

Reflections on the Mass

Reflection 10: The Communion Rite, Part I

The Liturgy of the Eucharist might be compared to a great symphony, with one movement leading harmoniously to the next, rising and falling, only to rise again to a new level. In the Eucharistic Prayer we reach a spiritual crescendo as the words of consecration are spoken, followed by the Great Amen as we prepare to receive Communion - the Body and Blood of Christ. The transition to the next high point of the Mass is the Lord's Prayer, and it is fitting that it should be a part of our liturgical worship since it is the prayer Jesus gave us.

The petitions of this model Christian prayer are closely linked to the Eucharistic Prayer - asking for bread and forgiveness. We ask for the bread of the Eucharist as well as for bread to satisfy our daily needs, both physical and spiritual. And we ask to be reconciled with one another so that we might share our bread worthily at the Table of the Lord. The Lord's Prayer helps us look forward to Communion where we will receive the Bread of Life.

After the final petition of the Lord's Prayer, the priest offers a petition for perfect peace. This additional request is referred to as the "embolism" from the Greek meaning an "insertion" and acts as a transition to the doxology - "for the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours ..." proclaimed and sung, if possible, by all the faithful. These words were probably added at an early date so that the Lord's Prayer would end on a positive note, rather than "deliver us from evil."

In recent years, different postures for praying the Lord's Prayer have appeared - some prefer to pray with hands raised in what has traditionally

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been called the *orans* or praying position, harking back to early depictions in the catacombs at Rome. Some prefer to hold hands, symbolizing unity, while others prefer to keep a respectful distance, perhaps praying with hands folded and eyes closed. None of these ways of praying is either recommended or forbidden by the instructions for the Mass.

The reconciliation and unity that we ask for in the Lord's Prayer find further expression in the Rite of Peace or what has been traditionally called, "the kiss of peace." This rite, which the priest initiates with the words, "Lord Jesus Christ, who said to your apostles ..." has over the centuries been placed at different points in the liturgy. It is closely linked to the reception of the Eucharist and has always been viewed as a sign of mutual love required by Christ.

After the priest extends the sign of peace to those assembled and the words "And with your spirit" are heard, the deacon or, in his absence, the priest, invites everyone to share the sign of peace with one another. But it must be kept in mind that the Rite of Peace is a sign, a sign that need not be exhausted by trying to give this greeting to everyone or even a great number of those present. The celebrant must be especially mindful of this limitation, since a more elaborate or extended exchange of peace can become a distraction. It is best to limit the sign only to those who are nearest. Except on special occasions, such as a wedding or a funeral, the priest should remain within the sanctuary so he does not disrupt the celebration.

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The exchange of Christ's peace is not of value if we see it as simply a "Hello" to people we know and care about. It is more than that; it continues our preparation for Communion by reminding us that we desire for others the perfect peace that Christ promised us. This simple gesture is truly a complex sign - a greeting, a prayer, and a reminder that we are always seeking for the unity that we are about to experience when we receive Christ's Body and Blood. Indeed, the sign of peace symbolizes that just as Christ gave himself for us, so too I desire to give my life for you.