



My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The next section in the Mass is the prayer for peace. The priest reflects on Jesus' words to His apostles:

Lord Jesus Christ, who said to your Apostles: Peace I leave you, my peace I give you; look not on our sins, but on the faith of your Church, and graciously grant her peace and unity in accordance with your will.

This is one of the few prayers in the Mass directed to Jesus (most are directed to the Father). It is a beautiful prayer asking for peace and unity in the Church.

The priest then extends peace to the assembly: "The peace of the Lord be with you always" and the people respond, "And with your spirit."

Then there is the optional sign of peace (indicated by the priest or deacon saying, "Let us offer each other the sign of peace."). As you know, right now, the Bishop has asked that we not extend the sign of peace to each other. Over the centuries, the sign of peace has had to go through various renewals, as it has gotten out of hand and lost focus on its true meaning. Our Bishop believes this is a time of this renewal.

So, what is the sign of peace? Many times, we look at the sign of peace as an opportunity to reconcile with each other. The Scripture we remember is:

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. (Matthew 5:23-24)

In the western Church (that's us), however, this is not how it has developed. Rather, it is about Jesus giving us His peace, and we share *that* peace with each other. To put it another way, the peace we share in Mass is "vertical" – coming from Jesus – not "horizontal" – reconciling differences.

The horizontal dimension of the "kiss of peace" (by kiss, think of an embrace) is clearer when we look at how it was shared in the Tridentine Liturgy (the "Pre-Vatican II" Mass). The priest would kiss the altar near the host (receiving the "peace" from Jesus), then he would "kiss" the deacon, who would then "kiss" the subdeacon – passing Jesus' peace from one to the other. No one can give the peace who has not received it from someone else.

The symbolism is both beautiful and clear. All true peace comes from Christ through the ministration of His Church. Grace cascades from the Eucharist through Christ's ministers to His people, forming a "chain of love" that both binds and elevates. ("The Kiss Off: A Crisis of Meaning in the Sign of Peace" by Michael P. Foley, April 14, 2023)

This "Kiss of Peace" is sometimes referred to as the "Paschal Kiss" – meaning it is taken from the Paschal Mystery – the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. St. Thomas Aquinas says that the Paschal kiss helps us prepare for Holy Communion, as we receive Christ's peace flowing from His Paschal Mystery, which is sacramentally present to us in the Eucharist.

Often our focus during the sign of peace is not on this grace "cascading" from the Eucharist, and so our Bishop wants to help us refocus the meaning of this act. He promises a further catechesis on the meaning of the sign of peace before he reestablishes it in our Diocese. In the meantime, we can reflect on the mystery of Christ pouring out His peace upon us in the Eucharist.