

(Re-) Learning the Mass

Part 8 – The Introductory Rites, Continued

After the Sign of the Cross, the Priest begins the **Greeting**. When we looked at sacramentality, we noted that language functions in a symbolic way- the words we choose set the stage. As we have entered a liturgical space, a ritual space, we don't use the usual words for greetings; we use different words which express that we have entered a different sort of place. "The Lord be with you," "And with your spirit." These words are said (or sung!) four times during the Mass: at the Greeting, at the proclamation of the Gospel, at the beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer, and before the final blessing. At the Greeting, the priest will often use an expanded form naming all the persons of the Trinity.

Sometimes, perhaps we see it as just a funny way of saying hello, instead of "Good morning, everybody", "Right back at you, Father!" But as with all the words of the liturgy, they signify something much more profound.

St. John Chrysostom, in a homily from the 4th century, said this about the greeting: "If the Holy Spirit were not in our Bishop when he gave the peace to all shortly before ascending to his holy sanctuary, you would not have replied to him all together, *And with your spirit*. This is why you reply with this expression not only when he ascends to the sanctuary, nor when he preaches to you, nor when he prays for you, but also when he stands at this holy altar, when he is about to offer this awesome sacrifice....reminding yourselves that by this reply that he who is here does nothing of his own power, nor are the offered gifts the work of human nature, but it is the grace of the Spirit present and hovering over all things which prepared that mystic sacrifice." (*Pentecost Homily*).

This is why in liturgical practice, only Priests (including Bishops) and Deacons use this greeting when leading prayer, they have received this particular gift of the Spirit in the sacrament of Holy Orders.

The greeting "signifies the presence of the Lord to the assembled community. By this greeting and the people's response, the mystery of the Church gathered together is made manifest." (*GIRM*, 50). Therefore, it isn't really surprising when we read what the Church says are the most important parts of the Mass to be sung; it isn't the Entrance or Communion chants- instead, "in choosing the parts actually to be sung, preference is to be given...especially to those which are to be sung by the Priest or the Deacon or a reader, with the people replying, or by the Priest and people together." (*GIRM*, 40). These dialogues express something about the nature of the assembly, the nature of the Church. The Lord is with us! We are the Body of Christ! Christ is in our midst in the person of the Priest, through the gift of the Spirit given to him at ordination! Christ speaks and the Church responds!

This also begins to get at the dual role of the Priest in the celebration. At times, he is the sign of Christ, the Head, to the community, the Body, speaking to us with the authority of Jesus. At other times, he is the representative of the entire community before God (which is still the role of Christ, offering himself to the Father).

The Greeting is also a way of recognizing God's assistance, symbolized by our need for the wider Church. We cannot do these things unless the Lord is with us; we cannot have Mass unless we have an ordained Priest, and the community does not ordain someone; rather, this must be done by the Bishop, who himself is ordained by the bishops of the surrounding Churches, going back to the Apostles.

Following the Greeting, the Priest may choose to say "a very few words" to introduce the day's celebration. Then begins the **Penitential Act**. There are different forms that this may take: the *Confiteor* ("I confess to almighty God"), a short dialogue between the Priest and the people (which is the least often used), or the *Kyrie eleison*, with invocations. In whichever form, we acknowledge our sinfulness and need for God's mercy.

