The Kiss of Peace
An Hispanic Understanding

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Drawing on his own cultural heritage, the author asserts that the Sign of Peace is more than simply one ritual among many in the liturgy, but is a constitutive dimension of Hispanic worship.

In our own lives we are constantly experiencing a process of transformation. This process is repeatedly shaping and reshaping us, stretching our boundaries and horizons and trying to make us conscious of our very selves. In encountering our very self, as Christians, we also encounter the Holy. The desire for an enduring peace is always present within all, especially in a society and in a world that is divided by war, for we are the people who “seek the face of the God of Jacob” (Ps 24:6). I have been in North America for almost twenty years and, from the beginning, my attention has been attracted to the way in which the Hispanic community shares the Sign of Peace within the Eucharistic liturgy. This is what I will explore in this article.

One of the ways in which we Catholics celebrate who we are is through the liturgical life of the Church. It is through the liturgy “especially, that the faithful are enabled to express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church” (The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, #2). We come to express ourselves as a gathered community and as a praying community. We not only celebrate, but learn from one another as we create a large tapestry of peoples from different cultures and backgrounds, people who speak different languages and celebrate our faith in so many different ways. We become more who we are called to be as we come together.

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Hispanics in the U.S. Church

As a group, Hispanics are very different people because their realities are always different. A Puerto Rican is different from a Mexican or a Cuban, and a Colombian from the South is different from a Colombian from the East. Even though they speak basically the same language they have their own idiosyncrasies because all share different histories and stories. Their narratives are diverse. Many times I have heard people from a non-Hispanic community saying that “the Hispanics do this or that,” or “that is what they do,” as if they would all do the same things, think the same way and react in the same manner.

Even though different Hispanic communities could be so different from each other, they also cherish many things in common. Hispanics are hopeful people. They are eschatological people, people who believe in the Reign of God that is to come, “an eschatological community that lives, then, the hope of something beyond” (Romero, 22). It is difficult for the community to see that the Reign of God is already present. That is why they are people of Ash Wednesday and Viernes Santo (Good Friday). For Hispanics, it is difficult to see the joy of the Resurrection morning because that is not part of their immediate experience. Many of their countries live in a constant Viernes Santo and live and long to see the joy of the Resurrection. For many, that “resurrection” will never be experienced in this life but in the life to come. For some, however, that resurrection is experienced not on Easter morning, but in the walking together as a community in the Vía Crucis. In this procession, they become one and experience the Christ of the Resurrection. They also long to experience peace in their lives, not only spiritual peace but also physical. They value family life and community sharing and nourish their faith and live in a constant celebration. La Fiesta is an important part of who they are. In the midst of suffering and death, in the midst of natural disasters and rejection, they celebrate. They celebrate because they believe in a better future. They celebrate because they realize that in difficulties they become one and, because they believe that mañana será otro día (tomorrow will be another day). They celebrate because a loving, compassionate God, a Mary who is always walking with them, and a family of Saints who guide them, always help them to get through anything in life. This “extended family” will bring them peace and a better day, and so they celebrate.

Very often, people complain about the expression of the Sign of Peace within the Eucharist in a “Hispanic” celebration: “It is too long,” “takes too much time,”

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“people start walking all over the Church,” “it is too messy,” “we lose focus,” and so on. A look at history, and therefore at the different positions of this gesture throughout the ages will bring some new insights and will help us understand and learn from this ritual as celebrated by the Hispanic community in the United States.

**Location of the Kiss of Peace**

**The Ancient Location of the Kiss of Peace**

One of the first places where the exchange of the kiss of peace is mentioned is in the *First Apology of Justin Martyr*, about 150 C.E. The section follows the account of a baptism at Eucharist and reads: “Having ended the prayers we greet one another with a kiss” (Burghardt, 70). Then, the preparation of the gifts follows. In the third century, Tertullian refers to the kiss of peace as the seal of prayer. Within the celebration of Eucharist, it was given at the end of the liturgy of the Word,

Then, the deacon calls out: “Greet one another; let us kiss one another.” Don’t take this kiss to be like the kiss friends exchange when they meet in the marketplace. This is something different; the kiss expresses a union of souls and is a plea for complete reconciliation. The kiss then, is a sign that our souls are united and all grudges banished. This is what our Lord meant when he said: “if you are offering your gift on the altar and remember there that your brother has a complaint against you, leave your gift on the altar and go first and be reconciled with your brother and then come and offer your gift” (Matt 5:23-24). Thus the kiss is reconciliation, and so is holy, as blessed Paul implied when he proclaimed: “Greet one another with the kiss of charity” (Yarnold, 182–83).

*The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus* also mentions the kiss of peace at the ordination of a bishop before the gifts are presented (Hippolytus, 35).

In the Byzantine liturgy “a sign of peace is exchanged . . . [before the Nicene Creed which precedes the Eucharistic Prayer] by the priest at the altar. . . . The peace appears to have been exchanged by all present until some time between the ninth and eleventh centuries; it probably died out because a kiss upon the mouth, such as this was, would inevitably be stylized and modified” (Woolfenden, 243).

In the East, this exchange of the sign of peace remains before the Eucharistic Prayer, and it is seen as a preparation for the offering of the entire Eucharistic action by all those who are gathered. In the West we can also find similar actions.
The Mozarabic rite, or the Spanish liturgy, which was the autonomous liturgy in constant use in Spain from the beginning of the sixth century until it was suppressed by the Council of Braga in 1080, is comparable to the Eastern rite in this matter. The transfer of the gifts is followed by a lengthy formula for solemn intercessions and then the exchange of peace which precedes the Eucharistic Prayer. These intercessions “conclude with the sign of peace, ending with the song Ad Pacem, which immediately precedes the preface dialogue” (Lenti, 422). Saint Augustine refers to exchanging the peace after the Lord’s Prayer, but he also expected the fraction to follow the Eucharistic Prayer and to precede the Lord’s Prayer, and so, the sign of peace led directly to communion and not fraction (Woolfenden, 245).

Joseph Andrew Jungmann mentions that “in the Carolingian era also the same succession (of kiss of peace and distribution of Communion) is found both at Communion of the sick and at public service. Indeed the kiss is often restricted to the communicants” (Jungmann, 481). He mentions that the canones of Theodore of Canterbury in the eighth century had in their rule: “Whoever does not communicate should not receive the [kiss of] peace nor the kiss in church” (481). Jungmann notices that elsewhere “the kiss of peace gradually became a sort of substitute for Communion” (481).

It is clear that the majority of the Fathers of the Church were accustomed to exchanging this kiss of peace before the Eucharistic Prayer. Only in Rome and North Africa was this exchange before communion. Woolfenden, using Bernard J. Lee, argues that “it is interesting that those who have made proposals for new forms of Eucharistic worship are united in seeing the sign of peace as a moment of peace and reconciliation before the preparation of the table and the Eucharistic Prayer” (Jungmann, 251). This reason must be kept in mind, especially when we look at the exchange of the sign of peace as celebrated by the Hispanic community at the Eucharistic liturgy where people from different countries—some of them in conflict among themselves—come together for worship.

Present Location and the Gesture

The first indication of the present location for the kiss of peace in Rome appeared in 416, when Pope Innocent I wrote to the bishop of Gubbio telling him that he should follow the Roman custom of having the kiss of peace at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer, because the bishop had been following the more ancient practice (Reese, 16). Whether the priest should only exchange the sign of peace with those in the sanctuary or go to the assembly to exchange it there is debatable. Some argue that he has already extended peace to the entire congregation (“The peace of the Lord be with you”) and does not have to give it to individuals. But if this is the case, why does he exchange it only with those in the sanctuary?

Earlier sources (Ordines Romani) suggest that the kiss of peace did not originate with the presider and then proceed in orderly fashion to the rest of the assembly,
but that each member of the clergy extended the sign of peace to his neighbor while the faithful extended it among themselves. Later formulations were made to start the kiss of peace from the altar to the people, that is, like a message, handed from the presider to the others. The presider first kissed the altar, the missal, the crucifix, chalice or the consecrated host before he extended the sign of peace to others. This gesture was going to be received from the priest and, even when communicated among the assembly by the pax-board, which was a small tablet of wood, ivory, or metal with the figure of Christ, a saint, or a symbolic figure engraved or painted on it, it was understood that the peace was first of all, coming from the priest. Both in the East and in the West, men and women where separated in the assembly; therefore the kiss of peace was given by women to women and by men to men. A booklet that the United States Conference of Bishops published in 1977 states: “It is also clear that the sign of peace is to be exchanged with persons who are rather close by (General Instruction #112). Neither the people nor the ministers need try to exhaust the sign by attempting to give the greeting personally to everyone in the congregation or even to a great number of those present.” What was really written in the 1970 General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) is “All exchange some sign of peace and love, according to the local custom. The priest may give the sign of peace to the ministers.” The statement from the Bishops’ Conference is obviously interpreting something that does not seem to be that clear in the instruction. This directive from the Bishops’ Conference interprets that “the reason for this ‘limited sharing’ is that the priest has already prayed for peace among all present and has addressed them with words that are all inclusive: “The peace of the Lord be with you always.” The new General Instruction for the Roman Missal #82 states: “As for the sign of peace to be given, the manner is to be established by Conferences of Bishops in accordance with the culture and customs of the peoples. It is, however, appropriate that each person offer the sign of peace only to those who are nearest and in a sober manner.”

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy #50 asked for a careful examination of each part of the Eucharistic Liturgy to be revised. The Constitution called for simplicity in adaptation to other cultures and stated that “other elements that have suffered injury through accident of history are now, as it may seem useful or necessary, to be restored to the vigor they had in the traditions of the Fathers.” The sign of peace is one of those elements that had been injured and neglected

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throughout history. The kiss of peace in our liturgies is placed after the Lord’s Prayer and before the breaking of the bread. The new GIRM #82 reads: “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.”

Different Meanings of the Kiss of Peace

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes: “Greet one another with a holy kiss.” A kiss can have many meanings depending on the persons who kiss, the place, the time and the culture. It could be seen as a sexual sign, a greeting, a good-bye, an expression of a special relationship, an act of aggression if it is not wanted and even an act of betrayal (Judas) (Reese, 13). Some people would say that it is a sign of reconciliation, especially after the Lord's Prayer: “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Thomas Reese mentions that the sign of peace fulfills that prayer through an action, that is, we show our forgiveness to each other in a concrete, visual way, therefore, people bestow a blessing upon each other: “Peace of Christ be with you.” It is done with smiles, joy, not with tears of regret. The sign of peace is not merely an expression of solidarity or good will; “it is rather an opening of ourselves and our neighbors to a challenge and a gift from beyond ourselves” (14). In other words, people understand this sign of peace in many different ways.

How Hispanics Celebrate in the U.S.

It is said that many of Hispanic Catholics in the United States have never heard about the Second Vatican Council. This implies that most Hispanic Catholics in this country are unaware of the liturgical reforms that the Church called for in its decrees. Yet pastoral agents frequently note the vibrant and lively liturgical life of Hispanic communities. Hispanics, even without knowing it, are aware of a call to worship in the way those directives promoted it (Mantovina, 18–19).

Liturgical celebrations for Hispanics are considered encounters with the person of Jesus. These encounters become alive, especially in celebrations such as Viernes Santo (Good Friday). On Good Friday the whole day is devoted to having that encounter with the human Jesus in Las Siete Pulabas (The Seven Last Words), the Via Crucis (The Way of the Cross), el Santo Entierro (the entombment) and in some places like Puerto Rico and Dominican Republic, el Encuentro (the encounter) or the procession of La Dolorosa (Our Mother of Sorrows). These celebrations bring Hispanics close to the human Jesus who has suffered in the same way they have suffered. It is a recognition of the Christ who still lives among them and suffers with them. An Hispanic can laugh at difficulties, always waiting for justice and living in the hope of a better world.
For Hispanics, liturgies are also celebrations of the “extended family” of God and therefore, theirs too. Here we direct our attention to the significance of the padrinos (godparents) who are selected not only for the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, but also for Marriages, First Communions and the quinceañeras (fifteenth birthday). Once the padrinos are chosen, they become compadres or co-parents. These compadres become part of the extended family and will share in the well being and spiritual needs of the child or ahijado(a). This understanding of extended family is also seen in the way Mary and the saints are remembered. They become part of our human family. “The extended family grows and is created through symbolic and sacred moments of liturgy, blessings, fiestas—and despedidas—farewells. These are moments of color, song, dance and ritual” (Vela, 40). Their preference for “numerous statues and images in churches stems in large part from this understanding of liturgy as an extension of familial ties into the community of believers, both past and present” (40).

During Sunday Eucharist, perhaps the only day during the week when people have the opportunity to see each other, those human bonds and the love that already exists among family members and friends are expressed and shared with others in different ways. As people gather, the saludos, besos y abrazos (greetings, embraces and kisses) are very obvious. Hispanics welcome people con un beso y un abrazo (with a kiss and an embrace). These feelings will continue, and will find different forms of expression, throughout the Eucharistic celebration, especially during the Kiss of Peace. This is a way of teaching others what the meaning of Church for the Hispanic community is and how they express their own theology of community. On the other hand, these are more than warm feelings but a way of being, and a way of including all the members of an extended family. For Hispanics, family means not only having to live, struggle and dream alone but acompañados (accompanied). They cannot see themselves in isolation but always in relationship. Roberto Goizueta argues that “to be an isolated individual is, literally, to have no humanity, no identity, no self, it is to be no-thing, no-body (Goizueta, 50). That acompañamiento (accompaniment) finds its place not only at home but also in the liturgy. As we accompany each other, we are also hospitable and welcoming.

Sense of Hospitality and Celebration

For Hispanics, hospitality is essential. It is seen as a crucial virtue and an honor to extend hospitality to others but also to accept that hospitality from

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others. It is expressed and shared from the first moment we meet people. Even when there is a lack of “confianza” (trust), still to be hospitable is part of being a person. The “mi casa es su casa” (my house is your house) spirituality is a golden rule. In extending hospitality to others, the family circle is extended. Even though there are many differences among peoples, there are also common characteristics: the cultural value of the dignity of each person, the deep love and regard for the extended family, the celebration of life as a gift, e.g., presentación (presentation of a baby in the church after birth), tres añitos (presentation of the children in the church when they turn three years old), quinceañeras (celebration of the fifteenth birthday), and many others. People like to savor their time as a gift to be enjoyed, not by themselves but with others. Hispanics share, one way or another, the sense of hospitality and the abiding faith that permeates their daily lives not only with those known to them but even with the stranger. I remember my mother setting up another plate during dinner time “por si alguien llega” (in case someone stops by).

As others are welcomed into their lives, they also welcome their “holy” family. Phrases that point to the divine are part of the vocabulary and expressions of Hispanics: Dios te bendiga (May God bless you), Si Dios quiere (If God wills it), Ay, Dios mío (Oh my God), ¡Santo Dios! (Holy God), Con Dios por delante (With God before us), Primero Dios (God first), and so many others. Justo L. González mentions that “a new way of being Hispanic is being born in the United States. Being a Mexican-American is not the same as being a Mexican-American in Mexico” (González, 12). He argues that we “become partners in forging a new reality. This reality, which some called ‘Hispanic’ and some call ‘Latino,’ is currently being born” (13). In other words, living in the United States creates a different reality and a new identity.

Celebrations are essential for Hispanics as individuals and as a community. The social aspect of the sacraments has great importance, and it is unthinkable not to celebrate religious events. Sunday is the day when the family and the community gather precisely to do that: to celebrate. They come to church with their best clothes because they are going “a la casa del Señor (to God’s house);” therefore, one wears the best for the Lord. Hispanics consider themselves good story tellers and so they come to hear the stories of their faith. Friendship and family ties are also strengthened by sharing food and drink. This creates a wonderful opportunity and a great challenge to understand the Eucharist as essential in their lives.

**What Does It Mean?**

There could be various reasons why the kiss of peace during the Eucharistic Liturgy as celebrated by the U.S. Hispanic community is so distinctive and is celebrated with so much enthusiasm, joy and spontaneity. These reasons could become great elements for catechizing all our communities, but especially for
creating a stronger sense of unity in diversity: (1) The kiss of peace increases the sense of family and extended family that is at the heart of the Hispanic/Latino community; (2) it represents a concrete sign, and tells of a future desire of peace and reconciliation among the people. This waiting is not passive but leads to action and to a constant struggle to overcome oppressive structures; (3) it is another moment during this holy celebration in which holy people can socialize and greet each other in a ritual way; (4) the sharing of the Body and Blood of Christ is a sign of unity among the faithful, but because so many people do not receive Communion due to misunderstandings and/or different situations in their lives, the exchange of the sign of peace is a way in which that expression of unity and deep communion occurs. Some of these difficulties can be addressed by proper catechesis and religious instruction. Others are more difficult for they involve other elements that very often are out of our reach, such as legal or immigration issues. The Kiss of Peace offers a moment of participation in which everyone is welcomed. It is indeed a sign of union in which old and young, sinners and saints, broken and holy people become one in gesture and song, in hope and faith; and (5) the exchange of the kiss of peace has become a sign of the identity of the Hispanic community living in the United States and a sign of hospitality. The community has come to be known in the U.S. for the way in which the Kiss of Peace is shared during the Eucharist, and for the way in which it has become a sign of unity and of welcoming among all the different peoples.

Conclusions

If the kiss of peace is for Hispanics, among other things, a concrete sign of celebrating not only their identity as a U.S. Church community, but also an expression of a concrete sign of hospitality, then we might need to ask ourselves if these cultural elements encourage the current position of the rite or perhaps are calling for a change. By having the sign of peace in its present location the reconciliatory nature of the gesture before receiving the Body and Blood of the Lord might be emphasized. However, Hispanics teach us that hospitality should be extended from the very beginning of an encounter as the relationship is nourished and grows in many different ways. Should the community wait until the rite of communion to express a sign of communal reconciliation? Do we wait until we bring and present our gifts of bread and wine? Our ecclesial experience teaches us that liturgy flourishes within a climate of hospitality. This hospitality is expressed from the welcoming environment outside the church building, to the warm greeting by the ministers of hospitality at the gathering space where strangers become known to one another. This hospitality is nourished in the place where people are seated together and where “the community worships as a single body united in faith, not simply as individuals who happen to find themselves in one place” (Built of Living Stones, #52), but as a pueblo (a people) who gather in worship and together invoke a community of Father, Son and Holy
Spirit. To try to formalize the expression of the sign of peace during the liturgical celebration of the Hispanic community in the U.S. will not only constrict an important expression of faith of a community, but will also adversely affect the development of the identity of a people who are already strangers in a strange land. Catechesis must continue for everyone and a conversation between the Hispanic community and the pastors of our churches must happen before we make any decisions or before we impose rules on the community.

As a community and as a people who walk by faith, Hispanics are eager to share their stories, and in the sharing of those stories, to share who they are. As the gathered Hispanic community celebrates its life in the liturgy, we realize that liturgy may be seen as catechesis, but we also understand that it goes beyond catechetics and that it helps us be and become more who we are and who we are called to be in the presence of God and of one another. There is a song that has a prophetic vision for Hispanics living in the U.S.:

Sois la semilla que ha de creer,
sois la estrella que ha de brillar.
Sois levadura, sois grano de sal,
Antorcha que debe alumbrar. (Gabaráin)
(You are the seed that is to grow,
you are the star that is to shine.
You are the yeast, you are the salt,
A torch that should give light.)

May this community teach us and learn themselves that they are called to be seed, star, yeast, salt, torch, and peace.

References


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