

Recommitting to the sign of peace in a world at war

by Anthony Russo

America Magazine - September 19, 2025

The sign of peace stresses me out. As soon as I sit down at Mass, I scan my surroundings to gauge the likely rhythm. Who will want a handshake? Who will want a hug? And lately, who will want a nod or a quick wave?

When people started returning to church as the pandemic restrictions loosened, the sign of peace was different. Outside of family or close friends, handshakes have been replaced by quick gestures and an even quicker utterance of the word, “peace,” often without eye contact. My personal favorite is what I call the “arm flap”—elbow firmly planted at one’s side, hand and forearm snapping upward quickly for a pseudo wave.

For a while, this reduced contact made sense to me (aside from the lack of eye contact), as we were all navigating a new normal in a world still dominated by Covid. We sought to resume some semblance of life as we knew it yet remained vigilantly aware of precautions to mitigate the spread of the virus.

But today, in our post-pandemic society, these quick and, dare I say, shallow, gestures are too often still the norm. Certainly, adjustments based on individual or family health realities might be necessary, but I hope for a more widespread return to handshakes or something closer to that. At the very least we should aim for direct eye contact and a declarative, “Peace be with you.”

Let me be clear. I'm guilty of defaulting to these quick gestures as well, and they definitely ease the stress of the sign of peace guessing game. But my fear is that they have become merely the comfortable path, at best minimizing uncertainty and awkwardness, and at worst masking disdain: "Let's just get this over with."

This newly distant sign of peace is in stark contrast to the proximity that Pope Francis modeled and on which he so often preached. In an address in 2023 he commented, "God's style is never distant, detached or indifferent. On the contrary, it is a style of proximity, compassion and tenderness." His remarks were focused on drawing close to the most vulnerable in society, but if we cannot draw close to those next to us, how can we expect to do so authentically with those on the periphery?

We offer one another a sign of peace as a way of remembering some of the last words of the Prince of Peace before his arrest and looming murder: "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you" (Jn 14:27). We prepare ourselves to receive the body and blood of Christ by first being at peace with one another. Communion with one another is a pathway to communion with God. Particularly in a world so often at war, this gesture can be a radical, countercultural act. We meet the gaze of friend and stranger alike. Peace is risky, but not riskier than war.

I was at dinner with a friend over the summer when I learned that the United States had bombed Iran. "Lord, have mercy," I thought, in a quite literal, visceral way. Another attempt at bombing our way to peace. Another attack to add to the wars raging around the world, only some of which generate media attention.

In his first Urbi et Orbi blessing, Pope Leo XIV exclaimed, “‘Peace be with you all!’ Beloved brothers and sisters, this is the first greeting of the Risen Christ, the Good Shepherd who has given his life for the flock of God. I, too, would like this greeting of peace to enter your hearts, reach your families, to all people wherever they may be, to all peoples, to all the earth.” He continued by calling the peace of the risen Christ “a disarmed peace and a disarming peace.”

A disarmed peace and a disarming peace. He wants such a peace to enter our hearts. But it can only enter our hearts if we prepare our hearts, if we risk opening our hearts, particularly to the other.

Peace has been a consistent theme of Pope Leo’s messages thus far. And the morning after the bombing of Iran, Pope Leo repeated his plea: “Now more than ever, humanity cries out and pleads for peace.... War does not solve problems. On the contrary, it amplifies them and causes deep wounds in the history of peoples—wounds that take generations to heal. No military victory can ever compensate for a mother’s pain, a child’s fear, or a stolen future.”

At Mass recently, the horror of the world’s wars on my mind, I paid particular attention to the sign of peace, challenging myself to greater proximity. No exchange lasted long enough for a full, “Peace be with you.” And twice, my neighbors waved and turned away before I could do or say anything. I was not at peace when I received the Eucharist.

I’m not naïve enough to think that more deliberate encounters during the sign of peace will alone create more peace in the world. But I am audaciously hopeful that it can enhance our capacity for proximity—proximity that represents God’s own way of being.

I also believe this proximity can allow peace—a disarmed peace and a disarming peace—to enter our hearts. And once it’s there, we can help spread it to our families, to all peoples, to all the earth.



Anthony Russo

Anthony Russo is an associate dean at Boston College Clough School of Theology and Ministry. He is a parishioner at St. Ignatius of Loyola in Chestnut Hill, MA

