

UNDERSTANDING THE MASS AND THE GENERAL INSTRUCTION OF THE ROMAN MISSAL

What does GIRM say about the Our Father and Sign of Peace?

Surprisingly, GIRM says very little about the Our Father and Sign of Peace, and what it does say only takes two short paragraphs! For both elements of the rite GIRM provides a helpful *theological* statement and says very little about the practical issues that are on people's minds.

The Our Father

GIRM focuses on the request for daily food and for forgiveness of sins so that “what is holy may be given to those who are holy” (no. 81). This paragraph goes on to say that the presider invites the assembly to pray who then prays the Our Father with him. The presider says the “embolism” which begins with “Deliver us, O Lord, from every evil . . .” (an embolism is an insertion in a prayer) and is a “development” of the last petition of the Our Father. The people conclude the prayer with the doxology “For the kingdom, the power and the glory” (this doxology is not included in any of the gospel texts of

the Our Father but is first found in a very early document called the *Didache*).

Pastoral difficulties usually center on two issues: the presider omits the embolism (which he may not do) and the assembly holds hands during the prayer. GIRM makes no comment about the assembly posture during this prayer (the Sacramentary specifies that the presider prays with extended hands). So, there is neither an injunction to hold hands nor a rubric that forbids it.

The primary reason some oppose this hand-holding gesture has to do with the meaning of the rite itself and its placement in the Liturgy of the Eucharist. At this point in the liturgy—at the beginning of the Communion rite—we have prayed together the Eucharistic Prayer with its *epiclesis* (calling down the Holy Spirit in a blessing) of changing both the bread and wine (and ourselves!) into the Body and Blood of Christ. So, at that point we don't focus on ourselves and our human ties as community (as important as this is!) but rather we focus on God and the transformation and new life God is offering us.

The Our Father prepares us to come with open, forgiven hearts to the Lord's table to be nourished in Holy Communion. The Our Father is directed *to God*; it is a *community* prayer not because of holding hands or even because we all say it together but because we are the *Body of Christ* whom God is forgiving and nourishing. Another point is that holding hands during the Our Father is redundant and detracts from the Sign of Peace where direct contact with each other is ritually called for.

In both explanations the emphasis is on what God is doing in and for us rather than on ourselves and being friendly with each other. Having said this, we also must be careful to be charitable! Causing hurt or a disturbance because we refuse to hold hands isn't what is appropriate either. There is, of course, an appropriate time for expressing friendliness and the bonds of community—in hospitality toward each other while gathering into the sacred space at the beginning of Mass or greeting each other at the end of Mass. If this time were used effectively perhaps there

would be less need for what is too often a disruptive time at either the Our Father or Sign of Peace.

The Sign of Peace

GIRM expressly says that one of the reasons for the Sign of Peace is for the assembly to express its unity and mutual love for one another (no. 82). Again, we must understand this in context. Here the unity is as the body of Christ and the mutual love is toward one another as God's redeemed, holy people. The Sign of Peace is *symbolic* of what is shared not only by this assembled community but shared among all Christians from all time. This is why GIRM specifies that the Sign of Peace is given only "to those nearby and in a dignified manner." The greetings and exchange that are appropriate at the beginning of Mass or at the coffee hour which may follow Mass are something quite different from what takes place at the Sign of Peace.



The prayer that the presider prays before the invitation to exchange a Sign of Peace is helpful for the context of this brief rite. The text ("Lord Jesus, you said to your apostles: I leave you peace, my peace I give you . . .") harkens back to the appearance of Jesus to the disciples in the

Upper Room after the resurrection (see John 20:20-23). Our exchange of a Sign of Peace, then, recognizes that we already share in the resurrected life of Jesus; our greeting of peace to each other is a here-and-now expression of the peace Jesus extended to the disciples. No wonder the Church asks that this be done in a dignified manner! We are acknowledging who God has made us to be for each other: the presence of the risen Christ!

For prayer and reflection

I am aware of God's transforming me into a more perfect member of the body of Christ when . . .

I am most aware of the other as the body of Christ when . . .

I can pray the Our Father best when . . .

I extend the Sign of Peace to those around me because . . .

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