

Especially for the People in the Pews

The Peace Ceremony

A few summers ago I was saying Mass at a boys' camp. At the peace ceremony the servers gave the handshake of peace to a boy on each end of the front pew and I watched as it gradually worked in toward the two in the middle. Each received it from his own side. One of them figured that it was enough and put his hand in his pockets. Then other boy, after receiving it from his end, turned to extend it. The first boy didn't respond and simply kept his hands in his pockets. The other boy didn't like this, so he gave his neighbor a shove which caused the little fellow to take his hands out of his pocket and punch him a good one, saying, "I already got it!"

Usually, the Sign of Peace comes off a little better than that. It has all the potential for being a winner, although I think we need some clarification of its meaning.

The handshake of peace is not necessarily a sign of deep friendship. One of my brothers frequently reminds me of his dislike for this ceremony saying, "It's hypocritical. How am I supposed to pretend I am friends with complete strangers, some of whom might run me down in the parking lot.

As a matter of fact, the peace ceremony can display its deepest meaning between complete strangers. What it is meant to say is this: "Even though we don't know each other personally (or even if there are some differences between us), we have very much in common. We share the same life and the same beliefs. There may be no other bond between us, but that bond is thicker than blood. And so I offer you this handshake with the warmth I usually reserve for close friends."

When strangers acknowledge this kind of bond in the handshake of peace, they are expressing something more profound than the very natural (and sometimes automatic) handshake between friends.

It should also be pointed out that the peace ceremony does not have to be an expression of *perfect* peace (any more than an authentic act of contrition has to be an authentic expression of perfect sorrow). It can legitimately express the beginning of peace or perhaps only the hope of peace.

At that memorable moment on television when Sadat and Begin first embraced, the peace between these two men and their countries was a long way from being worked out. No one thought their embrace was hypocritical. It was an honest beginning.

The Sign of Peace also should be seen more clearly as an immediate preparation for Holy Communion. It is not simply a chummy ceremony thrown in by promoters of group dynamics. It is directly related to Communion and it was the lord's idea, not ours: "If you bring ysus is more powerful thanall the turbulence and evil in this world.our gift to the altar and recall that your brother has anything against you Go first to be reconciled with your brother" (Mt. 5:24). It is consistent to be willing to receive Communion and not to be willing to exchange an honest gesture of peace with those who receive the same lord beside us.

One final note about the peace ceremony. Its meaning goes beyond interpersonal relationships. We are acknowledging together a gift that is incredible, like people acknowledging together the beauty of a sunset. Jesus has given us the gift of peace. Even though it is not fully accomplished, it is ours. Even on the darkest days, when peace for this world seems totally out of reach, we can find assurance in this belief. At the Eucharist, we acknowledge this beautiful gift to one another: "Take courage; the Lord is really with us." This is more than a greeting, more than the "peace" or "shalom" we might wish to someone. It is a statement of profound faith.

The peace that Christ has given us and the bonds that join us are very unusual. And we express all this in a very unusual way – shaking hands and smiling even with complete strangers.

Receiving Communion in the Hand

Did you ever watch marcel Marceau, the famous mime? What he can do with only a movement of the hand! He is living proof that a gesture can say a lot.

People are now invited to make a very important gesture at Mass. It is a ritual gesture and one that is meant to be expressive: taking communion in the hand. So far, at least in my experience, they haven't done too well. Not that they are irreverent, they simply haven't been expressive.

Perhaps they haven't realized that this is a ritual gesture. Or perhaps they haven't realized what it is supposed to express.

When all is said and done, those hands outstretched are meant to express the stark reality of begging for a handout. We do it with dignity and reverence, but it is a handout nonetheless.

When Jesus told us to become like little children, he wasn't automatically extolling the undeveloped virtue of six-year-olds. He was simply telling us to realize the one thing all six-year-olds know: They are not self-sufficient.

They can't drive a car, they don't have money, they don't have a key to the house, they don't know how to get across the city. They have to *ask* for everything

This is hard for adults to do. We are used to being self-sufficient. That was the difference between the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee expected mercy because he had earned it. The tax collector asked for it like a handout, because he knew he didn't deserve it.

The coming of Jesus into our lives is pure gift. We do not earn it. We don't deserve it. We cannot demand it.

Further, we can give him nothing in return. Nothing, that is, except our thankfulness (which is what the Greek word *eucharistia* means).

All of us want to do more than that. We want to pretend that we have earned his coming - earned it through a good life, prayers, religious practices, suffering, faithfulness.

We do nothing of the kind. He comes because he loves us first, before we ever were born. And so we simply ask for a hand-out.

Most of us never do that—*even*—in our lives. We ask for help, but it is more along the lines of "supplemental assistance." We do not experience the helplessness of a beggar, of little children. But at communion we are all beggars, little children. And we have to convey our belief in this by the way we come forward and extend our hands. We are not there to take something. We are there to ask for something we don't deserve.

How do you express all that? Well, there is probably no way that could be prescribed in every detail. Nonverbal language is very personal and very subtle. But you can tell the difference between outstretched hands that express this and hands that do not. Some seem almost demanding. Some are perfunctory, almost like reaching for coins across the counter at the drug store. Some are just plain nonexpressive. Some, finally, convey a profound appreciation of the great mystery that is about to be placed in them.

Asking for a handout with dignity and reverence—how would Marcel Marceau express that? Expressive gestures are within everyone's capacity. And they speak volumes.

It would be a shame if our comments to parishioners about Communion in the hand dealt almost with directions on *how* ("left hand on top of the right hand") without ever really telling them *why*. It would seem better to emphasize the latter, and then let each of them find the most expressive way of conveying this meaning.

We have always needed priests who can preside at the liturgy with expressive gestures. And now we need to invite everyone to do the same.

Crying Children

I take it you've heard the story about the priest who said to the woman hurrying out of church with a crying child during the homily, "Ma'am, he's not bothering me." She replied, "Maybe not, but you're really bothering him."

The easiest time for a priest to deal with a crying child is during the homily. At least then he can say something that helps put people at ease and he can direct steps to smooth over the inevitable disruption and distraction. During the Eucharistic prayer, on the other hand, the priest is just about helpless to do anything about it.

If ever there was a no-win situation, it's this one—crying children. I am probably a fool even for bringing it up. But it's often part of the Sunday Mass scene and many people have strong feelings about it, so it can't be passed over.

Parents of crying children are rightly offended if they receive critical looks while no alternative is offered—a crying room with adequate provision to see and hear what is taking place) or, even better, some kind of nursery service.

On the other hand, the congregation is rightly offended if it happens frequently. The crying of a child is something against which no part of the Mass can compete—neither prayer nor homily nor silent reflection, just as a home Mass could never compete with a ringing telephone (even though it is a normal part of life.)

For that matter, a television newscaster couldn't compete either. If he or she tried to conduct the evening news with a crying child in the studio, the child would win—despite the best professional writers, color film, etc.

If the Mass were simply a social gathering, it would be different. The Mass, however, is intended to be a ritual action that fully engages everyone there. It is impossible to do that while a child is crying.

As mentioned above, we cannot toss the entire problem into the laps of parents of little children. If their only option is to attend separate Masses I don't blame them for coming together with children. The only real solution is to make available some babysitting or nursery service.

If such services are available and parents still bring their children, then I do have a problem. Some parents say, "Well, I'll take the child out if he starts to howl." That doesn't work. The liturgy has a certain rhythm to it; the build-up is very important. A good presider works very hard to create an atmosphere. When a child starts to cry and the parents don't take him out, it's already too late. The damage has already been done. The atmosphere and rhythm have been broken. You watch it happen before your eyes.

Every head in the congregation turns in the direction of the howling. When attention returns to whatever was taking place, the people are shifting and shuffling. Whatever atmosphere had been created is now broken.

If it happens during a part of the Mass when the presider can easily make some ad lib comments, he may be able to put the people at ease (they are always a little nettled by the interruption) and partially regain what was there. But if it happens at other times – during the Eucharistic Prayer or during Communion – he is powerless to do anything about it. He has lost the congregation. They will come back, of course, but it will take time. And what occurs during the interim will lose much of its effect. The buildup has been ruined and there is no way to retrieve it.

Crying children and good Sunday liturgy do not mix.