



## Mass Parts 39/52: *Sign of Peace*

After the whole Eucharistic Prayer and the Our Father, we prepare for the Communion Rite by offering each other peace. Some liturgical scholars comment that the Sign of Peace seems to interrupt the Eucharistic Prayer and the Communion Rite. Why offer peace now? There have been past attempts at moving the Sign of Peace to the beginning of Mass. The placement of the Sign of Peace at this point, however, makes perfect Scriptural sense. In the Gospel of Matthew (5:23-24) we read:

*Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift.*

Our gifts are already on the altar and have been transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. Before we come forward to receive them, we must make peace with each other. Let no words of forgiveness be unuttered before coming to receive our Savior.

The Sign of Peace itself varies according to culture and relationship. I have been to very kissy parishes in the past and some that kept it to a firm and distant handshake. Depending on our relationship to the person, whether related or beloved or stranger, we can shake hands, kiss, or hug.

The Sign of Peace is not the time to talk or catch up on the week or make plans for the rest of the day. It is only to offer peace. It is also only for those around you. This is a ritual symbol and only needs to be shared with those sitting immediately around you. It is not appropriate to leave your pew and shake the hands of everyone in the church or even across the aisle. There is also no need to flash the peace sign to everyone with whom you make eye contact. It is not rude to just share peace with those immediately beside, behind, and in front of you.

One funny note though. Culturally appropriate can also seem odd to strangers. I have been to Priesthood Ordinations where the difference in how peace is offered by the other priests present to the newly ordained depends on culture as well as personal comfort. Other places have an awkward shoulder grab type of hug that keeps the person at a distance, which always looks more like the person is afraid of their own skin more than peace. Thankfully in Youngstown we go for bear hugs!

Anyone wondering why I don't leave the altar during the Sign of Peace? When I was growing up, one pastor I had left the altar and shook hands with everyone in the front row across the church. I cannot leave the Eucharist unattended on the altar, however. Even at weekday Mass I stay by the altar and shake hands with one person in the front that I can reach. On Sundays, I stay by the side of the altar and let the cantor and servers come up to me. And as a reminder to all Eucharistic Ministers: when taking Communion to the sick, you can't stop anywhere on the way once you have the Eucharist on your person. It doesn't go in the glove box and you can't stop to pick up a snack. It leaves the tabernacle and goes directly to the person who is to receive.

-Fr. Kopp

Next Week: Lamb of God