

Is it wrong that at the sign of peace the priest leaves the altar (as do the altar servers) to shake the hands of people in their pews?

An interesting and controversial question. The new General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) does give us some direction on this subject: *“The priest may give the sign of peace to the ministers but always remains within the sanctuary, so as not to disturb the celebration. In the dioceses of the United States of America, for a good reason, on special occasions (for example, in the case of a funeral, a wedding, or when civic leaders are present) the priest may offer the sign of peace to a few of the faithful near the sanctuary.”* (GRIM #154)

I approached Father on this subject. His reply is that, in his opinion, every Sunday mass is a special occasion. It’s hard to argue with that! The concern in the GIRM is with disturbing the celebration, not with the fact that the priest leaves the sanctuary. As long as Father returns to the sanctuary before all the parishioners have concluded the exchange of the sign of peace, it is probably not disturbing the celebration.

It is interesting to note that this subject is currently being discussed in Rome. On March 13, 2007, Pope Benedict XVI issued his apostolic exhortation, *“Sacramentum Caritatis”* (The Sacrament of Charity). In this document he states: *“during the Synod of Bishops there was discussion about the appropriateness of greater restraint in this gesture, which can be exaggerated and cause a certain distraction in the assembly just before the reception of Communion.”* In a proposal as part of the exhortation, he wrote: *“Taking into account ancient and venerable customs and the wishes expressed by the Synod Fathers, I have asked the competent curial offices to study the possibility of moving the sign of peace to another place, such as before the presentation of the gifts at the altar. To do so would also serve as a significant reminder of the Lord's insistence that we be reconciled with others before offering our gifts to God.”* Moving the place of the sign of peace would minimize disruption of the Eucharistic celebration.

Deacon Joe