



Archdiocese of New York + 2011

THE EXCHANGE OF PEACE

The Exchange of Peace at Mass is the Rite by which the Church asks God to grant peace and unity to all her members as well as to the whole human family. This prayer is followed by a symbolic gesture in which all in the Assembly exchange a greeting of peace with those around them. The greeting is conveyed in words and through a sign: a handshake or embrace or kiss which is an expression of the genuine desire that all may be at peace. The gesture is symbolic in that those nearby in the Assembly with whom the peace is exchanged represent all those whose lives touch our own and with whom we need to be at peace. In the words of one Father of the Church: *This kiss that all exchange constitutes a kind of profession of unity and charity that exists among them. Each of us gives the kiss of peace to the person next to him, and so in effect gives it to the whole assembly because this act is an acknowledgment that we have all become the single Body of Christ the Lord and so must preserve with one another that harmony ... loving one another equally, supporting and helping one another, regarding the individual's needs as the concerns of the community, sympathizing with one another's sorrows and sharing one another's joys.* (Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Baptismal homily 4.39*) Those with whom we exchange the *Peace* also represent the entire world community whom we, as followers and messengers of Christ, pray may experience the peace that only Christ can give.

Historical Background of the Exchange of Peace: The Exchange of Peace has its roots in the Semitic community whose custom it is to greet one another with an embrace and the words *Shalom aliekem*. Saint Paul in closing both his Epistles to the Corinthians, and in the First Epistle to the Thessalonians, exhorts those to whom he writes to *greet one another with a holy kiss*. It is not surprising, then, that this cultural and spiritual practice became part of the traditional celebration of the Eucharist. In the Second Century writings of St. Justin Martyr, mention is made of the exchange of peace at the beginning of the *Mass of the Faithful*, after the catechumens had been dismissed. It followed the *Prayer of the Faithful*, and preceded the

bringing forth of the gifts. This placement probably reflects the words of the Gospel: *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)

Later in history, the *Peace* began to be exchanged before the reception of Communion and it is this tradition which is followed in the present reform of the Mass. Although the way in which this later tradition came into existence is not clear, the fact that in it the *Exchange of Peace* follows the Lord's Prayer with its call to forgive as God has forgiven us, and the embolism which makes an explicit plea to God for peace, makes this, too, a logical place for the Exchange of Peace.

The Rite of Peace: The Exchange of Peace, then, has three parts: first, the prayer for peace by the priest-celebrant; next the celebrant's wish for peace to all those gathered in the Assembly, and finally, the greeting and gesture of peace among all those taking part in the Mass. It is up to the bishops of a given territorial conference to determine the gesture suitable for the exchange of peace in accordance with the culture of their people. Whatever gesture is chosen for the Exchange of Peace should be dignified. This is not the time for secular, everyday greetings: "Hello, how are you?" nor is it the time to introduce ourselves to those around us or to carry on a conversation. While the gesture of peace is being shared, the greeting, *The peace of the Lord be always with you*, is offered, to which the one receiving the greeting responds: *And with your spirit.* The *Exchange of Peace* is, then, a solemn, religious action. St. Cyril of Jerusalem expressed it well:

Do not assume that this is the customary kiss exchanged by friends in public. No, this kiss joins souls together in search of complete forgiveness from one another. So the kiss marks the fusion of souls, and the expulsion of all resentment from wrongs. (*Mystagogical Catechesis 5.3*)