coming ultimately from the celebrating priest.

The present rite calls for a general greeting of peace proclaimed by the priest after the prayer for peace and unity within the Church. This prayer can be regarded as a communal seal and pledge of fellowship since it appeals to Christ for the peace and unity of his kingdom. When the celebrant or deacon says, "Let us offer each other the sign of peace," each person is invited to exchange the sign of peace with others nearby. The challenge is to make the sign of peace both genuine and reverent. It is not a mere greeting. It is a form of worship and of prayer—a personal and sincere pledge and sign of reconciliation, unity and peace. It is a manifestation of faith in the presence of Christ in one's neighbor and a prayer that God may bless him/her. It is the opportunity to see one another afresh in God and to be reconciled in the way that only liturgy affords.

Pastoral Suggestions

The manner in which the sign of peace is exchanged is to follow the local custom. As a deeply significant part of the communion rite, the sign should not be used in a casual or introductory way, but should be maintained as a true gesture of the mutual peace that comes from one's union with Christ. The sign of peace may vary according to the type of celebration. In celebrations with large congregations, the handshake is the most common. Experience has shown that the use of both hands in extending the greeting creates an expression of greater warmth and distinguishes this rite from the ordinary handclasp associated with a social greeting. In celebrations with smaller groups a handclasp is often used as well as the embrace. Some priests still

employ the traditional "pax" of the Roman Rite. Often words accompany the action, such as "Peace be with you," or some similar greeting.

It is also clear that the sign of peace is to be exchanged with persons who are rather close by (*General Instruction* no. 112). Neither the people nor the ministers need try to exhaust the sign by attempting to give the greeting personally to everyone in the congregation or even to a great number of those present. The sign remains just that—a sign of the peace that should exist among all those who celebrate the sacrament of unity.

The celebrant of the eucharist may offer the sign of peace to the deacon or minister, that is, to those near the altar. In accordance with the intent of the ritual, the priest need not move from the altar to offer the sign of peace to other members of the assembly. The reason for this "limited sharing" is that the priest has already prayed for peace among all present and has addressed them with his all-inclusive greeting: "The peace of the Lord be with you always."

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.

Although the priest's greeting "The peace of the Lord be with you always" is always included in the communion rite, the *General Instruction* of the Roman Missal (no. 112) indicates that the sign of peace need not be exchanged at every eucharistic celebration. However, its inclusion should become the norm.

Consideration for the overall ritual flow and rhythm should be an additional important factor in the use of the sign of peace. The time used to exchange the sign should be in proper proportion to the other ritual elements of the communion rite and should not create an imbalance

because of length, style, musical accompaniment, or other elements that may give exaggerated importance to it. The celebrant, as the one who presides, must weigh such factors as local standards for propriety, size of the church, number of participants, character and intimacy of the assembly, lest the rite become a mere formality or deteriorate into a frivolous display.

Conclusion

All who gather to celebrate the eucharist are called upon to form the worshiping community of faith and manifest by word and gesture to one another and the world that the Church is indeed a community of reconciliation, unity and peace. The General Instruction of The Roman Missal (no. 566) therefore states that "before they share in the same bread, the people express their love for one another and beg for peace and unity in the Church and with all mankind."

