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Vatican Issues Circular Letter to Bishops on the Sign of Peace

In a circular letter to the world's bishops approved by Pope Francis on June 7, 2014, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments (CDW) issued the protocol for the ritual expression of the exchange of peace at Mass. The circular letter was sent to conference presidents on July 12 (see below). The circular letter makes explicit the meaning of this sign, and that the exchange of this sign of peace will remain between the Lord's Prayer and the Lamb of God, and will not be moved to an earlier part of the Mass. Text of the circular letter follows.

CIRCULAR LETTER: THE RITUAL EXPRESSION OF THE GIFT OF PEACE AT MASS

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

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,"⁹ which is non-existent in the Roman Rite.
- 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

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. [NB. not attached; expected later. Ed.]

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 7 June, 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, Rome. 8 June, 2014, the Solemnity of Pentecost.

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+ Arthur Roche

¹ Jn 14, 27.

² Cf. Jn 20, 19-23.

³ Cf. *MISSALE ROMANUM ex decreto 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, Istr., *Redemptionis sacramentum*, March 25, 2004, n. 71: AAS 96 (2004) 571.

5 *MISSALE ROMANUM, ex decreto sacrosancti Oecumenici Concilii Vaticani II instauratum, auctoritate Pauli Pp. VI promulgatum, Ioannis Pauli Pp. II cura recognitum, editio typica tertia, diei 20 aprilis 2000, Typis Vaticanis, reimpressio emendata 2008*, General Instruction of the Roman Missal, n. 82. Cf. BENEDICT XVI, Post-synod. Apost. Exhort., *Sacramentum caritatis*, February 22, 2007, n. 49: AAS 99 (2007) 143.

6 Cf. BENEDICT XVI, Esort. Apost., *Sacramentum caritatis*, February 22, 2007, n. 49, footnote n. 150: AAS 99 (2007) 143.

7 BENEDICT XVI, Esort. Apost., *Sacramentum caritatis*, February 22, 2007, n. 49: AAS 99 (2007) 143.

8 *MISSALE ROMANUM, Ordo Missae*, n. 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 are who nearest. The chant for peace presumes, however, a much longer time for the exchange of peace.

10 Cf. General Instruction on the Roman Missal, n. 82: "It is appropriate that each person, in a sober manner, offer the sign of peace only to those who are nearest"; n. 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, Istr., *Redemptionis sacramentum*, March 25, 2004, n. 72: AAS 96 (2004) 572.

11 Cf. Mt 5:9f.

12 Cf. Eph 2:14.

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ET DISCIPLINA SACRAMENTORUM