

Vatican urges priests to clamp down on excessive emotions during the sign of peace

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) In an effort to ensure a more sober ritual, the Vatican has urged bishops to clamp down on singing, moving around, and casual expressions of affection when the sign of peace is exchanged during mass.

The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments led by Spanish Cardinal Antonio Canizares Llovera, has sent a letter to bishops around the world expressing concern about what it considers to be ritual abuses.

Among them, he said, were turning the sign of peace into a “song of peace,” the priest leaving the altar during the interlude, or use of the ritual to offer congratulations at weddings or condolences at funerals.

Pope Francis reportedly approved the letter, which confirmed the importance of the rite, before it was distributed to bishops’ conferences.

The Rev. Anthony Ruff, a theology professor at St. John’s School of Theology-Seminary in Minnesota and editor of the blog Pray Tell, believes the Vatican letter will have little impact on Catholics.

“I suspect such local practices will continue and the Vatican letter won’t change much, since most people don’t find it irreverent to reach out in friendliness even if it’s beyond what the rules allow,” said Ruff.

Vatican expert Thomas Reese criticized the letter.

“It ignores the most ancient tradition where the kiss of peace occurred at the end of the liturgy of the word,” Reese, a commentator for *National Catholic Reporter*, told Religion News Service. “I pity the poor priest who has to tell his congregation not to smile during the kiss of peace.”

In the letter, Cardinal Canizares Llovera and the congregation's secretary, Archbishop Arthur Roche, said the issue was raised during a synod on the Eucharist in 2005.

Two years later in an exhortation "Sacramentum Caritatis," former Pope Benedict XVI stressed the need for simplicity and sobriety.

He wrote: "Nothing is lost when the sign of peace is marked by a sobriety which preserves the proper spirit of the celebration, as, for example, when it is restricted to one's immediate neighbors."