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Callistus Ibeh, right, exchanges the sign of peace with fellow Diocese of Brooklyn, New York, seminarian Juan Herrera-Posada during their ordination to the transitional diaconate at St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers, New York., Nov. 9, 2024. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)



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Years out from the social distancing practices established during the COVID-19 pandemic, most churches seem to have stuck with the hand wave as the preferred way to share peace between parishioners during Mass. But the specifics of how people do it vary widely, from a makeshift sign of the cross blessing to the kind of quick wave you might give an acquaintance in the grocery store when you're in a hurry, or even just a nervous nod at everyone in the room.

There seems to be an underlying sense of discomfort, as well, as though people are afraid of doing it wrong or missing someone. By not having to physically reach out to anyone, do we now feel responsible for acknowledging everyone?

While the ritual has changed for many of us since the pandemic, Fr. Richard Fragomeni, who serves as the chair of the Department of Word and Worship at Chicago's Catholic Theological Union ([aka Pope Leo XIV's alma mater](#)), said that in the United States there has never been a prescribed "right way" to do it.

"The common form in the United States has certainly in the past been shaking hands," he told NCR. "But from my study, no official expression of peace has ever been stipulated by the dioceses of the United States." A variety of practices, many of them specific to different cultural traditions, have always been allowed.



A woman smiles as she and other worshippers share the sign of peace during the St. Patrick's Day Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City, March 17, 2023. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Layla Karst, associate chair of the Department of Theological Studies at Loyola Marymount University, said that the once-common handshake has problems from a ritual point of view. Greetings like handshakes or hugs, she said, "reflected the kind of relationship we think we have with people. People we were really close to, we would hug. People who were kind of familiar, we would shake hands with. People at a distance, we might give a wave."

But the sign of peace was intended not to reinforce relationships but to indicate a radical, status quo-breaking familiarity: "If you look at how the greeting was understood in the early church, it wasn't a handshake or a hug, it was a kiss," she said, "the way they would greet siblings or family members."

Fragomeni said, in the modern era, the kiss of peace has often reflected "the stratification of intimacies. That is not what it's meant to be."

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The key to understanding the ritual, he said, is first to remember that it is one. Rather than "a gesture of affection," he said, the sign of peace is a "ritual expression of prayer for peace."

After the new General Instruction of the Roman Missal was promulgated in 2011, some complained about [the instruction that priests should remain](#) in the sanctuary during the sign of peace. But Fragomeni explained that the point was to keep the sign of peace from becoming an interruption in the liturgy.

"The sign of peace is not a disruption of the order, it's part of it," he said. Following directly upon the presider's prayer that God will grant the church the peace that Jesus offered, "these gestures that we do are ways of committing with our physical bodies to be agents and instruments of that peace."



Fr. Stephen Rooney smiles as he exchanges the sign of peace with Bishop John O. Barres of Rockville Centre, New York, during his ordination to the priesthood at St.

Agnes Cathedral in Rockville Centre June 18, 2022. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Karst saw the ritual today as having multiple layers. "The greeting of peace can be a greeting of reconciliation," she said. "It's also the greeting of siblings, or recognizing the bonds of Christians as something more than just another kind of stranger you might meet on the street or sit next to at a movie."

But the proper form for that familial layer, she said, remains an open question. "I think the closest ritual that we have to that in today's liturgy is not the sign of peace, but the shared cup. A shared cup is not something you do with strangers you've never met outside of church. It recognizes and ritualizes the kind of familial bond that the Eucharist creates for us."

In response to the anxiety some feel about acknowledging everyone within their field of view, Karst suggested looking to the practice of Communion. "When we take Communion," she said, "we talk about it as a meal, and yet everybody takes just a small piece." That piece, she said, is enough to adequately represent the whole.



Altar servers exchange the sign of peace during the Diocese of Brooklyn's annual Black History Month Mass of thanksgiving at St. Therese of Lisieux Church in the East Flatbush section of Brooklyn, New York, Feb. 16, 2025. (OSV News photo/Gregory A. Shemitz)

"In the same way that you can receive the entirety of the Eucharist in a small piece of bread or the wine or both," she said, "greeting a few people can ritualize the sign of peace. We don't have to make eye contact with everybody for it to work."

The heart of the practice of the kiss of peace, Fragomeni said, is not the mechanics but the internal disposition we bring to it. "A lot look to the form: 'How do we do this right? How do we do it correctly?' The answer is, you do it correctly by what's going on inside the expression, not in the external ways in which it gets expressed," he said.

He recalled a touchstone experience of his own. "This older woman just smiled at me and pursed her lips like she was giving me a kiss. I felt a tremendous sincerity in that, an invitation to become a member of a new humanity, rather than the old humanity which is always at war with one another," he said.

Ultimately, he said, we give the kiss of peace "right" by performing it with "a sincere commitment, prayer and willingness to allow the peace of Christ to transform us so that we can be agents of peace in this crazy, disruptive, very unpeaceable time that we're living in."

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