



Kiss of Peace: Its timing in the Mass is deliberate

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Answered by Father Edward McNamara, LC, professor of liturgy and dean of theology at the Regina Apostolorum university.

Question: The Sign of Peace is positioned at the worst part of the Eucharistic celebration. It should be at the introduction part, prior to the Eucharist, I believe. — G.W., Bahamas

Answer: It might be just a tad excessive to say that the kiss of peace is placed at the worst part of the celebration, especially considering that it has **probably been in its current position since Pope St. Gregory the Great (590-604).**

Perhaps our reader's difficulties stem from the fact that rite is **sometimes carried out in a confused manner, which is not the mind of the Church and is not how the rite developed in history.**

The kiss, **or sign, of peace was already part of Church practice from the earliest times**, perhaps inspired by St. Paul's invitation to the Corinthians: "*Greet one another with a holy kiss*" (1 Corinthians 16:20).

The rite is mentioned in ancient sources such as the "Apostolic Constitutions" and the sermons of St. Augustine.

At first, the kiss of peace was considered as an important, and even obligatory, preparation for those about to receive Communion but was later extended to all. After the year 1000 the kiss of peace gradually became a far more formalized rite and later the exclusive preserve of the clergy, except for some special occasions.

Thus, the sign of peace, as described in the **present missal, roughly restores the rite to the form it had in medieval times in which everyone briefly gave the kiss of peace to the person beside him. At that time, the gesture of the kiss was more a mark of respect than of affection.** Hence, the gesture adopted today should be what local custom considers as a gesture of respect.

We should also consider the nature of the peace that we are giving. The rite is preceded by the monition, "*The peace of the Lord be with you always.*" This is both a signal for the rite of peace and an indication that the peace we exchange **is not merely a benevolent feeling for our neighbor but the peace that comes to us through Christ and the unity and harmony that derives from sharing the Eucharist.**

After the synod on the Eucharist in 2005 there was some discussion and widespread consultation regarding the possibility of changing the moment of the sign of peace. **The majority of experts recommended keeping the traditional position before communion.**

Finally, on June 8, 2014, the **Congregation for Divine Worship** published a circular letter “*Pacem relinquo vobis,*” on “**The Ritual Expression of the Gift of Peace at Mass**” (Prot. N. 414/14) with the conclusions of the inquiry:

“1. ‘Peace I leave you; my peace I give you.’ As they gathered in the cenacle, these are the words with which Jesus promises the gift of peace to his disciples before going to face his passion, in order to implant in them the joyful certainty of his steadfast presence. After his resurrection, the Lord fulfills his promise by appearing among them in the place **where they had gathered for fear of the Jews saying, ‘Peace be with you!’** Christ’s peace is the fruit of the redemption that he brought into the world by his death and resurrection — **the gift that the Risen Lord continues to give even today to his Church as she gathers for the celebration of the Eucharist in order to bear witness to this in everyday life.**

“2. In the Roman liturgical tradition, the exchange of peace is placed before Holy Communion with its own specific theological significance. Its point of reference is found in the Eucharistic contemplation of the Paschal mystery as the **‘Paschal kiss’ of the Risen Christ present on the altar** as in contradistinction to that done by other liturgical traditions which are inspired by the Gospel passage from St. Matthew (cf. Mt 5:23). The rites which prepare for Communion constitute a well-expressed unity in which each ritual element has its own significance and which contributes to the overall ritual sequence of sacramental participation in the mystery being celebrated. **The sign of peace, therefore, is placed between the Lord’s Prayer, to which is joined the embolism which prepares for the gesture of peace, and the breaking of the bread, in the course of which the Lamb of God is implored to give us his peace.** With this gesture, whose ‘function is to manifest peace, communion and charity,’ the Church ‘implores 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,**’ that is, **the Body of Christ the Lord.**

“3. In the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum caritatis*, **Pope Benedict XVI entrusted to this Congregation the competence of considering questions about the exchange of peace, in order to safeguard the sacred sense of the Eucharistic celebration and the sense of mystery at the moment of receiving Holy Communion:** ‘By its nature the Eucharist is the sacrament of peace. At Mass this dimension of the Eucharistic mystery finds specific expression in the sign of peace. Certainly this sign has great value (cf. Jn 14:27). In our times, fraught with fear and conflict, this gesture has become particularly eloquent, as the Church has become increasingly conscious of her responsibility to pray insistently for the gift of peace and unity for herself and for the whole human family. [...] We can thus understand the emotion so often felt during the sign of peace at a liturgical celebration. Even so, during the Synod of Bishops there was discussion about the appropriateness of **greater restraint in this gesture, which can be exaggerated and cause a certain distraction in the assembly just before the reception of Communion.** It should be kept in mind that nothing is lost when the sign of peace is marked by a **sobriety which preserves the proper spirit of the celebration, as, for example, when it is restricted to one’s immediate neighbors.**’

“4. Pope Benedict XVI, further than shedding light on the true sense of the rite and of the exchange of peace, emphasized its great significance as a contribution of Christians, with their prayer and witness to allay the most profound and disturbing anxieties of contemporary humanity. **In light of all this he renewed his call that this rite be protected and that this liturgical gesture be done with religious sensibility and sobriety.**