

The Mass (Part XXVI)

by Fr. Tim Church

THE PEACE

The next element in our Mass is the exchange of the peace. It is interesting that this has moved around in the Mass to a variety of positions. Even in the very early days of the Church's life, it could be found at the beginning of the Mass. Probably the most predominant place of the peace in ancient times was before the preparation of the altar, or in association with a penitential rite. We can see here a reflection of Jesus' teaching against hypocrisy in worship:

“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)

The adoption of the practice of placing the peace after the Our Father connects it directly to this prayer. It seals the prayer as an expression of our unity and charity for one another. It is, however, to be distinguished from the penitential rite:

“The practice of the Roman Rite is to be maintained according to which the peace is extended shortly before Holy Communion. For according to the tradition of the Roman Rite, this practice does not have the connotation either of reconciliation or of a remission of sins, but instead signifies peace, communion and charity before the reception of the Most Holy Eucharist. It is rather the Penitential Act to be carried out at the beginning of Mass (especially in its first form) which has the character of reconciliation among brothers and sisters.”

(Redemptionis Sacramentum, #71)

The peace, then, is a sign of the charity that is among the fruits of the Mass itself. The penitential rite is effective when venial sins against this charity have occurred. Grave sins against this charity should prevent us from receiving communion. Again, this is a well-founded teaching of the Church. We should recall the teaching of St. Paul in this regard:

“27 Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord. 28 A person should examine himself, and so eat the bread and drink the cup. 29 For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself.” (1 Corinthians 11:27-29)

The more casual approach to communion in our time will probably not survive the Church's reflection. For the spiritual good of the faithful, we need to re-examine our attitude toward our readiness to receive communion.

To clarify the role of the penitential rite in preparing us for communion, this is an appropriate means for reconciling us to God with regard to venial sins. These are less significant sins, minor acts, generally of forgetfulness or habit, that do not have grave consequences. Mortal sins prevent us from receiving communion. These must be confessed in the sacrament of penance, during individual confession to a priest.

The manner of exchanging the peace is simple, but the recent revision of the Liturgy has clarified a few things. The priest is generally expected to remain in the sanctuary, except during funerals and other times when pastoral necessity dictates that he leave the altar area. Requiring him to remain in the sanctuary is to prevent any sort of disruption in the flow of events in the Mass.

It is common for a variety of greetings to be exchanged during the peace, but we probably need to remember that this is a celebration of a gift that we have received from God, rather than our happiness to see each other. The General Instructions of the Roman Missal specify that the peace be exchanged among the people with the words: "The peace of the Lord be with you always." The proper response is "Amen."