

COMMENTARY

Peaceful Peace

by William Mahrt



The circular letter of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments concerning the Sign of Peace raises important issues in the conduct of the sacred liturgy. The Sign of Peace has often been the occasion for inappropriate and fundamentally secular actions, just before a most sacred moment, the reception of the Eucharist. At the Peace there has often been conversation far exceeding the greeting prescribed by the liturgy, conversation that may include secular topics, and this has been a serious disruption of liturgical decorum at a most sacred moment in the liturgy. The Peace has been used to further an anthropocentric focus in the liturgy; the extended hubbub at this point placed the focus upon the congregation. There is today a strong move back to a more theocentric focus in the liturgy—the focus of attention upon the worship of the Almighty, instead of upon the congregation, is the best pastoral approach for the congregation. This calls for a reorientation of the Peace as it has often been practiced.

Some had proposed moving the Peace to a location known by other rites, particularly before the offertory; this would have placed it at a hiatus between the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, where the more relaxed atmosphere of casual conversation would not be seen as a serious disruption. The sacred congregation has rejected this suggestion on

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the grounds that such a move would denigrate the integral relation between the Peace and the Eucharist. Rather, there should be catechesis on its proper meaning. It might be recalled that in the extraordinary form, the intimate link between the Eucharist and the Peace is expressed by the priest's making a Sign of the Cross with a particle of the Host as he says "Pax Domini sit semper vo-

biscum," and then puts the particle in the Chalice. This Commixture is an ultimate expression of the sacrificial presence of Christ, and is persuasive reason to keep the location of the Peace there, and to draw our congregations into this mystery through catechesis. Will we hear such catechesis?

It is particularly in sung Masses that the inappropriate activity at the Peace has been a disruption. The singing of each part of the Mass contributes to a purposeful action that finds

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its climax first in the Consecration and then in the Communion. The Lord's Prayer comes as an intensification of devotion and the subsequent liturgical activities contribute to a build-up, not of something bombastic or extroverted, but as something of great and elevated interiority; our focus upon the presence of Christ is enhanced by each of these activities, especially as they are sung. The intrusion of conversational elements breaks this focus and is a distraction from the center of our attention. The fact that we sing many of them together means that there is already a genuinely communal element to this focus, and a discreet exchange of a gesture of peace should not disrupt it. This exchange of peace must, then be done with a consciousness that it is done in the presence of Christ here on the altar.

The sacred congregation rejects the use of a "peace song," something that has evidently been developed to accompany the long time that has been taken for the Peace. The extraordinary form had a simple solution for this: at the High Mass the Peace was given after the priest

had said the Agnus Dei and while the choir finished singing it. In the ordinary form, the Peace comes before the Agnus Dei and the fraction and commixture take place during it.

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The sacred congregation suggests discreetly that "familiar and profane gestures of greeting . . . be replaced with other more appropriate gestures" (§6b, above). The word "profane" should be taken in the sense of "secular," not "blasphemous,"

and I would suggest that the handshake is principally a secular gesture that does not adequately express the sacred nature of the action. In my diocese, at the peak of the flu epidemic, the bishop instructed our congregations to avoid contact that might communicate the disease, and so we were not to take the Chalice, to receive Communion on the tongue, or to shake hands at the Peace. At the Peace, we naturally turned to the gesture of a simple bow to each other, something whose meaning has been well established in the liturgy. There was never a rescinding of this instruction after the waning of the epidemic; interestingly, many people now have kept the simple bow, even though they have gone back to receiving Communion on the tongue and the Chalice.

The sacred congregation reminds us that the Sign of Peace has always been optional, and at this point could be omitted. This has been done in some places for a long time and is one solution. But perhaps the issue should be taken in hand. The cultivation of a more sacred gesture, the renewal of the celebration of the liturgy upon theocentric principles, and ample catechesis on the unique value of the Sign of Peace properly given should be the goal. ❧