

What happened to the Sign of Peace?

Dear Parishioners,

As you know, at our two churches, following the Our Father, the priest rarely if ever invites the congregation to exchange the Sign of Peace. Please be aware that omitting the Sign of Peace was the custom here long before I arrived 14 years ago. Furthermore, I twice polled the parish on this question and both times you voted by 80% that you preferred not to have the Sign of Peace.

This part of the Mass is an optional rite. The rubrics (or instructions) for the Mass state: *“Then, if appropriate, the Deacon, or the Priest, adds: ‘Let us offer each other the sign of peace’”* [no. 128].

Thus, the decision rests with the priest celebrant. If the priest does not include this in the Mass it is not proper to go ahead and exchange the sign of peace privately. Doing so despite the priest’s choice of option adds to confusion and disunity in the Mass. The congregants should not exchange the Sign of Peace if the priest does not include it. We realize that this is happening at some of the Masses, but it is not appropriate and we have been getting inquiries from parishioners about why some people are doing so on their own.

Beyond answering the question of whether or not the priest has the right to omit the Sign of Peace, there is the question of why would he do so, given that almost everywhere it is not omitted?

An argument can be made that the Sign of Peace, occurring just prior to the Lamb of God, distracts from the mystery of Christ’s Real Presence just made present on the altar. Following the Eucharistic Prayer our attention is increasingly focused on the Blessed Sacrament. But just then our thoughts are distracted from that mystery as we turn to one another for the Sign of Peace. The argument is not that a Sign of Peace is not fitting within the context of Mass (it is actually an ancient gesture). Rather, in the current Mass its precise placement is liturgically awkward.

It is a question of a legitimate liturgical option (a discipline) and not of unchanging doctrine, and thus faithful Catholics may disagree on the point (which we must always do with charity).

Years ago, when visiting Asia, I observed that at the Sign of Peace the congregants exchanged a very reverent, simple and quiet bow to one’s neighbor at Mass, with hands folded. All was done very elegantly and silently. But this is not what happens in America. Here it is usually a hand clasp and then a murmur ripples throughout the congregation. Sometimes there is brief chatter, walking across the aisle, even back slapping. We’ve all experienced this.

All this happens right while the Eucharist is present on the altar and immediately before we begin the Lamb of God and fall on our knees in Adoration. It is disconcerting to many people, including people at our own parish who frequently mention this to us.

To reiterate my point: The legislation of the Mass leaves it to the priest to make the decision. There has even been a recent directive from Rome in this same vein.

One is free to form one’s own opinion on the matter. But for the sake of the unity of the congregation at Mass, there should not be a section of the congregation that exchanges the Sign of Peace if the priest does not say, *“Let us offer one another the Sign of Peace.”*

Thank you for considering these points. I am open to hearing your feedback on this matter.

Omnes cum Petro ad Iesum per Mariam,

Father de Rosa
Pastor

February 21, 2023