

THE SIGN OF PEACE

By PHILIP SHELDRAKE

I WONDER how many priests have hesitated at this moment in the Eucharistic Liturgy, when they were confronted, say, with an early morning congregation scattered to the four corners of a large church? Is it worth the effort to disturb them from what is still, so often, a private devotion? It would only be a small minority of worshippers who would go as far as the man who bolted into an empty confessional! However, in at least one diocese the instruction was given, 'no physical contact during the *Pax*', and there are still some parishes where it is not given at all. The picture is not universally negative, of course. Young people (except, perhaps in single-sex boys' schools) mostly welcome the gesture. Small group liturgies put a great deal of emphasis on it. Even so, in the large amorphous congregations of the average Sunday liturgy there is still a question whether the Sign of Peace symbolizes very much at all. Doubtless there are psychological problems. Youngsters undoubtedly lack the fears and inhibitions of their parents. Small groups, almost by definition, seek more than the average sense of 'togetherness'. Despite the overall emphasis on participation in the new Roman Missal (1970), the notion of 'community celebration' still clashes head-on with a desire for privacy and the chance to 'get on with my prayers'.

No one wants artificial familiarity and, despite the rapid spread of the charismatic movement, the anglo-saxon temperament still flinches at anything, however ritualized, that suggests a public display of emotion. On the other hand, the writer of a letter on this subject to a well-known Catholic newspaper, to the effect that christian charity did not mean that we have actually to *like* one another, may be saying something important: a sign of peace, unity and fellowship is a hypocritical gesture unless we are prepared to have our very selective love challenged and expanded by God's grace. Yet perhaps the same writer would find nothing strange in sharing Communion (that primary symbol of unity) with those he does not like and has no intention of trying to like.

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The slow death of the idea that the Eucharist is a private devotion, along with a discomfort at the implications of the Sign of Peace for our limited ability (or desire) to accept the stranger kneeling next to us as neighbour, points to a very fundamental problem. The level of real christian community is in many places pretty perfunctory; and naturally the Sign of Peace seems irrelevant or even a 'sign of contradiction'. In contrast, the experience of community of the early Church was the heart of its existence. Thus the exhortations of First Peter (5,14) or Paul's Letter to the Romans (16,16) to greet one another with a 'holy kiss' or a 'kiss of love', could be taken seriously in early Eucharistic celebrations. The sharing of the one loaf and the one cup was an action both expressive and creative of the corporate nature of Christianity. We are only very slowly rediscovering that we do not simply receive the body of Christ at Communion; we are that Body, united with our Head and with each other.

Liturgical renewal in all the Western Churches has had a great deal to do with the rediscovery of the early Church, and with a relativizing of some of the later medieval changes and accretions which often led to a loss of contact with basic Eucharistic symbolism. Probably the most important shift of emphasis was the gradual focusing on the increasingly complex ritual of the sanctuary, which became a spectacle to be watched rather than the corporate action of the whole community. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that any attempt to return to a purer liturgy with more than half an eye on its origin in the early Church has often been misunderstood by many clergy and laity. It is difficult, for example, in celebrating the Eucharist to make the mental adjustment from a rubrical approach to a truly liturgical one. Many clergy were simply not educated in the theological mentality which lies behind the changes. Liturgical instruction of the laity is not widespread. And yet if we are to appreciate fully why a rite like the Sign of Peace has been re-introduced, what its import is, why it is placed where it is in the current Missal and what it is supposed to mean, we cannot proceed very far unless we study its origins and development and decline, as well as its recent rediscovery, in the history of liturgy.

The primitive Church

The New Testament does not provide us with a detailed description of worship in the early Church; but it is reasonable to assume from references in Romans and 1 Peter that the 'holy kiss' was a usage of the apostolic period which became part of liturgical celebra-

tions during their earliest development. Certainly by the middle of the second century, the first detailed account of liturgy in the *Apology* of Justin Martyr (c. A.D. 150) mentions the kiss of peace as a 'seal' put on the prayer of the faithful (*signaculum orationis*) at the end of the synaxis (fore-liturgy). The same position and purpose is present in the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus at the beginning of the third century. The kiss is something for full members of the Church. Hippolytus records that it was exchanged with the newly baptized at the conclusion of the initiation rite to signify their membership in Christ. It was also, in this context, a symbol of reconciliation to Christ in the Church and later became extended to the return to fellowship of the apostate or public sinner. It may be that the tap on the cheek given to candidates in the old rite of Confirmation was a relic of this gesture. Because the exchange of a holy kiss was seen as appropriate only for full members, both Justin and Hippolytus record that catechumens had to leave the Church before the prayers of the faithful, of which the kiss was a conclusion. The ethiopic version of the *Apostolic Tradition* explains that 'their kiss is not yet holy'. It is interesting to note that the Mennonite Community continues to use the 'holy kiss' at baptism and to withhold it as a form of discipline for the wayward until they are reconciled at the Lord's Supper.

It is not clear precisely when the kiss of peace changed from a conclusion to prayers already said to a preparation for the offering of gifts. In any case this was a change in emphasis rather than in its position in the Mass. As the action of those only who would stay for the Eucharist, such an emphasis would be entirely natural in the light of Christ's injunction to be reconciled before offering gifts to God (Mt 5, 23ff). This association of the kiss of peace with a spiritual preparation for the offering of gifts remains the general practice in the Eastern Churches. However, in the Roman rite during the fifth century, it was moved to the end of the Eucharistic prayer. The main reference to this is in a letter of Pope Innocent I to the Bishop of Gubbio (A.D. 416). He still argues within the tradition of the *signaculum orationis* and suggests that the kiss of peace would be more appropriate at the conclusion of the central prayer of the Eucharist, as a seal and guarantee of all that had gone before. However, the prayers of the faithful which had previously been linked to the Kiss were in process of dying out; whilst many of the intercessions were creeping into the Roman Canon. When the *Pater Noster* was also moved to the end of the Canon by Gregory the Great, the Kiss of

Peace became associated with that prayer's expression of fraternal peace and concord: 'as we forgive those who sin against us'. Again, it was not long before the rite of peace in its new position began to look forward rather than backwards. It became a preparation for communion as a 'sign of unity and bond of charity'. There it remained as part of the Communion Rite for as long as it continued to be practised, though the more ancient position at the offertory was kept in some other rites, for example the Mozarabic in Spain.

A preparation for Communion

Not surprisingly, the kiss of peace became linked with other elements, which belonged to the preparation for Holy Communion in the Roman Rite and were already associated with the *Pater Noster*: the embolism (the prayer immediately following the our Father), the breaking of the host and the 'Lamb of God'. It is probable that the phrase in the embolism, 'grant us peace in our day' originates in its close proximity to the Rite of Peace. Whilst it is evident, as St Augustine writes (*Epp* 149,16), that the fraction was strictly functional in origin, 'breaking the bread for distribution at Communion', it gradually assumed a more symbolic meaning, rooted in a pauline reminiscence: 'The bread we break, is it not a participation in Christ's body? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread' (1 Cor 10,16-17). The link with the unity and reconciliation of the Kiss of Peace was not hard to find. The anthem 'Lamb of God' was originally introduced to accompany the fraction, but when between the ninth and eleventh centuries the use of unleavened bread (and ultimately, wafers) became common in the West, and the fraction consequently ceased to have much practical significance, the anthem was moved to the rite of peace; and the final refrain became 'grant us peace'. Thus there came into being a continuous movement from the *Pater Noster* to the giving of peace, the breaking of bread and the reception of Communion. Later, of course, the post-Tridentine Missal (1570) removed the clarity and logic of the fraction by having it take place during the doxology ('Through the same Jesus Christ your Son . . .') of the prayer following the Our Father, and by moving what should have been the signal for the sign of peace (*Pax Domini sit semper vobiscum*) to the end of the fraction. Part of the purpose of the new Roman Missal is to restore something of the coherence of the pre-communion rite and to bring out more clearly the link between its various parts.

Medieval developments

Whatever the original reasons for moving the Kiss of Peace to the pre-communion position, by the time of Gregory the Great, at the end of the sixth century, it was already seen as a natural preparation for Communion. Later, it became so closely linked to the reception of the Eucharist that an eighth-century directive of Theodore of Canterbury could say: *qui non communicant, nec accedant ad pacem neque ad osculum in ecclesia* ('those who are not communicating, should not come up for the peace nor for the kiss in the Church'). It would seem, then, that the Kiss of Peace was understood as disposing the heart to receive the grace of devotion desirable for the reception of Communion. Hence, during the Carolingian era (c. A.D. 750-900) it was given at the Communion of the Sick; whereas today we tend to dwell more on Contrition and Absolution. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, we find, in the monastic 'customals', that the rite of peace is omitted except in communion. It was omitted, therefore, at Masses for the dead, since there was no communion of the faithful in the Liturgies for the 'faithful departed'. The *Regularis Concordia*, written as a result of the tenth-century monastic reforms in England, suggests that the monk should feel free to receive communion whenever the *pax* is given.¹ Here, then, it was a symbol of reconciliation, just as it had been in the rites of initiation in the early Church. However, it would be anachronistic, in the context of the early middle ages, to take it as an equivalent of, or substitute for, confession or absolution before communion, as some have suggested.

The method used in the rite of peace in the Western Church would seem to have been a kiss on the mouth until the time of Pope Innocent III (1198-1216). The rite was the same for all worshippers until more or less the same period; though with men giving it only to men, and women to women, on opposite sides of the Church. Indeed after the ninth century, there is evidence of strong reminders that the *osculum pacis* was a very suitable way of involving all the faithful in the liturgical action. This in itself is an indication that the participation of the laity in the liturgy in general was diminishing. It was not surprising that this general trend of separating the worshippers from the action in the sanctuary gradually spread to the *pax*. While early versions of the *Ordo Romanus* indicate that in papal Eucharists the Pope gave the *pax* first and then the rest followed, tenth-century manuscripts signalize a change: now the Pope passes the *pax* to the rest of the clergy and laity in hierarchical order. This development, which gradually spread to other, non-pontifical

liturgies, led to an emphasis on the kiss of peace being a blessing from Christ mediated by the celebrant, rather than a simple action among the worshippers to express their mutual reconciliation. The gradual 'sanctification' of the kiss of peace developed into elaborated rituals of first kissing the altar, or the host, paten, or chalice as symbolizing the presence of Christ as source of the blessing. The next step was the introduction of a distinction between the clergy who continued to receive a kiss or embrace in order of precedence, and the laity who were invited to kiss the paten or missal. The later middle ages saw an even greater stylization in the introduction of a pax-brede, or pax-board for the use of laity. This seems to have come into use first of all in England around the year 1250. It consisted of a small ivory or metal plate with handle, and embossed with a representation of the crucifixion or similar motif. This was kissed by the celebrant and then taken to the congregation.

As it became more stylized and gradually came to be accepted as a blessing from Christ on the altar, the kiss of peace also became more and more the privilege of the few, with consequent disputes about precedence! By the introduction of the 1570 Missal, its meaning was almost forgotten. It was retained only for those on the sanctuary at High Mass. Perhaps the greatest example of this emasculation of the meaning of the kiss of peace was its treatment as a sign of honour. The 1570 rite allowed it to be given (by means of a pax-brede only), on certain occasions, and then only to princes and other persons of rank.

The sign of peace in the new Order of Mass

The movement for liturgical renewal, which began in the mid-nineteenth century and found its culmination in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* of Vatican II, led to a rediscovery of the liturgy and theology of the early Church. What gradually emerged was that the kiss of peace, despite its later ritualization, limitation and final decline, was not, historically, an optional extra in the celebration of the Eucharist. It had been present right from the beginning, was consistently insisted upon and was treated as a very potent symbol of reconciliation, mutual forgiveness, membership of the fellowship of the Church and the unity of the members of the Body of Christ. It was largely due to these liturgical and theological researches and new insights, that the introduction to the new Order of Mass, the *General Instruction on the Roman Missal*,² reintroduced the sign of peace as a rite in which the entire assembly was to be encouraged to participate.

The Communion Rite (56) is now to be seen as an integrated whole, centring around the interrelated concepts of breaking bread, unity and communion (48,3). The union/communion expressed is not merely personal union with God but also *koinonia* or fellowship. There is a theme of peace woven into the Our Father, embolism, prayer for peace, sign of peace and 'Lamb of God', which has complementary aspects: the peace and unity of the Church, the reconciliation of the worshippers before communion, and the peace and unity of the whole human family. The General Instruction draws these aspects together in its comment on the Rite of Peace (56,b). Whether the sign of peace is extended to all or not, the rite has been given a new importance, as the prayer for peace, being a priestly prerogative since the eleventh century, is now said aloud and acts as an introduction to the priest's greeting and offering of peace. This is clearly linked to the breaking of bread which follows immediately and is intended to convey the meaning that all are united in love through the one bread (56,c and 283). To make this symbolism clearer, it is stressed that the bread ought to be of such a nature that it can be broken in pieces and used for the communion of at least some of the congregation (283). As far as the rite of peace itself is concerned, the official english translation does not refer to a 'kiss' but a 'sign', thus leaving the form open. There is a return to original practice, in that the *pax* is not given in hierarchical order, nor is it confined to High Mass. However, there does seem to be a certain ambiguity about passing the sign of peace to the congregation. What is clear from chapter two of the General Instruction (56,b) and from the prominence given to the prayer for peace and greeting, is that a rite of peace as such is not an option: it is integral to the Eucharist, as it had been until the middle ages. In the over-all understanding of the revised liturgy of Word and Eucharist, a serious question must be asked: is it tantamount to undermining the integrity of the total Eucharistic action, to omit certain rites because they do not happen to suit the celebrant's taste?

The Sign of Peace should be understood as having the symbolism intended in the early Church (the main source of modern liturgical renewal); and, since the new Roman Missal opts for the position before communion, as stressing the link with communion which developed in the period after the initial change in the Roman Rite in the fifth century. However, it will also help us to understand why the new Missal re-introduces this rite if we outline briefly some of the general liturgical principles expressed in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the

Constitution on Liturgy of Vatican II, as well as in the General Instruction. The keynote is 'participation' — that the congregation take a more intelligent and active part in what, from the very origins of the Eucharist, is meant to be a community celebration (7). This emphasis contrasts strongly with any notion of the Mass as an action of the priest alone. Participation is stressed because the Eucharist is not a spectacle: nor is it a question of 'giving them lots of things to do'; it is rather to enable the worshippers to draw the fruits intended by Christ from the celebration and to involve them 'in both body and soul' (3). So participation is much more than having 'intelligible' prayers to listen to. There is no question, either, of creating a wordy and didactic lecture on 'right living and thinking', but of enhancing the sense of mystery: that is, of being truly 'part of', caught up in, the sacramental revelation of Christ. It is for this reason that actions and symbols are as important as words. 'The celebration of the Eucharist . . . is carried out by means of signs perceptible to the senses . . . signs by means of which faith is nourished, strengthened and expressed' (5). Far from reducing the symbolism of the liturgy (as some protagonists of the post-tridentine Mass of 1570 claim) the new rite seeks to strip away only some of the exaggerated medieval typology and confusion of different symbols, and to reveal more effectively those that are essential. It would be nonsensical therefore to omit arbitrarily those key symbols which the liturgy proposes — particularly one like the sign of peace, which points most effectively to the community nature of the celebration. Thus, although the General Instruction places much emphasis on local needs (3,5,6), the question of what is acceptable to people should always be balanced with what is *necessary* in order to educate us in a proper understanding of the Eucharist.

The question remains whether the revision of the rite of peace is entirely satisfactory for its intended purpose. Although the Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy suggests that the various rites should be clear and not require much explanation, it seems that the sign of peace does require some verbal explanation or reminder of its meaning. This could be done by a more comprehensive introductory prayer. A useful model might well be the rite of peace in the recent *Alternative Service Book* of the Church of England, where one of the introductory prayers explicitly reminds the congregation that they are the Body of Christ, and then exhorts them to act in a way that makes for peace and builds up christian community.

It has been pointed out by some that the sentiments expressed in the Embolism which asks God to 'keep us free from all anxiety' can confuse peace and unity with 'not being disturbed'. The fact is that the 'peace and unity of the Kingdom' for which we also pray is distinctly demanding; it can hardly fail to disturb our complacency if we take it seriously! If we turn to the actual 'sign' that is most commonly used in the anglo-saxon world — the handshake — there seem to me to be two questions. First, it seems very odd to shake hands with someone next to you whom you would normally kiss! And yet husbands and wives solemnly exchange handshakes, as do parents with their children. Perhaps we could have sufficient imagination to leave the gesture free, while suggesting some of the viable alternatives? Secondly, we need seriously to consider whether the ordinary handshake has been so devalued as to be almost empty of meaning. Perhaps a warmer clasp using both hands (as in some Eastern Churches) might help distinguish the sign of peace from the rather perfunctory gesture of general greeting. Finally, while the new Order of Mass has opted for a pre-communion position for the rite of peace, thus continuing the tradition of the Roman rite from the fifth century, it should not be automatically assumed that this is the most effective context. The tradition of the East continues to link the peace to the offertory; and many recent western liturgies of the Reformed tradition follow suit. Other alternatives that have been used or are currently practised are to link the peace with the rite of reconciliation or even to place it after communion.

Conclusion

The sign of peace as a religious symbol is meant both to point beyond itself to a deeper meaning and also to produce an effect. It is not an empty gesture. Any discussion of the rite of peace must therefore end with some general reflections on its deeper significance. One problem is that many Christians do not realize that they are a community. Here, the sign of peace can be an important reminder that Christ is really present in the members of the Church which is his Body. Do I recognize him there? And if not, why not? However, the sign can also be contradictory — revealing that the 'community' is an artificial one of cult, not of life. Sometimes we do not even have a recognizably *human* gathering, let alone a good christian community. And the model presupposed by the whole Eucharistic celebration is far more than we can create by our unaided efforts. The sign of peace, then, can effectively remind us that this sort of

community of reconciliation can only be achieved by centring on the power of God as an instrument of change. That power, to build up the Body of Christ, is given to us in the sharing of bread broken for us. St Paul talks of a *holy* kiss. It is indeed not merely a sign of natural affection but a display of and a means of growth in God-centred love, which alone can destroy the barriers between male and female, Greek and Jew, slave and free. It is then not a gesture for those who already know and love each other fully, but a call to go beyond the limited possibilities of our selective human affection and acceptance of people.

Am I ready to live this symbol? Every sharing in the sign of peace is a risk, for it asks the question whether I am prepared to go where the symbol points. The sign makes demands and, not surprisingly, it may be confusing and disturbing. Liturgy certainly should reflect our aspirations and experience; but equally it should challenge that experience by revealing the limitations of our vision, by bringing it into contact with the presence of the living Christ who transforms and enlivens us. The liturgy is not a private event; and the ideal of christian community to which the sign of peace points is not a safe refuge from an inhospitable world. We pray at the Eucharist not only for our own peace and unity but for the peace of the world. The relevance of liturgy is that it meets the worshipper 'where he or she is'; but far from leaving people there, points them towards not only a personal growth but a sense of mission to spread the Kingdom, whose peace and unity alone can transform the sinful fragmentation, injustice and isolation of society into something fully human.

NOTES

¹ *Regularis Concordia*, ed T. Symons (London, 1953), p 19.

² *General Instruction on the Roman Missal*, tr Clifford Howell S.J. (London, 1978).