

Why does everyone do something different at Mass?

Dear **Father Kerper:** I attend Mass at several parishes in New Hampshire and I'm becoming confused. In some parishes people hold hands during the Our Father. In others I see people raising their hands like the priest at the altar. Also, I find the sign of peace a huge distraction. Isn't it a throwback to the 1960s? More and more, I find it difficult to pray because everyone does things in a different way.

These are great questions to consider as we are preparing for the new translation of the Mass. This is an important time to think about the meaning behind the words we speak and the gestures we use during Mass. Your multiple questions touch upon three interconnected issues: the importance of physical gestures in public worship; the tension between tradition and innovation; and the need to balance communal and individual preferences.

First, let's consider the role of the body in worship, something we often overlook. Human beings are a union of matter and spirit, body and soul. As such, during public worship our bodies inevitably become involved in what is primarily a spiritual activity.

Designated bodily postures correspond with specific spiritual activities. For example, we sit to listen to God's Word, we stand together when we profess the Creed, and we kneel during the times of intense awareness of the Lord's presence, notably during the Eucharistic Prayer and before and after receiving Holy Communion.

In addition to these common postures, the liturgy also has two kinds of gestures: those of the ordained leaders and those of the people. Gestures used only by the ordained include the outstretched hands when he leads prayer and offers the greetings, the movements during the Eucharistic prayer, and the act of blessing. The principal gestures of the people are

the sign of peace, folded hands during prayer, and genuflection to honor and acknowledge the Eucharistic Presence.

These postures and gestures have deep meaning and should never become mere habits. Rather, they should always reflect what is happening to us spiritually.

“During public worship, never do anything that draws attention to yourself or distracts other people.”

The Sign of Peace

Now, let's look at tradition and change. You mentioned that you don't like the sign of peace because it's “something from the 1960s.” Actually, this liturgical gesture is very ancient and packed with symbolic meaning.

Though no one can pinpoint the exact origin of the “kiss of peace,” it surely existed in the early fifth century. We know this because in 416 A.D., Pope Innocent I corrected the Bishop of Gibbia, who insisted that the “kiss of peace” should be exchanged among the people before the Eucharistic Prayer.

Pope Innocent I insisted that the “kiss of peace” be exchanged after the Eucharistic Prayer and immediately before the distribution of Holy Communion. Why? To stress

the necessary connection between reconciliation and worthy reception of the Eucharist. By the sixth century, the two acts had become so intertwined that those unable to receive Holy Communion because of grave sin were instructed to refrain from sharing the sign of peace.

The sign of peace still seems “new” to many people because it gradually disappeared centuries ago. It survived as a formalized gesture exchanged only among the clergy — never the people — during high Masses.

In the late 1960s, after Vatican II, the Church restored the sign of peace. Whether one likes it or not, it is definitely not an innovation but part of our genuine liturgical tradition. Moreover, recognizing that it may not work well in all conditions and cultures, the Church never mandated it but made it optional.

Holding Hands

Whereas the sign of peace is a true traditional practice, the custom of holding hands during the Our Father is not. Some good people have promoted this practice as a way of symbolizing and even fostering community.

It has two drawbacks. First, it draws people away from the Father, whom we address in union with Christ, by focusing too much attention on the specific community linked by hands. Second, in most places it actually

divides the worshippers because some cannot reach the hands of another person. For example, I have seen some congregations broken into six or seven groups with some people actually turned from the altar as they seek someone's hand.

What began as a sincere attempt to foster community often does the opposite: those who hold hands appear to be the "insiders" while the ones unable or unwilling to clasp someone's hand look like "outsiders."

"Orans Position"

As to the custom of some people who adopt the "orans position" — the outstretched arms and hands — this too can lead to confusion. The rubrics, the official instructions to the priest, direct him to adopt that position in his role as leader. By using the bodily gesture of extended arms and hands, the priest also symbolizes the essential unity of the prayer.

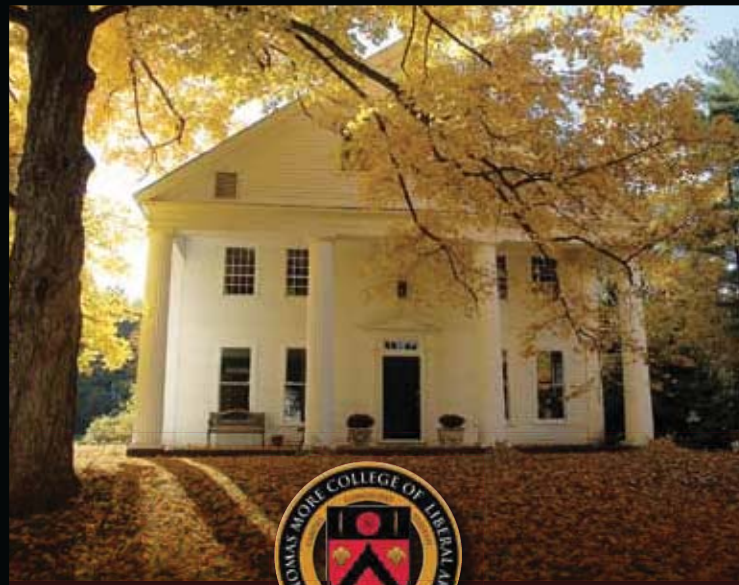
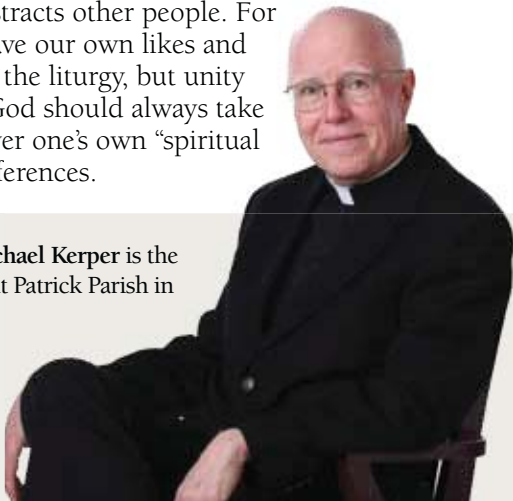
Here the priest acts like the conductor of an orchestra who alone holds the baton. Imagine what would happen if other musicians rose from their seats and wielded a baton. Confusion would reign.

Though the *orans* position is not prohibited, its use by people in the congregation certainly seems inappropriate and distracting. In private prayer or, say, in devotional prayer groups with a more charismatic style, the *orans* position might be good and useful, but not during Mass.

This brings us to the third point: the need for balance between the communal and personal in the liturgy. By its very nature, liturgy organizes and expresses the worship of multiple people who act as a united body. Unified worship, then, needs predictable, harmonious and understandable actions. As such, conspicuously peculiar actions, such as raising one's hands during the Our Father, become distractions that erode unity. Likewise, the adamant refusal to join in common action is equally distracting, even disruptive. I know people, for example, who adamantly refuse to give and receive the sign of peace on the grounds that it's a "new custom."

Allow me to distill all these words into one "golden rule" that flows from the demands of charity: During public worship, never do anything that draws attention to yourself or distracts other people. For sure, we all have our own likes and dislikes about the liturgy, but unity in glorifying God should always take precedence over one's own "spiritual style" and preferences.

■ Father Michael Kerper is the pastor of Saint Patrick Parish in Nashua, NH.



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