

Sealed with the Kiss

Once upon a time, we Christians concluded our liturgical gatherings with a liturgical kiss, sealing all that we had prayed with the apostolic sign of unity. As scholars tell us, it was probably exchanged “at every Christian *synaxis* (or gathering)...” The original place for the giving of the Kiss of Peace was “immediately after the prayers at the conclusion of the Liturgy of the Word, for its pristine purpose was to conclude the *synaxis* of readings and prayers...(it was common) for Christians to exchange the Peace, especially after prayers at the end of a gathering before being dismissed”. (Taft, *Great Entrance*, p. 374, 376). That is, the exchange of “the holy Kiss” (1 Cor. 16:20), dating from apostolic times, was the way the early Church commended its prayers to God. After praying together, they sealed all their work with the sign of love.

How did this work? In the earliest times, it would seem that the Kiss was given indiscriminately, between all Christians, of whatever gender. Each would greet their neighbours standing around them, bidding them the Peace of Christ, saying “Christ is in our midst!” (or some other greeting). In Chrysostom’s day, in Antioch, the Kiss was given on the lips. (Perhaps this is why it was soon changed!) Anyway, by 200 A.D. (long before Chrysostom), men and women were segregated in their giving of the Kiss and when it was exchanged with those standing on either side, it was then exchanged only among those of the same gender. Indeed, during Chrysostom’s time, men and women stood on opposite sides of the church. Thus, clergy in the altar exchanged the Peace with fellow-clergy, men in the nave exchanged it with men, and women with women. But though the mechanics had changed (to preserve propriety as the Church grew in size and composition), the underlying principle remained the same: the Church still sealed its prayers with the Kiss of Peace. At the Eucharist, this had the added function of mutual reconciliation before offering the eucharistic Sacrifice. Had not the Lord Himself said “If you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, first be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your gift”? (Mt. 5:23-24). Thus the Kiss remained the way that baptized Christians acknowledged one another liturgically. It was always exchanged in church as an integral part of the worship.

But, alas, many forms of participation once integral to worship tended to fall away. It used to be unthinkable that baptized Christians would abstain from receiving Holy Communion at the Liturgies they attended, yet this form of saving participation started to fall away and “non-communicating attendance” (as it is sometimes called) became the norm. Thus what was once done by all present, continued to be done at every Liturgy only by the clergy. The clergy received Holy Communion, while the people (or most of them) abstained.

It was the same with the giving of the Kiss of Peace, which also began to fall away. By as late as the 10th century (scholars tell us), the Kiss was still given by all. But by the 11th century, it begins to be exchanged only by those in the altar, and a 13th century Georgian version of Chrysostom’s Liturgy prescribes that the priest, when serving alone, omit the Kiss entirely—since there was no one else in the altar with whom he could exchange it. (Taft, *op. cit.* p. 395). Thus today, despite the diaconal command to exchange the Kiss, most Orthodox do not, in fact, exchange it (though the Copts still do at their Liturgies).

In many places, however, the Kiss, like the weekly reception of Holy Communion, is being restored (though not without the same controversy that once accompanied the restoration of more frequent Communion). Its restoration does not disrupt the service, nor degenerate into a warm and fuzzy charismatic “hug-fest”. At my own parish of St. Herman’s in Langley, the faithful simply turn to those on either side and exchange the greeting, saying “Christ is in our midst!” I actually timed it once! It took 10 seconds.

But importance cannot be measured with a clock. (If it comes to that, how long does it take to receiving the life-giving Holy Communion?) For the exchange of the Peace, simply and reverently given, does something to the people. It knits them into a family, breaks down the barriers which sin has erected between brother and brother and, sealing what they have already prayed, prepares them to stand together at the Holy Chalice.

This, it would seem, cannot be done with the same effectiveness any other way. For, (as C.S. Lewis reminded us in his “Screwtape Letters”), Man is an animal, and whatever our bodies do affects our souls as well. Thus, we have a need to exchange the Peace in a bodily way, actually greeting one another, and not just thinking loving thoughts about our brother, as if we had no bodily existence.

Our experience at St. Herman’s in Langley, I would suggest, confirms the timeless wisdom of the Church. From apostolic days, the Peace was given as a part of the Church’s assembled worship. The invitation to exchange it has continued even until now in our Liturgy—and it continues to be exchanged by the clergy, whenever two or more serve together. Let us heed and accept the Church’s invitation. Let us greet one another in the Lord’s Peace. “Let us love one another, that with one mind we may confess Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Trinity one in essence and undivided!”

---Archpriest Lawrence R. Farley