

4-28-2022

## Liturgical Signs and Gestures

Chinh Nguyen OP

*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, cnguyen003@csbsju.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta>



Part of the [Liturgy and Worship Commons](#)

ISSN: 2472-2596 (print)

ISSN: 2472-260X (online)

---

### Recommended Citation

Nguyen, Chinh OP. 2022. Liturgical Signs and Gestures. *Obsculta* 15, (1) : 134-153.  
<https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta/vol15/iss1/18>.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Obsculta* by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@csbsju.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@csbsju.edu).

# Liturgical Signs and Gestures

## The Sign of the Cross, the Sign of Peace, and the Liturgical Procession

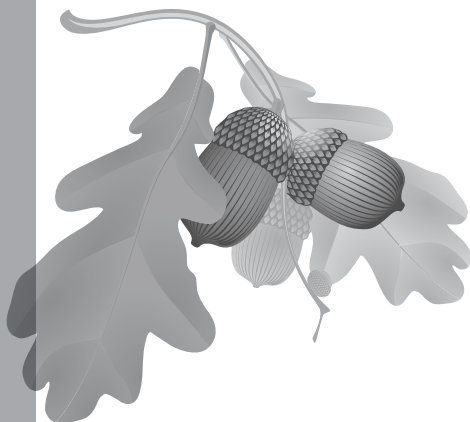
*by Sr. Chinh Nguyen*

### **ABSTRACT:**

Fully, consciously, and actively participating in the sacred liturgy was one of the goals of the renewal of the liturgy called for by the Second Vatican Council. This paper explores the question, how do we enter in? The answer is there are many ways to help the faithful take part in the sacred action of the liturgy. One of the best ways is understanding what we are doing or celebrating in the Sacred Liturgy of the Church. The practical way is comprehension of the meaning of the liturgical gestures.

### **SYNOD:**

This paper examines the definitions, origins, meanings, and theology of the sign of cross, the sign of peace, and liturgical processions, to assist the faithful to celebrate sacred signs or liturgical gestures with the heart of full, active, and conscious participation. In other words, it can help people participate in liturgy more fully, consciously, and actively.



## INTRODUCTION

Following the Second Vatican Council, the Church has emphasized that active participation in liturgy is very important for the faithful. Each person takes part in the mystery being celebrated in which we are united with the Church and with Christ offering our life to God for the salvation of ourselves, others, and all creation. The *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, emphasize the active participation in terms of the various roles that can be fulfilled in the liturgy. One of them is liturgical gestures.<sup>1</sup> In *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Pope Benedict XVI stressed the need for formation and instruction about the Sacred Mysteries so that Catholic people will more fully understand the liturgy and thus be able to more fully unite themselves with God and with one another.<sup>2</sup> For Benedict XVI, part of this teaching involves the meaning of ritual gestures. The Pope also notes that catechesis of students should be concerned with presenting the meaning of the signs contained in the liturgical rites.<sup>3</sup> This is particularly important in a highly technological age like our own, which risks losing the ability to appreciate signs and symbols. Reflecting on the concern of the Church's teaching as well as Benedict XVI describes it, along with my personal experience, I see that many people do not understand much the meaning of gestures that are used daily in the liturgy. If they do not comprehend what they are doing how they enter in sacred liturgy with fully, consciously, and actively participate. This paper examines the history, theology, and meanings of particular gestures in the liturgy such as the sign of cross, the sign of peace and liturgical procession to help the faithful more understanding and have basis of an awareness of the mystery being celebrated and its connection to daily life.

### I. THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

#### **Definition of the sign of the cross**

According to Peter Fink in *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, "The sign of the cross is Christian gesture which symbolizes a person's unity

- 
- 1 Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy- *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Vatican website, December 4, 1963, section 30.
  - 2 Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, apostolic exhortation, Vatican website, February 22, 2007, section 64.
  - 3 *Ibid.*, section 64b.

with Christ, confessing the cross as central to the mystery of salvation and confirming one's identity as a Christian.<sup>4</sup> As we know The sign of the cross begins with words, "In the name of the Father, and of the son and of the Holy Spirit," at the same time with saying the words we move the right hand from forehead to chest and then from left shoulder to right shoulder. Through this definition of the sign of the cross, we can realize that for many Christians the meaning of this symbolic gesture is a blessing for oneself and for others, renewing baptism, confession of faith in the mystery of Trinity, and identification as a Christian.

### **The origin of the sign of the cross**

Many Christians learn and make the sign of cross as little children, but not many people know its origin. According to Andreopoulos, the origins of the sign of cross are unknown: "The origins of sign of the cross are lost in unwritten tradition of the Church, our information is sparse because this ancient practice emerged naturally, as something that made sense to most Christians."<sup>5</sup> Reading the Old Testament, we find some evidences that probably, early Christians were taking their cues from passages in Scripture: in Genesis 4:15, "*Then the LORD said to him, not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance. And the LORD put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him*"<sup>6</sup>. Or in Ezekiel 9:4, "*Go through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of those who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it*"<sup>7</sup>. In Revelation 14:1, "*Then I looked, and there was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion! And with him were one hundred forty-four thousand who had his name and his father's name written on their foreheads*"<sup>8</sup>. And Revelation 22:4, "*They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads*"<sup>9</sup>.

All these passages describe a mark on the forehead as a sign of God's claim on a person. The question may be asked why this mark on the forehead is

---

4 Peter E. Fink, *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship* (Wilmington, DE: M. Glazier, 2000), 512.

5 Andreas Andreopoulos, *The Sign of the Cross: The Gesture, the Mystery, the History* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2006), 11.

6 Genesis 4:15 (New Revised Standard Version)

7 Ezekiel 9:4 (NRSV)

8 Revelation 14:1 (NRSV)

9 Revelation 22:4 (NRSV)

connected to the origins of the sign of the cross? What is the meaning of this mark? The forehead is chosen as the most noticeable place to display the sign which shows that this person belongs to God. For example, the Biblical text says: “*The Lord put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him*” (Genesis 4:15). The mark serves like a seal of God for protection, the sign of belonging. The book of Revelation (14:1) reveals something spiritually significant about the person, an exposition of what this person is really like inside, as God sees him or her. The mark carries the meaning of the people of God. As we know it today, the sign of the cross is a symbol of baptism, protection, profession of faith, defiance of the devil. That is the reason why the sign on the forehead of people in Scripture connects to origin of the sign of the cross.

According to Fink, already by the second century marking one’s body with the sign of the cross was a form of Christian devotion. He also says that sometimes a Christian signed the forehead, other times Christians signed the breast or the eyes<sup>10</sup>. Andreopoulos mentions St. Cyril of Jerusalem wrote about the sign of the cross in the fourth century: “Let us then not be ashamed to confess the Crucified. Let the cross as our seal, be boldly made with our fingers upon our brow and on all occasions.”<sup>11</sup> By the fourth century the cross had become a symbol of pride, of worship, and of Christian identity, but we do not know exactly the foundation day of the sign of the cross.

### **The development and practice of the sign of cross**

The next point we turn to is the development and practice of the sign of cross in daily Christian life. The early Church Fathers attested to the use of the sign of the cross: St. John Chrysostom (347–407), the eloquent fourth-century preacher wrote:

Never leave your house without making the sign of the cross. It will be to you a staff, a weapon, an impregnable fortress. Neither man nor demon will dare to attack you, seeing you covered with such powerful armor. Let this sign teach you that you are a soldier, ready to combat against the demons, and ready to fight for the crown of justice. Are you ignorant of what the cross has

---

<sup>10</sup> Fink, 306.

<sup>11</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, qtd. in Andreopoulos, 34.

done? It has vanquished death, destroyed sin, emptied hell, dethroned Satan, and restored the universe. Would you then doubt its power?"<sup>12</sup>

In the time of Tertullian, it is indicated that the cross was made with one finger probably the thumb on the forehead in the shape of a Hebrew T or a Greek X, letters that stood for names of God and Christ.<sup>13</sup> Tertullian (d. c. 250) described the sign of the cross: "In all our travels and movements, in all our coming in and going out, in putting on our shoes, at the bath, at the table, in lighting our candles, in lying down, in sitting down, whatever employment occupies us, we mark our foreheads with the sign of the cross."<sup>14</sup> St. Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 386) in his *Catechetical Lectures* stated, "Let us then not be ashamed to confess the Crucified. Be the cross our seal, made with boldness by our fingers on our brow and in everything; over the bread we eat and the cups we drink, in our comings and in our goings out; before our sleep, when we lie down and when we awake; when we are traveling, and when we are at rest."<sup>15</sup> From the teaching of the Church Fathers, we can see early Christians made the sign of cross every moment of their lives. Nowadays, many religious Sisters still trace a cross in the soup bowls on their habits, on their eyes to see God in His creation, on their ears to hear the word of God, on their mouth to speak or preach the Word of God, on their hands to bless people, on their foot to do mission on the world. Despite its simplicity, the Sign of the Cross is an ancient prayer rich in meaning. Making a sign of cross is an opportunity for drawing us nearer to God. Each time we make the Sign of the Cross, we confess our faith; express our belief in Trinity and ask a blessing from God. Making a sign of cross has multiple meanings for many people. Some use the sign of cross to avoid the evil because they believe that the sign of cross calls to mind the Crucified, evil is afraid of Christ. Some Christians signed the cross on their breasts or on their eyes and other times they signed cross with the eucharistic bread. In the 5th century, people signed the cross the entire upper body. According to Fink, we can see that in the 6th century the custom of signing the body using two fingers which express and cultivate the belief in

12 John Chrysostom, qtd. In Andrew Arnold Lambing, *The Sacramentals of the Holy Catholic Church* (New York, Benziger: 1892), 75.

13 William Seymour, *The Cross in Tradition, History, and Art*, (Putnam Sons. Ltd., 1898). Also refer to Bert Ghezzi, *The Sign of the Cross: Recovering the Power of the Ancient Prayer*, (Loyola Press, 2006).

14 Tertullian, *De Corona*, trans. Fabio Ruggiero (Milano: A. Mondadori, 1992): 30.

15 Cyril of Jerusalem, qtd. in Andreopoulos, 34.

the two natures of Christ or three fingers carrying the meaning of Trinity<sup>16</sup>. It was not until a 9th century that the rubric appears for the priest to make the sign of cross over the offering at Mass with the thumb and two fingers extended. In the West, it was not until the 13th century, that signing with three fingers and touching the right and then the left shoulder emerged. Later the directive was changed to open the entire hand and move from the left to the right shoulder.<sup>17</sup>

The sign of the cross became a very important gesture in the medieval Church. As a Dominican Sister, I have learned that Saint Dominic always carried with himself the Cross of Christ wherever he went. Before studying or teaching, he always made the sign of cross to bless himself and asked blessing from God. As he went out to preach the Gospel, he would sign himself frequently to ask God to bless him and protect him. Reading the life of the saints, we also recognize that many saints did the same thing. They used the sign of the cross as a shield, a protection, a blessing. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that the Sign of the Cross renews this solemn devotion, ending with “Amen,” a declaration of truth before God.<sup>18</sup>

### **The meaning and theology of the sign of the cross**

Many people wonder why Christians around the world use this sacred gesture like the sign of the cross as a blessing upon oneself and others. What does it mean? According to Bert Ghezzi, the author of the book, *The Sign of the Cross: Recovering the Power of the Ancient Prayer*, there are several interpretations. “For the Church Fathers, the forehead is symbol of Heaven; the stomach means the earth and the shoulders are the sign of power. Others explain that the hand to the forehead may be seen as a prayer to the Father for wisdom, the hand to the stomach as a prayer to the Son who became incarnate, and the hand to the shoulders as a prayer to the Holy Spirit”<sup>19</sup>. Ghezzi also points to another interpretation that the fingers put together first touch the forehead to sanctify the mind, then the belly near the solar plexus for

---

16 Fink, 306.

17 Ibid.

18 Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 1061–1065.

19 Bert Ghezzi, *The Sign of the Cross: Recovering the Power of the Ancient Prayer* (Quezon City: Jesuit Communications Foundations, 2006), 11.

sanctification of feelings, then to the right and finally to the left shoulder to sanctify one's bodily strength.<sup>20</sup>

In the book, *Sacred Signs* written by Romano Guardini, we find an interpretation that the sign of cross is the sign of universe and sign of our redemption. On the cross Christ redeemed human beings. By the cross Jesus sanctifies humanity. In communal liturgy or personal prayer, we often make the sign of cross. We make sign of cross before we pray to collect and compose ourselves and surrender our mind, heart, and wills to God. When we finish prayer, we also make the sign of cross in order to thank God for the gift of the blessings that we have received from God. In temptation we sign ourselves by the cross to be strengthened; in dangers, we make the sign of cross on our body to be protected.<sup>21</sup>

Antonio Donghi argues in his book *Words and Gestures in the Liturgy* that "The liturgical celebration always begins with the sign of the cross, which is felt through the entire body of those who are present to celebrate the sacramental presence of Christ. The cross is our great love, since we have been embraced by the glorious Crucified One."<sup>22</sup> For my own experience, not only Mass but all liturgical act always begins and ends with the sign of the cross. It has as its beginning and manifest the love of Christ given to us in the Cross. Andreas Andreopoulos, a lecturer of Christian theology at the University of Wales, explores the theology of the physical gesture of making the sign of the cross on our bodies, arguing that "From the time it was first practiced by the early Christians, the sign of the cross has been used as a sign of sanctification. It was made to sanctify food, the bed, each other, and ourselves. It is a sign of blessing used by laypeople."<sup>23</sup> Andreopoulos believes that the spirituality behind the sign of the cross is one of openness and community, of transforming the world and our actions. It's not a private devotional gesture so much as it's a recognition that our bodies and ourselves can become temples of the Spirit, arenas where God can change things for the better. The

---

20 Ibid.

21 Romano Guardini, Grace B. Branham, and Romano Guardini, *Sacred Signs* (St. Louis: Pio Decimo, 1956), 13.

22 Antonio Donghi, *Words and Gestures in the Liturgy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 4-6.

23 Andreopoulos, 116–117.



sign of the cross represents the victory of Jesus Christ over death. For example, when we make a sign of cross in restaurant, we confess our faith as Christians and value the cross as the source of our salvation.

According to Johan Van Parys, the author of the book, *Symbols that Surround Us*, there are two moments in the Mass when we sign ourselves with the sign of cross: the beginning and the end. During the Liturgy of the Word, we sign ourselves when the priest announces the Gospel saying, "A reading from the Gospel according to ..." This gesture indicates our desire and hope that the word of God we are about to hear may be in our mind, on our lips, and in our hearts, so that we may inspired by the word, willing to testify to the word, and moved to live it as we carry the word in our hearts.<sup>24</sup> For me, I pray when I make the sign of cross on head, lips, and chest before reading the Gospel, I say to myself "May the Lord be in my mind, on my lips and in my heart." This prayer to ask God helps me to hear the Gospel with active listening so that the Word of God can change my mind, help me to proclaim God's Word by my lips, and let His word affect my heart and put in my action. In other words, inviting God to sanctify my thoughts, my speech, and my action through the Word of God.

I am really interested in idea of Anthony Lilles about the meaning and theology of the sign of cross: The Sign of the Cross is a physical reminder of God's love for humanity and the greatness of human dignity that flows from this love. Lilles explains that making the sign of the cross involves the decision to choose the cross as a part of our life. When we make the sign of cross, we should connect to the love of Jesus who shows that love for us on the cross. This love is a true sacrificial love; in paying back, we must make real sacrifices of love in the circumstances of our daily life.<sup>25</sup> Also according to Van Parys, the Cross is our sign because it is by the cross that we have been saved. Through the cross, Jesus grants us salvation. Some people may think that the cross is a symbol for suffering, but it is said that there is no Easter Sunday without a Good Friday.

---

24 Johan Van Parys, *Symbols That Surround Us: Faithful Reflections* (Liguori, MO: Liguori, 2012), 103.

25 Lilles, Anthony, *Fire from above: Christian Contemplation and Mystical Wisdom* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute, 2016), 99-104.

At the end of Mass, the celebrant sends us into the world to live as the body of Christ. Before we leave, he calls down God's blessing upon us with the sign of the cross to give us strength for our journey of faith and all we encounter beyond the doors of the church.<sup>26</sup> God's love for us is not just to keep for ourselves but also to share with others. Because of that as we receive the love of God in a special way in the Mass and we share it out when we go at the end of Mass. The sign of cross also seen as the sign of courage. For many Christians when they are faced with persecution because of their faith, this sign is a source of hope and strength.

The sign of the cross has had a long history of theological development as a gesture. Nowadays, no one can deny the fact that the sign of the cross is used as the Christian symbol. This is especially true in liturgy, when people make the sign of the cross to remind them of Jesus' suffering and death on the cross because of love for all creation. Making the sign of the cross also helps Christians remember that the triune God is always present with them. Making the sign of the cross is an act of faith that brings us into God's presence; a way to renew our baptism, a decision to accept our share in Christ's suffering and help to grow in likeness to Christ.

## II. THE SIGN OF PEACE

### **Definition of the sign of peace**

Another easily recognizable Christian gesture in liturgy is the sign of peace also known as the kiss of peace or holy kiss. But what exactly is the sign of peace? It is said that the sign of peace is the liturgical practice of exchanging a handshake, embrace, kiss, as a sign of peace, union, or friendship which happen in a Christian service, especially in a Mass or liturgical services.

### **The origin of the sign of peace**

According to Circular Letter, the sign of peace has its origin in Gospel: "Peace I leave you; my peace I give you" (John 14:27). This is gift of peace that Jesus promises to give to his disciples before going to face his passion. After his resurrection, the Lord fulfils his promise when He sees his disciples, "Peace be with you!" Christ's peace is the fruit of the redemption that he brought

---

<sup>26</sup> Van Parys,103.

into the world by his death and resurrection. The gift of peace that the Risen Lord continues to give us in every single liturgical celebration in order to bear witness to this in everyday life.<sup>27</sup> The meaning of the sign of peace is also found in the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus said, “If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24). To live in peace of God and to share that peace with others, we need an action which comes from our heart – the action of forgiveness, the action of reconciliation. For Paul, the exchange of peace or kiss is not just a sign but should be put in action: “Brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you” (2 Cor 13:11-12).<sup>28</sup> The simple action of sharing peace with one another has its foundation in Jesus Christ, the source of our lasting peace, the one who grants us peace, and the one who invites us into peace. Through the teaching of Paul, we can see the important action we need to practice is to connect the liturgy with our daily life, in other words the liturgical ethic needs to be practiced. The sign of peace cannot end with the liturgical celebration but needs to be alive in our daily life.

### **The development and the theological meaning of the sign of peace**

According to Thomas J. Reese, drawing from Joseph Jungmann, the sign of peace “was originally placed at the end of the service of reading and prayers rather than at the start of the sacrifice-Mass. In keeping with the ancient Christian conception, it formed the seal and pledge of the prayers that preceded it.”<sup>29</sup> In other words, the time to offer the sign of peace is at a conclusion of the Liturgy of the Word. The assembly accepted the message they just heard. It reminds the faithful that to be in full communion with Christ, one must first “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength,” and not forget

---

27 The Congregation for Divine Worship, Circular Letter: “The Ritual Expression of the Gift of Peace at Mass,” July 12, 2014.

28 Donghi, *Words and Gestures in the Liturgy*, 4.

29 Thomas J. Reese, “A Kiss is Never Just a Kiss,” *America*, April 15, 1995: <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/100/kiss-never-just-kiss>. Accessed 11/16/2021.

to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:30-31). In the article, “Vatican says, ‘Don’t Enjoy Kissing,’” Thomas J. Reese quotes some Church Fathers who reference the sign of peace at the end of the liturgy of the Word to confirm his opinion. Tertullian asks, “what prayer is complete without the holy kiss?”<sup>30</sup> For Apology of St. Justin, the kiss of peace occurs at the end of the Liturgy of the Word<sup>31</sup>. He describes: “Having ended the prayer, we salute one another with a kiss,” after which the gifts are brought forward. Thus, the kiss occurred immediately after the prayers that ended the Liturgy of the Word. Kissing at the conclusion of prayers appears to have been a common Christian custom.<sup>32</sup> The early Christians explained that they saw the kiss as a seal of the prayer, like the Amen.

In some Catholic liturgical traditions, the exchange of peace occurs before the offering in response to Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5:23-24: “If you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” It would see it as a sign of reconciliation. Through this action, we show that we forgive each other and are at peace with one another before encountering God.

Although the sign of peace has retained this place in contemporary eucharistic liturgy, many presiders want to move it to its original place at the completion of the liturgy of the word before the gifts are presented. They explain that reconciliation and hospitality or greeting each other are practiced as people arrive for Mass, not when it is almost over!

In the Roman liturgical tradition, the exchange of peace is placed before Holy Communion with its own specific theological significance. Pope Francis approved the Circular Letter titled “The Ritual Expression of the Gift of Peace at Mass” which explains that “Its point of reference is found in the Eucharistic contemplation of the Paschal mystery as the “Paschal kiss” of the Risen Christ present on the altar as in contradistinction to that done by other liturgical

---

30 Thomas J. Reese, “Vatican says, ‘Don’t Enjoy Kissing,’” *National Catholic Reporter*, August 1, 2014, <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/vatican-says-dont-enjoy-kissing>. Accessed 11/16/2021

31 Ibid

32 Ibid.

traditions which are inspired by the Gospel passage from St. Matthew<sup>33</sup> (Matt. 5:23). The rites which prepare for Communion constitute a well-expressed unity in which each ritual element has its own significance, and which contributes to the overall ritual sequence of sacramental participation in the mystery being celebrated. The sign of peace, therefore, is placed between the Lord's Prayer, to which is joined the embolism which prepares for the gesture of peace, and the breaking of the bread, in the course of which the Lamb of God is implored to give us his peace. With this gesture, whose "function is to manifest peace, communion and charity," the Church "implores peace and unity for herself and for the whole human family, and the faithful express to each other their ecclesial communion and mutual charity before communicating in the Sacrament," that is, the Body of Christ the Lord.<sup>34</sup>

At the synod on the Eucharist in 2005, it was considered whether to maintain the exchange of peace before Communion, where it is presently found, or whether to move it to another place, with a view to improving the understanding and practice of this gesture. After further reflection, it was considered appropriate to retain the rite of peace in its traditional place in the Roman liturgy and not to introduce structural changes in the Roman Missal. However, the Church gives some guidelines for doing the sign of peace in liturgy: The rite of peace already has its own profound meaning of prayer and offering of peace in the context of the Eucharist, so an exchange of peace appropriately carried out among the participants at Mass enriches the meaning of the rite itself and gives fuller expression to it.

However, the sign of peace can also be omitted, and indeed sometimes ought to be omitted. The rubrics state: "If appropriate, the Deacon or the Priest, adds: "Let us offer each other the sign of peace".<sup>35</sup> For example, we are currently living in the time of COVID-19, and when Christian communities celebrate Mass together, they may often omit the sharing the sign of peace due to health concerns. Some communities continue to include the gesture, but they change the way of offering the sign of peace such as shaking hands

---

33 The Congregation for Divine Worship, Circular letter: "The Ritual Expression of the Gift of Peace at Mass."

34 Ibid.

35 *Missale Romanum, Ordo Missae*. Vác, 1944. 128

instead of giving a hug, or they use a bow of peace that is my experience here in America. The Congregation for Divine Worship also mentions that the Conferences of Bishops should consider whether it might not be fitting to change the manner of giving peace which had been established earlier. For example, following these years of experience, in those places where familiar and profane gestures of greeting were previously chosen, they could be replaced with other more appropriate gestures. The Conferences of Bishops are likewise invited to prepare liturgical catechesis on the meaning of the rite of peace in the Roman liturgy and its proper realization in the celebration of the Holy Mass.<sup>36</sup>

### **The meaning of the sign of peace.**

To understand this gesture, it is important that we become familiar with the liturgical text. The rubrics in the Roman Missal say thus: “The Rite of Peace follows, by which the Church asks for peace and unity for herself and for the whole human family, and the faithful express to each other their ecclesial communion and mutual charity before communicating in the Sacrament. As for the sign of peace to be given, the manner is to be established by the Conferences of Bishops in accordance with the culture and customs of the peoples”<sup>37</sup>

Every ritual gesture finds its explanation in the Scriptures and has the purpose, on one hand, to make the action more real, and on the other hand, to overcome the risk of being considered a daily routine. In the sign of peace, the Lord is giving us the gift of his peace: “The peace of the Lord be with you always.” The exchange of peace draws meaning from the sacramental presence of the Risen Christ because the faithful share the Holy Spirit in such a way as to generate fraternal communion according to the Gospel model. In the exchange of peace, through the stretching out of the hand, the assembly breathes the creative communion of the Holy Spirit and illuminates the fact that people lovingly give themselves to their brothers or sisters in Christ Jesus and bring together their brothers and sisters as Christ himself did.

---

36 Congregation for Divine Worship, Circular Letter: “The Ritual Expression of the Gift of Peace.”

37 *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal*. Ottawa, ON: Publications Service, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011. 82

## The practice of the sign of peace

There is a link between the liturgical practice and enculturation. According to Johan Van Parys, the Church recognizes that some cultures might not want to kiss strangers, so other options have been provided: a hug of peace, a handshake of peace, or, in some Asian cultures, a traditional bow of peace. Each of these gestures involves different levels of touching, relative to how comfortable a particular culture is with physical contact. During the time of sign of peace in many western cultures, it is common to shake the hand of those we do not know well and to hug or kiss friends or family members with whom we are more familiar.<sup>38</sup> I agree with Van Parys; as an Asian person, I have experienced and practiced the bow of peace in my parish and my community. When I came to America, I have seen many people go around to give people a sign of peace; they said “peace be with you” with big smile. Many bishops complained that the kiss in its current location disrupts the congregation when it should be preparing for Communion. Cardinal Antonio Canizares Llovera called for an end to what he considered “abuses” in the sign of peace, such as: “The introduction of a song for peace, which is nonexistent in the Roman rite, the movement of the faithful from their places to exchange the sign of peace amongst themselves, the departure of the priest from the altar in order to give the sign of peace to some of the faithful, people using the sign of peace at Christmas, Easter, baptisms, weddings, ordinations and funerals to offer holiday greetings, congratulations or condolences.”<sup>39</sup> Van Parys also mentions this; more important than the type of gesture is the understanding that this is a moment in the liturgy to affirm the peace that comes from Christ and our participation in it, rather than an extended time to greet or visit with one another.<sup>40</sup> I value Van Parys’ view because I think at this time of liturgy we need a moment of silence to prepare our soul our heart for receiving the communion not a time for socializing.

Today, a serious obligation for Catholics in building a more just and peaceful world is accompanied by a deeper understanding of the Christian meaning of peace. This depends largely on the seriousness with which our particular Churches welcome and invoke the gift of peace and express it in the liturgical

---

38 Van Parys, 106.

39 Reese, “Vatican says, ‘Don’t enjoy kissing.’”

40 Van Parys, 107.

celebration. The sign of peace should not remain as a gesture but needs to express in action of our own peace and spread that peace of God to others. To deepen the spiritual significance of the rite of peace in the celebration of the Holy Mass, Churches should be diligent in their spiritual and liturgical formation and in appropriate catechesis for the faithful. Christ is our peace, that divine peace, announced by the prophets and by the angels, and which he brought to the world by means of his paschal mystery. This peace of the Risen Lord is invoked, preached and spread in the celebration, even and especially by means of a human gesture lifted to the realm of a sacred sign.

### III. THE LITURGICAL PROCESSION

#### **Definition of the Liturgical Procession**

To begin considering the gesture of a liturgical procession, we need to settle on a definition of what a liturgical procession is in the first place. According to *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, a procession is a ritual way of getting from one place to another and doing so with a particular mood. In other words, this action which involves a number of people moving forward with a definite purpose can be expressive of different interior attitudes depending on the liturgical context. For example, a funeral procession is dramatically different from a wedding procession; the procession on Good Friday has different emotional content than the procession with palms on Passion Sunday.<sup>41</sup> In comparison to other ancient rites, processions might be defined as prayers supported and expressed by a rhythmical movement combined with singing and sometimes music and dance, namely with a specific animation and choreography.<sup>42</sup> For me the aim of movement in the procession was not so much about reaching the destination but experiencing the way together the place of encounter between God and human beings.

For my own experience, the liturgical procession includes many forms of religious worship such as the entrance of the ministers of the Mass, presentation of the gifts, the funeral processions, wedding processions, eucharistic processions, Palm Sunday processions and so on, these processions reminder Christians pilgrimage from this life to our eternal reward. In this

---

41 Fink 512

42 Daniel Brzeziński, "Processions in Christian Liturgy: Origin, Theology and Ministry," *Roczniki Teologiczne* 8 (2017): 9.



pilgrimage, we do not walk alone but we walk with our brothers and Sister in Christ who is our Tour Guide. With this loving guide, we know, and we believe we will reach the destination with Christ and in Christ.

### **The origin of the liturgical procession**

The liturgical procession finds its origin in Scripture. For example, in the Old Testament there are abundant accounts of processions: a procession organized by Joshua before conquering Jericho (Jos 6:1–16); a processional moving of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem by David (2 Sam 6:1–23; 1 Chron 15:1–16,3); moving the Ark of the Covenant from Zion, the City of David, to the Temple built by Salomon (1 Kgs 8:1–9; 2 Chron 5:2–10. Also, the journey of the Israelites through the desert towards the Promised Land and their return from Babylonian captivity are sometimes compared to the great processions led by God.<sup>43</sup> In the New Testament, we can find the procession of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem (Mark 11, Matthew 21, Luke 19, and John 12). Both the processions of the Old Testament and New Testament become a theological and liturgical paradigm of Christian processions. Processions are expressions of a people's desire to walk in mutual harmony toward and with their God.

### **The development and the meaning or purpose of the liturgical procession**

The ancient religions processions were performed to express gratitude to their gods. The procession of figures of gods were carried out of the sacred places, so that they could protect the space and territory of the procession and dedicate them through a physical contact. Processions were also understood as the rite which prepared humans for an encounter with a divinity.<sup>44</sup>

The early Christian processions certainly had a highly honoring character recalling the events of the life of Jesus, such as the Palm Sunday procession described in the diary of Egeria. In the Western Church the development of such processions reached its peak in the late Middle Ages when liturgy was dominated by people such as procession of worship the Blessed Virgin Mary and patron saints. In my parish and some parishes where I did my mission, I participated in the processions to honor the Blessed Virgin Mary and Saint Theresa the Little Flower.

43 S. Rosso, "Processione," in Spirito Rinaudo, *I salmi preghiera di Cristo e della Chiesa* (Leumann : Elle Di Ci, 1993): 1112–13.

44 Brzeziński, 9-10.

Every procession of the earthly pilgrimage of human beings will be fulfilled in the eschatological times and is the expression of Christian hope. The People of the Old Testament led by God can be read as processing towards the Promised Land, the Holy City of Jerusalem, and the temple, Christian procession is a sign or even a symbol of the earthly pilgrimage of the Church and the world towards eschatological times and the heavenly liturgy. Living life as the human, we all know that the world is not our permanent home, but just a temporary place. We are journeying to the kingdom of God which we call our eternal home. The liturgical procession can give us a sense to see the passing from the earthly liturgy to the heavenly liturgy.

For Van Parys, the processions become symbolic walks of our journey of faith from baptism to burial, from we were born until we leave this world. It is a walk that echoes our pilgrim path here on earth: one that holds its own twist and turns, but that we will never walk alone.<sup>45</sup> We are sharing a common journey, a different path, but the same destination. We live and share this life together, we walk together, and we come home together. We wish and hope no one is left behind.

### **The practice of the liturgical procession**

In the current Roman liturgy processions might be divided into two groups: one group is associated with the celebration of the sacraments, and another group is related to the cycle of the liturgical year. During the Holy Mass, we can see there are four processions: the entrance procession, the Gospel procession, the procession with gifts and the communion procession. We find no explanation of meaning about these processions in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal.

In the Liturgical Year, in the Latin liturgy, there were celebrations of season in the church year such as the Procession of Candles on the Purification of our Lady, on Palm Sunday, the carrying of the Blessed Sacrament to the altar after the Holy Mass on Holy Thursday, processions connected with the adoration of the Holy Cross during the liturgy of Good Friday, the procession with a

---

45 Van Parys, 100.

Paschal candle and to the font on Holy Saturday and the procession on the feast of Corpus Christi.<sup>46</sup>

According to the guidelines of the General Instruction on the Roman Missal, participants in the procession at Mass stand at an entrance, and the procession begins when someone rings the bell. Two servers holding candles lead the procession, and the person who holds the cross walks with the candle bearers side by side in one line. If the pathway of the procession becomes too tight for the three servers to walk side by side, the candle bearers walk ahead to fulfill the meaning which is to light the way for everyone following them. It is possible to omit the processional cross and retain the two processional candles if there are not enough servers.<sup>47</sup>

In his article, Monsignor Marc B. Caron mentions that “Whenever used, the processional cross is always carried with the image of Jesus Crucified facing forward in the direction of the procession”<sup>48</sup> Other servers follow behind the cross and candles. If the deacon is not carrying the Gospel Book, he walks with the priest celebrant, at his right side. Otherwise, the deacon, wearing the stole and dalmatic, and holding the Gospel Book, walks directly in front of the priest celebrant. The procession makes its way to the sanctuary. This is guideline of the Church for particular procession. For my own experience, I see some places follow exactly the rubric, but other places ignore some part of this. Some people think that Christian liturgy as human activity which is not just an official public celebration, but involves the senses, feelings, and experience of participants. Because of that they can adapt the liturgical gestures to make more meaningful for specific community. At first, I wonder why some parishes or communities do not follow the guideline of the Church, but I learn that in the Church’s teaching, each religious community given a right to make their own liturgy that fit with their constitution and tradition.

---

46 Brzeziński, 20.

47 *The General Instruction on the Roman Missal*, 120–123

48 Joseph O’Brien, Michael Lang, Boniface Hicks, “Liturgical Traditions: The Entrance Procession.” *Adoremus*, May 1, 2020. <https://adoremus.org/2018/12/liturgical-traditions-the-entrance-procession/>. Accessed 11/17/2021.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the ritual gestures of the sign of the cross, the sign of peace, and the liturgical procession. Each of these gestures has its root in scripture and practice in time of history of the Church which carry beautiful meaning of theology. We see in these common gestures a symbol of the unity of those who have come together to worship. Understanding and experiencing the liturgical gestures, the faithful may be fully present in the liturgical celebration. For me after doing this paper, when I participate in liturgy, I know more and understand the origins and meanings of these symbols. This knowledge makes me become an active participant in liturgy. The knowledge of liturgical gestures that I gain from doing this paper is not only useful for myself but also will bring benefits for people who I will be sent to serve in the future. I am also concerned how to share this understanding of liturgical gestures with people and with the liturgical ministers. Most of the time we do these gestures by habit and without thinking about them. One of the ways is teaching the central meaning of each ritual gesture and help them how to become aware of what they are doing. There are so many reasons why we should learn to understand the meaning of these liturgical gestures. With this paper, I believe that it will help parents and teachers to find the answers for children and students who have questions about these signs.



## Works Cited

- Andreopoulos, Andreas. *The Sign of the Cross: The Gesture, the Mystery, the History*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006.
- Brzeziński, Daniel. "Processions In Christian Liturgy: Origin, Theology and Ministry." *Roczniki Teologiczne* 8 (2017): 5-19.
- Donghi, Antonio. *Words and Gestures in the Liturgy*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009.
- The General Instruction of the Roman Missal*. Ottawa, ON: Publications Service, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011.
- Ghezzi, Bert. *The Sign of the Cross: Recovering the Power of the Ancient Prayer*. Quezon City: Jesuit Communications Foundations, 2006.
- Kingston, Thomas. *Extracts from the Rubric of the Roman Catholic Mass Book, with Observations*. Dublin: William Curry and Co., 1858.
- Lambing, Andrew Arnold. *The Sacramentals of the Holy Catholic Church*. New York, Benziger: 1892.
- Missale Romanum, Ordo Missae*. Vác, 1944
- O'Brien, Joseph, Michael Lang, and Boniface Hicks. "Liturgical Traditions: The Entrance Procession." *Adoremus*, May 1, 2020. <https://adoremus.org/2018/12/liturgical-traditions-the-entrance-procession/>. Accessed 11/17/2021.
- Parys, Johan Van. *Symbols That Surround Us: Faithful Reflections*. Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 2012.
- Pastorelli, France, and Peter E. Fink. *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990.
- Reese, Thomas J. "A Kiss is Never Just a Kiss." *America*, April 15, 1995: <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/100/kiss-never-just-kiss>. Accessed 11/16/2021.
- Reese, Thomas J. "Vatican says, Don't Enjoy Kissing," *National Catholic Reporter*, August 1, 2014, <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/vatican-says-dont-enjoy-kissing>. Accessed 11/16/2021.
- Romano Guardini, *Sacred Signs* Pio Decimo Press, 1956.
- S. Rosso, "Processione," in Spirito Rinaudo, *I salmi preghiera di Cristo e della Chiesa* (Leumann : Elle Di Ci, 1993): 1112–13.
- Seymour, William Wood. *The Cross: in Tradition, History, and Art*. United States: Kessinger, 2007.
- Tertullian. *De Corona*. Translated by Fabio Ruggiero. Milano: A. Mondadori, 1992.
- The Congregation for Divine Worship, Circular Letter: "The Ritual Expression of the Gift of Peace at Mass." July 12, 2014.
- The General Instruction of the Roman Missal*. Ottawa, ON: Publications Service, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011.