



**Step-by-Step Walk Through the Mass  
Do This in Remembrance of Me, Part 63,  
Exchanging the Sign of Peace  
by FR. LUKE SPANNAGEL**



Continuing with the **Rite of Peace**, how do we exchange the sign of peace? For a little more background on this part of the Mass, the Diocese of Peoria teaches, “This prayer reaffirms the holiness of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ. The Church, insofar as She is the Bride of Christ, is holy and without blemish. While the Church remains holy, Her members are prone to sin and error, and so we beseech our Lord to look upon His Church with favor and grant us the peace and unity of the kingdom of heaven. Upon asking our Lord for this peace, the priest extends this peace to the congregation as he says: ‘The peace of the Lord be with you always!’ [The people reply] ‘And with your spirit.’ [The Deacon or Priest then says: “Let us offer each other the sign of peace.”] According to local custom, we exchange with one another a sign of peace. Typically, in the United States, the normative gesture is a handshake to those around us” (*A Study of the Mass*, p. 18).

**An Expression of Christian Community**

For more description of what happens after the words from the sanctuary, the *Catholic Encyclopedia* states, “It is then that the people of the assembled community turn to their immediate neighbors and exchange a greeting, a shake of the hand, or other sign of peace and friendship. This need not be an elaborate exchange. There are no ritual words to be said, some preferring to say: ‘Peace be with you’ or ‘the Peace of Christ be with you’ or ‘God bless you.’ The response may be equally simple. This kiss of peace, both as a sign of recognition of fellowship, respect, or friendship is essentially a sign of reconciliation, of expressing the mutual regard of Christian for Christian... St. Paul recognized this sign of peace as an expression of Christian community (Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12). And St. Peter considered this greeting a sign of union with Christ, or Christ-like togetherness (1 Pt 5:14)” (*Catholic Encyclopedia*, p. 465).

**Practical Gestures of Peace**

While the deeper meaning of this gesture may be more clear for us, the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* included a new paragraph addressing the practical gesture itself, which says, “As for the actual sign of peace to be given, the manner is to be established by the Conferences of Bishops in accordance with the culture and customs of the peoples. However, it is appropriate that each person, in a sober manner, offer the sign of peace only to those who are nearest” (*GIRM*, 82). So, what is the norm for us? While we don’t have a defined standard, as mentioned previously, our typical local norm is a simple handshake with people that are nearby. Certainly, spouses, families, and others may have more intimate exchanges of peace such as a hug or a kiss. During times when people are being more cautious about illness and contact, a simple bow or a wave and a smile can be fine gestures of peace as well. Generally, I would encourage people to choose the sign that is comfortable for people around us. The main thing we want to remember is to make the gesture a real sign of peace, while at the same time not being too carefree or moving throughout the church, where we might risk being disrespectful to Jesus present on the altar (which is also why we shouldn’t have conversations at this time).

For a few more summary thoughts, the Diocese of Peoria says, “This rite of peace acknowledges a few things: forgiveness, humility and community. In Matthew, Chapter 5, our Lord taught us we must first be reconciled with one another before approaching the altar. We approach the altar to receive the Prince of Peace; His command is that we be peacemakers ourselves by forgiving others and asking pardon for our sins... It is also a gesture of the communal Spirit which resides in the Church. The gesture of peace signifies this ‘ecclesial bond’ that with Christ we are a community of believers and children of the same Father” (*A Study of the Mass*, p. 18). The next time you offer the Sign of Peace at Mass, whether a hug, kiss, handshake, simple bow, wave, or smile, think about what it truly means—what you truly want to offer to those around you—and how it helps prepare your heart for Jesus truly present in Holy Communion.