

CDWDS Circular Letter on the Ritual Expression of the Gift of Peace at Mass

*On Pentecost Sunday, June 8, 2014, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments issued a circular letter entitled *Pacem relinquo vobis*, on “The Ritual Expression of the Gift of Peace at Mass” (Prot. n. 414/14). Addressed to the Presidents of Conferences of Bishops throughout the world, the letter is published here for the benefit of our readers:*

1. “Peace I leave you; my peace I give you.”¹ As they gathered in the cenacle, these are the words with which Jesus promises the gift of peace to his disciples before going to face his passion, in order to implant in them the joyful certainty of his steadfast presence. After his resurrection, the Lord fulfills his promise by appearing among them in the place where they had gathered for fear of the Jews saying, “Peace be with you!”² Christ’s peace is the fruit of the redemption that he brought into the world by his death and resurrection—the gift that the Risen Lord continues to give even today to his Church as she gathers for the celebration of the Eucharist in order to bear witness to this in everyday life.

2. In the Roman liturgical tradition, the exchange of peace is placed before Holy Communion with its own specific theological significance. Its point of reference is found in the Eucharistic contemplation of the Paschal mystery as the “Paschal kiss” of the Risen Christ present on the altar³ as in contradistinction to that done by other liturgical traditions which are inspired by the Gospel passage from St. Matthew (cf. Mt 5:23). The rites which prepare for Communion constitute a well expressed unity in which each ritual element has its own significance and which contributes to the overall ritual sequence of sacramental participation in the mystery being celebrated. The sign of peace, therefore, is placed between the Lord’s Prayer, to which is joined the embolism which prepares for the gesture of peace, and the breaking of the bread, in the course of which the Lamb of God is implored to give us his peace. With this gesture, whose “function is to manifest peace, communion and charity,”⁴ the Church “implores peace and unity for herself and for the whole human family, and the faithful express to each other their ecclesial communion and mutual charity before communicating in the Sacrament,”⁵ that is, the Body of Christ the Lord.

3. In the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum caritatis*, Pope Benedict XVI entrusted to this Congregation the competence of considering questions about the exchange of peace,⁶ in order to safeguard the sacred sense of the Eucharistic celebration and the sense of mystery at the moment of receiving Holy Communion: “By its nature the Eucharist is the sacrament of peace. At Mass this dimension of the Eucharistic mystery finds specific expression in the sign of peace. Certainly this sign has great value (cf. Jn 14:27). In our times, fraught with fear and conflict, this gesture has become particularly eloquent, as the Church has become increasingly conscious of her responsibility to pray insistently for the gift of peace and unity for herself and for the whole human family. [...] We can thus understand the emotion so often felt during the sign of peace at a liturgical celebration. Even so, during the Synod of Bishops there was discussion about the appropriateness of greater restraint in this gesture, which can be exaggerated and cause a certain distraction in the assembly just before the reception of Communion. It should be kept in mind that nothing is lost when the sign of peace is marked by a sobriety which preserves the proper spirit of the celebration, as, for example, when it is restricted to one’s immediate neighbors.”⁷

¹ Jn 14:27.

² Cf. Jn 20:19-23.

³ Cf. MISSALE ROMANUM *ex decreta SS. Concilii Tridentini restitutum summorum pontificum cura recognitum*, Editio typica, 1962, *Ritus servandus*, X, 3.

⁴ CONGREGATION FOR DIVINE WORSHIP AND THE DISCIPLINE OF THE SACRAMENTS, Instruction, *Redemptionis sacramentum*, March 25, 2004, no. 71: AAS 96 (2004) 571.

⁵ MISSALE ROMANUM, *ex decreta sacrosancti Oecumenici Concilii Vaticani II instauratum, auctoritate Pauli Pp. VI promulgatum, Ioannis Pauli Pp. II cura recognitum*, editio typica tertia, April 20, 2000, Typis Vaticanis, reimpressio emendata 2008, General Instruction of the Roman Missal, no. 82. Cf. BENEDICT XVI, Post-Synod. Apost. Exhort., *Sacramentum caritatis*, February 22, 2007, no. 49: AAS 99 (2007) 143.

⁶ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, Post-Synod. Apost. Exhort., *Sacramentum caritatis*, February 22, 2007, no. 49, footnote no. 150: AAS 99 (2007) 143.

⁷ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, Post-Synod. Apost. Exhort., *Sacramentum caritatis*, February 22, 2007, no. 49: AAS 99 (2007) 143.

4. Pope Benedict XVI, further than shedding light on the true sense of the rite and of the exchange of peace, emphasized its great significance as a contribution of Christians, with their prayer and witness to allay the most profound and disturbing anxieties of contemporary humanity. In light of all this he renewed his call that this rite be protected and that this liturgical gesture be done with religious sensibility and sobriety.

5. This Dicastery, at the request of Pope Benedict XVI, had already approached the Conferences of Bishops in May of 2008 to seek their opinion about whether to maintain the exchange of peace before Communion, where it is presently found, or whether to move it to another place, with a view to improving the understanding and carrying out of this gesture. After further reflection, it was considered appropriate to retain the rite of peace in its traditional place in the Roman liturgy and not to introduce structural changes in the Roman Missal. Some practical guidelines are offered below to better explain the content of the exchange of peace and to moderate excessive expressions that give rise to disarray in the liturgical assembly before Communion.

6. Consideration of this theme is important. If the faithful through their ritual gestures do not appreciate and do not show themselves to be living the authentic meaning of the rite of peace, the Christian concept of peace is weakened and their fruitful participation at the Eucharist is impaired. Therefore, along with the previous reflections that could form the basis for a suitable catechesis by providing some guidelines, some practical suggestions are offered to the Conferences of Bishops for their prudent consideration:

a) It should be made clear once and for all that the rite of peace already has its own profound meaning of prayer and offering of peace in the context of the Eucharist. An exchange of peace appropriately carried out among the participants at Mass enriches the meaning of the rite itself and gives fuller expression to it. It is entirely correct, therefore, to say that this does not involve inviting the faithful to exchange the sign of peace “mechanically.” If it is foreseen that it will not take place properly due to specific circumstances or if it is not considered pedagogically wise to carry it out on certain occasions, it can be omitted, and sometimes ought to be omitted. It is worth recalling that the rubric from the Missal states: “*Then, if appropriate, the Deacon or the Priest, adds: ‘Let us offer each other the sign of peace’*” (emphasis added).⁸

b) On the basis of these observations, it may be advisable that, on the occasion of the publication of the translation of the third typical edition of the Roman Missal in their own country, or when new editions of the same Missal are undertaken in the future, Conferences of Bishops should consider whether it might not be fitting to change the manner of giving peace which had been established earlier. For example, following these years of experience, in those places where familiar and profane gestures of greeting were previously chosen, they could be replaced with other more appropriate gestures.

c) In any case, it will be necessary, at the time of the exchange of peace, to definitively avoid abuses such as:

- the introduction of a “song for peace,” which is non-existent in the Roman Rite.⁹
- the movement of the faithful from their places to exchange the sign of peace amongst themselves.
- the departure of the priest from the altar in order to give the sign of peace to some of the faithful.
- that in certain circumstances, such as at the Solemnity of Easter or of Christmas, or during ritual celebrations such as Baptism, First Communion, Confirmation, Matrimony, Sacred Ordinations, Religious Professions, and Funerals, the exchange of peace being the occasion for expressing congratulations, best wishes or condolences among those present.¹⁰

⁸ MISSALE ROMANUM, *Ordo Missæ*, no. 128.

⁹ In the Roman Rite, a song for peace is not foreseen by tradition because only the briefest of time is envisaged for the exchange of peace to those who are nearest. The chant for peace presumes, however, a much longer time for the exchange of peace.

¹⁰ Cf. General Instruction on the Roman Missal, no. 82: “[I]t is appropriate that each person, in a sober manner, offer the sign of peace only to those who are nearest”; no. 154: “The priest may give the Sign of Peace to the ministers but always remains within the sanctuary, so that the celebration is not disrupted. He may do the same if, for a reasonable cause, he wishes to offer the Sign of Peace to a small number of the faithful”; Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Instruction, *Redemptionis sacramentum*, March 25, 2004, no. 72: AAS 96 (2004) 572.

d) Conferences of Bishops are likewise invited to prepare liturgical catecheses on the meaning of the rite of peace in the Roman liturgy and its proper realization in the celebration of the Holy Mass. In this regard, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments attaches to this Circular Letter, some helpful guidelines.

7. The intimate relationship between the *lex orandi* and the *lex credendi* must obviously be extended to the *lex vivendi*. Today, a serious obligation for Catholics in building a more just and peaceful world is accompanied by a deeper understanding of the Christian meaning of peace and this depends largely on the seriousness with which our particular Churches welcome and invoke the gift of peace and express it in the liturgical celebration. Productive steps forward on this matter must be insisted upon and urged because the quality of our Eucharistic participation depends upon it, as well as the efficacy of our being joined with those who are ambassadors and builders of peace, as expressed in the Beatitudes.¹¹

8. In conclusion, the Bishops and, under their guidance, the priests are urged, therefore, to give careful consideration to these observations and to deepen the spiritual significance of the rite of peace in the celebration of the Holy Mass, in their spiritual and liturgical formation and in appropriate catechesis for the faithful. Christ is our peace,¹² that divine peace, announced by the prophets and by the angels, and which he brought to the world by means of his paschal mystery. This peace of the Risen Lord is invoked, preached and spread in the celebration, even by means of a human gesture lifted up to the realm of the sacred.

The Holy Father Pope Francis, on June 7, 2014, approved and confirmed the contents of which is contained in this Circular Letter, prepared by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, and ordered its publication.

From the offices of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, June 8, 2014, the Solemnity of Pentecost.

Antonio Card. Cañizares Llovera
Prefect

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Archbishop Secretary

Understanding the *Circular Letter on the Ritual Expression of the Gift of Peace at Mass*



The *Circular Letter on the Ritual Expression of the Gift of Peace at Mass*, issued on June 8, 2014 by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, provides advice to Conferences of Bishops throughout the world on the placement and proper expression of the Sign of Peace at Mass. Pope Benedict XVI opened the issue to study by the pertinent Congregations of the Holy See in his 2007 Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum caritatis*. The Congregation, in turn, surveyed Episcopal Conferences on the question in 2008.

This new Circular Letter is the result of consultations within the Congregation, with Conferences of Bishops, and with Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis. The Holy See's decision, as expressed in the letter, is to maintain the Rite of Peace in its present place just prior to the distribution of Holy Communion, thus avoiding any structural changes to the *Order of Mass* at this time. Additional guidelines to aid in the development of "liturgical catecheses on the meaning of the rite of peace" (no. 6d) are pending. A study of the history and theology of the Rite of Peace helps place the Circular Letter in context.

¹¹ Cf. Mt 5:9ff.

¹² Cf. Eph 2:14.

“Greet One Another with a Holy Kiss”: A Brief History of the Rite of Peace

The New Testament has several references to Christians exchanging a “holy kiss” (Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; 1 Thess 5:26 and 1 Pt 5:14). Among early Christians (e.g., Tertullian), the kiss of peace was seen as a seal placed on prayer. This gesture became a stable element of the liturgies of the early Christian world, including in the city of Rome. At Rome, it may have initially occurred after the Prayer of the Faithful which concluded the Liturgy of the Word. In such a position, the kiss of peace was viewed as a sign of mutual love before offering sacrifice (Mt 5:23-24). The Eastern liturgical families retained this placement and adopted this perspective.

For reasons not entirely clear to liturgical scholars, the exchange of peace in the Roman Rite developed along different lines and with a different theological emphasis. In North Africa, Saint Augustine was already familiar with the practice of exchanging peace after the Eucharistic Prayer. In a letter written in the year 416, Pope Saint Innocent I, responding to a list of liturgical queries from Bishop Decentius of Gubbio, writes that in the Roman liturgy, the only proper moment for the exchange of peace is after the Eucharistic Prayer and before Communion. Instead of the emphasis on reconciliation as found in the Eastern liturgies, St. Innocent justifies this placement as an expression of the assembly’s consent to what the priest has just prayed in the Eucharistic Prayer, and the community’s “seal” on the priest’s sacred actions – an embodied extension of the Great Amen (cf. *Epistola 25 Decentio Augubino* 1, 4).

In some liturgical texts from the Early Middle Ages, the priest was directed to kiss the altar, and in some places even the host or the chalice (symbolically receiving the gift of peace from the risen Christ on the altar), and then to exchange a sign of peace with his assistants who extended it to the members of the congregation. When the reception of Holy Communion greatly declined, the sign of peace may have been considered by some as a “substitute” for the sacrament. Gradually, the gesture was limited to the clergy alone. In Frankish lands, the exchange was introduced by a prayer for peace said by the priest. The formula *Lord Jesus Christ, who said to your Apostles* dates from the eleventh century and was prescribed by the Roman Missal of St. Pius V (1570). Although the manner in which peace was expressed evolved and became increasingly stylized over the course of the centuries, its present location is consistently encountered in liturgical texts of the Roman Rite throughout the Middle Ages and beyond.

In medieval England, a particular manner of sharing a gesture of peace developed and eventually spread to the continent. After kissing the altar on which the consecrated host was present, the presiding bishop or priest would then kiss an *osculatorium*: a plaque, often richly ornamented, which came to be called a pax-board or pax-brede in Middle English. This pax-board was then shared among the other liturgical ministers and the assembly, often following strict sequence based on social rank. On an experiential level, those participating may have perceived the rite more as the veneration of a holy object than as a symbol of communal and sacramental unity.

Such stylized expressions of peace were still to be found in the liturgical books following the Council of Trent, but by the modern era prior to the Second Vatican Council, the Rite of Peace had come to be retained only as a highly formal embrace among the bishop or priest, deacon, and subdeacon in the celebration of a Solemn High Mass. Its absence from the more frequently celebrated Low Mass would explain why many today mistakenly regard the Rite of Peace as a post-Vatican II innovation.

A Theological Approach to the Rite of Peace

Some beautiful theological reflections are contained within the Circular Letter. In the Roman Rite, the exchange of peace is to be understood and experienced “in the Eucharistic contemplation of the Paschal mystery as the ‘Paschal kiss’ of the Risen Christ present on the altar” (no. 2). Christ is our peace (Eph 2:14), and for the Christian, an exchange of true peace is only possible in the spirit of the crucified and risen Christ (nos. 1 and 8). The letter continues, “An exchange of peace appropriately carried out among the participants at Mass enriches the meaning of the rite itself and gives fuller expression to it” (no. 6a).

Finally, an important connection is drawn between how our faith is reflected and formed in our worship as a community (*lex orandi*) and the content of what we believe (*lex credendi*); this connection must, in turn, influence how we live our lives once the liturgy has ended (*lex vivendi*). “Today, a serious obligation for Catholics in

building a more just and peaceful world is accompanied by a deeper understanding of the Christian meaning of peace and this depends largely on the seriousness with which our particular Churches welcome and invoke the gift of peace and express it in the liturgical celebration” (no. 7).

The Circular Letter challenges liturgical ministers and teachers to devote renewed attention to the existing rubrics regarding the exchange of peace in both the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM) and the Order of Mass, and to facilitate deeper catechesis on the origin and meaning of the Sign of Peace in the Roman Rite.

Placement of the Rite of Peace

By articulating this rich tradition and theology within the Roman Rite, the Circular Letter explains the decision of the Congregation to maintain the Rite of Peace in its present location. Following the Lord’s Prayer and just prior to the distribution of Holy Communion, it is by no means an arbitrary or haphazard placement. Instead, “[t]he rites which prepare for Communion constitute a well expressed unity in which each ritual element has its own significance and which contributes to the overall ritual sequence of sacramental participation in the mystery being celebrated. The sign of peace, therefore, is placed between the Lord’s Prayer, to which is joined the embolism which prepares for the gesture of peace, and the breaking of the bread, in the course of which the Lamb of God is implored to give us his peace” (no. 2).

In terms of practical action, the Holy See invited Conferences of Bishops to review current practices with an eye towards sobriety of expression and the avoidance of excessive, distracting gestures in order to “safeguard the sacred sense of the Eucharistic celebration and the sense of mystery at the moment of receiving Holy Communion” (no. 3). The Congregation encourages catechesis concerning the true nature, spirit, and expression of this rite, centered on peace rooted in Christ made present on the altar.

The Circular Letter cited several practices to be avoided, namely:

- the introduction of a “song of peace” not called for in the Roman Rite;
- the excessive movement of the faithful from their places to exchange a sign of peace;
- the departure of the priest from the sanctuary to share the sign of peace with some of the faithful; and
- the use of the Rite of Peace as a kind of “receiving line” of a social nature, to express congratulations, best wishes, or even condolences in a sometimes purely secular way.

These points are consistent with the restraint expressed in the 2002 GIRM, currently in force (see no. 154). The letter also underscores the fact that the rubrics of the exchange of peace already allow for its omission when significant pastoral circumstances warrant it (see no. 6a; see also the Nov. 2006 issue of the *Newsletter*).

The Sign of Peace in the United States

By itself, the Circular Letter is an administrative action, and it does not mandate changes to the existing adaptation in the GIRM approved for the dioceses of the United States. It is important to recall that the Holy See has granted permission, as an adaptation for this country, that “for a good reason, on special occasions (for example, in the case of a funeral, a wedding, or when civic leaders are present), the Priest may offer the Sign of Peace to a small number of the faithful near the sanctuary” (GIRM, no. 154). This adaptation was reaffirmed by the Congregation in 2010, as the *Roman Missal, Third Edition* was being prepared for implementation. As the Circular Letter itself states (no. 6b), the intention of the observations contained in the letter is to encourage deeper reflection and to guide Conferences of Bishops in future editions or revisions of the *Roman Missal*.

Furthermore, both the GIRM (nos. 82 and 154) and the Circular Letter (no. 6b), affirm the right of each Conference of Bishops to specify, if so desired, the manner of exchanging peace between the members of the assembly. No “official” expression of peace has ever been stipulated for the dioceses of the United States. Perhaps the most common form for the exchange of peace in this country is shaking hands, but the diocesan bishop may encourage other forms as well for cultural or other pastoral reasons. In fact, the GIRM even suggests a short, optional dialogue: “While the Sign of Peace is being given, it is permissible to say, ‘The peace of the Lord be with you always,’ to which the reply is ‘Amen’” (no. 154).