The Meaning of the Mass: Part Seven
by Fr. Brian Mahoney

THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

The sign of the cross came into the Mass most likely during the Middle Ages; there is no clear documentary evidence of it being in the celebration prior to that time. Its appearance most likely began as part of the priest's private devotional prayers prior to the Mass. In time, these devotions became incorporated into the celebration, and were officially inserted into the Mass in 1570 with the promulgation of the Missal of Pius V. As part of the prayers at the foot of the altar, which occurred after he came into the sanctuary and reverenced the altar, the priest made the sign of the cross. This was not done by the assembly, but privately by the priest.

As part of the reform of the Mass after the Second Vatican Council, the sign of the cross became an action of the whole assembly after the entrance hymn and the reverencing of the altar. (It is important to realize that this action is not the start of the celebration. The Mass begins with the first note of the entrance hymn.) At this moment in the celebration, the making of the sign of the cross acts as a reminder to us, of: our baptism, the cross which is the central event of Christian life, and the cross as a moment in which the Trinity is revealed. It calls us to embody the mystery in which we are now participating.

In all of this, then, the sign of cross makes clear to us that the action of this celebration is part of our baptismal calling. We can participate only because we are baptized, and because we are baptized we must participate. Baptism entered us directly into the central event of Christian life and calls us forth to live out that life. Participation in the Eucharist gives us the grace to live out our Christian life—to fully embody the salvation Christ won for us through his death and resurrection.

THE APOSTOLIC GREETING

The apostolic greeting “The Lord be with you” has ancient roots from Old Testament times, being used by Boaz in the Book of Ruth. Its Christian roots are tied to Paul’s letters, as he greeted the people with this salutation, or others that are now being used. There is clear evidence that by the fourth century, and probably earlier, the presider greeted the people in this way. Most likely his salutation was “The Lord be with you”, but by the fourth century the greeting “Peace be with you” was also being used. This later greeting quickly came to be reserved for use by the bishops, as it is today.

The apostolic greeting is intended to get the attention of the people by announcing the presence of the Lord to the assembled community. Since the Introductory Rites are concerned with forming the community, it is appropriate that the faithful be made aware of the Lord's presence, since it is the Holy Spirit who gathers the community and forms them into the body of Christ. In a sense, the greeting is a continuation of the sign of the cross in reminding the people of the presence of Christ in the midst of the assembly. This reminder further prepares the faithful to recognize the voice of the Lord in the Word about to be proclaimed.

The response “And also with you”, or the more direct translation of the Latin “And with your spirit”, speaks to the presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit in the presider. All four greetings used at this moment are taken from scripture, and all have the same intention of reminding us of Christ's presence. They further remind us that it is ultimately Christ who is the true presider of the celebration. It is Christ who is the head of the Church—his body—and it is in the celebration of the liturgy that the mystery of Christ and the true nature of the Church are revealed. We are reminded at the very beginning of the Mass that we, the people of God—formed by the Spirit in baptism—are united with Christ who is present with and in his people.