

Liturgy Lesson Twenty Nine: The Sign of Peace

Sometimes when you bounce a ball in the house, it lands two or three different places and then disappears. The history of the Sign of Peace is very similar. In the early church it came after the Liturgy of the Word. By the fifth century in Rome, it came after the Our Father. By the end of the Middle Ages, it had disappeared. It disappeared because, as has been said several times in these lessons, the Mass gradually became more and more the private prayer of the priest.

Now the Church has restored it to its position after the Our Father. Here is what the Roman Missal says about the purpose of the Sign of Peace: "...before they share the same bread, the faithful implore peace and unity for the Church and for the whole human family and offer some sign of their love for one another." Remember, Jesus said, "This is how all will know you for my disciples; your love for one another." So the Church asks us to share a sign of that love. True, we may not even know the person near us, but that doesn't matter. They are a brother or sister in Christ because we share the same faith in Jesus Christ.

The Church very deliberately does not say how that sign of peace is to be exchanged. It is to be exchanged "in accord with the culture and customs of the people. Neither specific form nor specific words are determined." It could be a hand shake, an embrace, or a kiss. The point is that we are brothers and sisters in Christ, and before we share Holy Communion, we share a simple sign of our love for one another.