The Sign of Peace
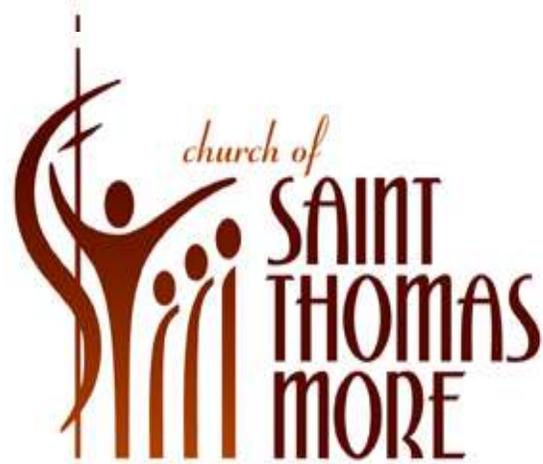
I remember when the liturgical reforms of Vatican II were first being introduced, the priest serving my home parish was struggling with the way to implement all the changes. I recall him telling my dad the toughest one to explain would be the "Kiss of Peace". He was worried that teenagers would take the title too seriously and start "making out" during mass!

History – A Kiss of Peace

In many traditions, the way to affirm something as solemn and binding was to make it "sealed with a kiss".   History records that Romans sealed business and legal agreements with a kiss. Early Christians greeted each other with a holy kiss (Romans 16: 16). According to this tradition, the holy kiss caused a transfer of spirit between the two people, which established a bond between them and strengthened the community.

The practice made its way into the liturgy, originally at the presentation of the gifts. This was most likely to follow the words of Jesus recorded in the Gospel of Matthew: "if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your give there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift." (Matt 5: 23-24)

Sometime before Pope Innocent I (401-430), the kiss was moved to right after the Our Father. We don't know exactly when or even why, but we do have record of Innocent defending the move as a way to tie into the last petition in the Lord's Prayer that we be forgiven "as we forgive those who trespass against us".

Eventually, the sharing of the peace became associated with the sharing of the Eucharist. In the early Middle Ages, the priest would kiss the Eucharist, then exchange the kiss with his assistants, who would then turn and extend the kiss to the congregation. This was during a time when the reception of communion was declining and in some places this sharing took the place of sharing the Eucharist.

In 13th century England, Catholics passed around a wooden board, called the "pax board", which the congregation kissed instead of each other. Gradually, the Kiss of Peace was limited to just the clergy, and left the mass entirely in the 16th century, only to return after Vatican II.

The Ritual Today

Today, we don't even call it the "Kiss of Peace". Rather, we are invited to share some *sign* that we are living in peace and harmony with those with whom we are about to share the Body and Blood of the Lord.

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal, updated in 2002-2003, tells us how and why to make this sign. But I miss the terminology of the OLD General Instruction, which put it in such beautiful language: "before they share in the same bread, the faithful implore peace and unity for the Church and for the whole human family and offer some sign of their love for one another." (1975 GIRM #56b)

Since our peace is rooted in and flows through Christ (who is present in the assembly), this sharing is a sign of our oneness resulting from membership in the body of Christ. Because of the power of this symbol, the Bishops Committee on the Liturgy issued statement in 1977 on the way we are to share the peace of Christ.

"the use of both hands in extending the greeting creates an expression of greater warmth and distinguishes this rite from the ordinary handclasp of a social greeting. Families and close friends may exchange a kiss…. Often words accompany the action, such as 'Peace be with you' or some similar greeting." (*The Sign of Peace*, USCC, 1977)

That same letter stresses that we share this sign with those around us, not the whole church. It reminds us this is a sign of the peace that should exist among all who celebrate the sacrament of unity, the Eucharist.

So whether you extend your hand, open your arms to a hug, or simply smile and nod, remember that the particular sign doesn't matter. What matters is the sign of everyone entering into this ritual - our sharing of the Peace of Christ before sharing the Body and Blood of Christ.

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