



My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We continue, today, looking at the introductory rites of the Mass. When the procession reaches the Sanctuary, they all greet the altar with a bow (unless the Tabernacle is in the Sanctuary, then it is greeted with a genuflection). It might look like we're bowing to the Crucifix in the Sanctuary, but that's not the case. Why bow to the altar? "The altar is the primary sign of the presence of Christ, who is the altar and the sacrifice, the giver of the gift" (*The Mass Explained* Msgr. James P. Moroney, p. 53). The priests and deacons then go up and venerate the altar with a kiss for the same reason. It is a sign of veneration, affection and greeting to Christ, who is both priest and victim at the Mass – the one who offers the sacrifice and the sacrifice offered.

The priest then goes to the chair. In a regular Mass, there are three points of focus – the chair, the ambo (where the readings are proclaimed), and the altar. From the chair, the priest gathers our prayers into one, lifting them to the Father. He begins the Mass with the sign of the Cross and saying, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" and all reply, "Amen." As I mentioned a couple weeks ago (in reference to the Holy Water), we consecrate this time to God, saying all that we do here is being done in the name of the God who is Trinity: I'm entering into this time of relationship with Him. Fr. Romano Guardini, wrote:

When we cross ourselves, let it be with a real Sign of the Cross. Instead of a small, cramped gesture that gives no notion of its meaning, let us make a large, unhurried sign, from forehead to breast, from shoulder to shoulder, consciously feeling how it includes the whole of us, our thoughts, our attitudes, our body and soul, every part of us all at once, how it consecrates and sanctifies us. (*Sacred Signs* 1927)

Now that we have placed ourselves in the hands of our God who is Trinity, the priest then greets us, "The Lord be with you" (or one of a couple of other possible greetings), and everyone replies, "And with your spirit." This is a biblical greeting, not one the priest is making up on his own. These greetings are found in Ruth (2:4), and is similar to the greeting to Mary at the Annunciation (Luke 1:28), as well as II Corinthians 13:13, Ephesians 1:2, and Galatians 1:3.

I remember when we were preparing for the change in the translation of the Mass (in 2011), there were people frustrated by this change from, "And also with you" to "And with your spirit." They argued that we were going from greeting the whole priest ("you") to only a part of him (his "spirit"). But here, the biblical history is important, because words mean something. The "spirit" that is referred to here is reminiscent of the spirit of Moses that the LORD took and sent upon the seventy elders who were going to help him in his ministry (Numbers 11:16-17). This is a prefiguring of what Jesus would do as He sent out seventy disciples ahead of him with his authority. This prefigures the Christian priesthood. When we say, "And with your spirit," it is not "Fr. Von's spirit" that we're greeting, but rather the spirit of priesthood passed on from Jesus to the seventy, and then from the bishops to the priests in ordination. This is the spirit that allows the priest to celebrate Mass.

Wow... we're only at the opening greeting! It is important for us to see how each detail of the Mass is not random, but has purpose and meaning. Hopefully as we continue through the Mass, it will help us to enter more deeply into the mystery of God's love for us.