

## The Sign of Peace – A fun break from serious prayer? A distraction? Or... God's peace?!

The sign of peace at every Catholic Mass is an ancient practice that I believe can have a profound effect on how we approach Jesus in the Eucharist and our relationship with God in general. For some people, the sign of peace is one of their favorite parts of the Mass because they get to say hi to family or friends in a personal way with a handshake or a hug, or because they get to meet new people around them and greet others with a smile and a word of welcome to the church on this particular Sunday. However, for some other people, the sign of peace is a bit frustrating and/or awkward. This is because we have just finished some of the most devout, prayerful, deep, holy, and transformative parts of the Catholic Mass. Jesus is currently fully present on the altar. We are preparing our hearts to receive the infinite God become man in Holy Communion. To some of these people, they might object and say, this is not the time of the Mass for greetings and handshakes and little conversations. We should be praying deeply, devoutly, and piously to receive holy communion well. For them, the sign of peace is much more a distraction and something that is unnecessary (and awkward for people who consider themselves introverts or don't want to shake a stranger's hand), especially at this most holy moment during the Catholic Mass. I would like to propose a middle ground and how approaching this properly can actually really help us pray each Mass well and enter more fully into our spiritual lives with Christ!

First of all, listen to this description by St. Justin Martyr about the Mass in the middle of the 100s in practicing the sign of peace, "*Having ended the prayers, we salute one another with a kiss.*" There is ample evidence that this quick description would have been a widespread practice of the sign of peace, not only because of evidence found in Scripture (e.g. see Rom 16:16; 2 Cor 13:12; 1 Peter 5:14), but especially because later descriptions in the 4<sup>th</sup> century talk about this in detail within the Catholic Mass (see St. Augustine's *Sermon 227*). With historical precedent in place, the question now is how should we approach this with the proper spiritual perspective during each Mass? Are the people who really enjoy the sign of peace, correct, and we should agree with them? Or are the people who feel disrupted or awkward by it more correct, and we should be on their side?

The answer is that both are potentially missing something rather important, and we can include both perspectives into the proper understanding and approach during Mass. First of all, we should realize that the sign of peace IS MEANT to be a devout and prayerful time during the celebration of the Mass. Therefore, we are not really meant to turn this into a casual moment for joking around with people or starting a conversation or walking down a few pews to give someone a hug. While we are shaking hands or saying hi or peace be with you to those immediately around us, we should try our best to keep in our minds that God is fully present and we are prayerfully and humbly preparing for this most holy encounter. We don't want to lose that disposition of heart as well as we don't want to distract others and have them lose that devout preparation as well. However, at the same time, just because we are devoutly praying and desiring to be in deep communion with Jesus, doesn't mean we can't in the same moment charitably greet others around us and engage in this basic human interaction. Is it possible to have deep communion with Jesus AND engage in human interaction? Yes! This is what heaven will be like for all eternity, and we can practice this at every Mass during this moment.

We are not in the perfection of heaven yet, so once again, undue distraction is not the goal [for both ourselves and others]. On the other hand, we can try our best to BOTH **keep our preparation and our desire to receive Jesus in Holy Communion devoutly WHILE AT THE SAME TIME being charitable to others in this simple human interaction**. This can help us to realize that Jesus' presence can be deeply with us during each and every day of our normal lives at home, school, work, or wherever. One last key thing that can help is that we are asking for God's peace to come to us and others. May we ask God to give us HIS peace during each Mass, and He can truly help us to understand that when the priest says to us, Peace be with you, we can receive God's peace. Not as the world gives do I give it to you, but I give you my peace, says the Lord (see John 14:27)! A peace that grows into our human relationships, a peace that helps us keep growing in the desire for a devout life, and a peace that surpasses all understanding of what the world alone can bring us. Jesus gives us His peace at every Mass, and we can practice bringing that into our human relationships during the sign of peace as well. Amen!