



Pastor's Column

St. Peter Catholic Church

January 20, 2019 ~ Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Mass Explained - Sign of Peace and the Lamb of God

Last week, we considered Holy Communion as part of our Pastor Column series "The Mass explained," but we have gotten ahead of ourselves a bit. We back up now and reflect upon what happens at Mass immediately before Holy Communion: the Sign of Peace and the Lamb of God.

At the end of the Eucharistic Prayer, the congregation concludes that great prayer with the Great Amen, signifying in the single unified voice of the faithful that this is our faith; this is the faith of the Church.

The foremost Christian prayer of all, appropriately following the Great Amen, is the prayer that Jesus Himself taught us: the Lord's Prayer (the "Our Father," or the *Pater noster* in Latin). We frequently will have non-Catholic Christians joining us for Mass, and perhaps they might feel lost in much of what we do at Mass, but the Lord's Prayer truly is where we can all pray together as one, and as Jesus is one and it is Jesus Who teaches us this prayer, so we pray as in the words that our Savior taught us.

Here at St. Peter, we have the tradition of *singing* the Lord's Prayer, a beautiful demonstration of what St. Augustine famously wrote that those who sing well pray twice. Now, I (for one) like to think that we sing well; ergo, we pray twice.

The conclusion of the Lord's Prayer leads us directly in the priest-celebrant's prayer to Jesus Christ: "Lord Jesus Christ, Who said to Your Apostles, 'Peace I leave you, My peace I give you,' look not on our sins, but on the faith of Your Church, and graciously grant her peace and unity in accordance with Your will. Who live and reign for ever and ever." The congregation responds again with "Amen," and then we are invited to share with one another the Sign of Peace.

Now, the Sign of Peace is intended precisely for that: to offer peace to one another. It is a common gesture to shake hands, though people who are sick may simply bow their heads. But it is not a time for catch up on the latest gossip, talk about last night's game, or what have you. Before and after Mass is the appropriate time for casual conversation; but the Sign of Peace is an integral liturgical movement in the context of the Mass and therefore ought to be exercised as such.

Following the Sign of Peace is the Lamb of God. The Book of Revelation frequently speaks of the Lamb of God; St. John the Baptist foretold His coming and proclaimed Him when He came with those immortal words, "Behold the Lamb of God." We sing and pray for the Lamb of God to have mercy on us, and then we do so again, and then a third we invoke the Lamb of God but this time to grant us peace. The liturgical gesture of kneeling at this point has returned to our diocese, which is fitting and appropriate given that we are at this very moment invited by the priest-celebrant, in the words of St. John the Baptist, to "behold the Lamb of God; behold Him Who takes away the sins of the world." And then the priest-celebrant says the words of Revelation, "Blessed are those called to the Supper of the Lamb," a reference to the eternal Wedding Banquet of Heaven for which all the faithful wait in joyful hope. We kneel at this point because the Lamb of God in the Eucharist is Jesus Christ, our King, our Lord and our God...and we are about to come forward in humility of heart and soul to receive Him as our celestial Food. How could we *not* kneel at the threshold of this amazing, awe-striking invitation?

And then, our last words before coming forward at Holy Communion, we pray in echo of the words of the humble centurion (Mt 8:8), "Lord, I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof. But only say the words and my soul shall be healed." This final gesture of contrition is a final prayerful and penitential preparation to receive the great Gift of all the earth: the Eucharist.

~ Fr. Lewis