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## 'And with your spirit'

By Msgr. Richard Antall \*

I was a boy when the Mass was translated into the vernacular, but I remember a joke my uncle told about the response in Latin to the greeting, “The Lord be with you.” He asked me whether I knew the phone number to heaven. I did not. “Et cum spiritu two oh,” he said. That was when phone numbers had letters and numbers together.

The joke comes to mind because of another change that will be noticeable in the new Missal. The response that was, “And also with you” shall become “And with your spirit.” At first glance, it does not seem to make much of a difference, but there are some interesting angles to the change. Other languages, after all, held on to the “and with your spirit” construction. That is the case, for instance, of Spanish.

Some have argued that the Church, by insisting on “your spirit,” only wants to recall the Latin construction of the original. Some think that it is only a more poetic or even archaic way of saying “with you.” But adding “and with your spirit” is not just saying, “the same to you.” What is involved is something not quite clear without some reference to Scripture. The mention of the spirit comes from the letters of St. Paul.

In both Galatians and Phillipians, Paul wrote, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brethren. Amen.” In the second Letter to Timothy, the apostle concludes with, “The Lord be with your spirit.” The last words of the letter to Philemon are “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.”

What did St. Paul mean? Some experts had said that mentioning the

spirit of the persons was a kind of Semitic throwback, expressing nothing more than a simple blessing-- that the Lord be with the persons to whom it was addressed. However Aramaic does not use such a construction and nor was it usual in Greek. The word “pneuma”—spirit, is not equivalent for a person. It is not a personal pronoun. So something specific is meant here. What can it be?

The French Benedictine Scripture scholar Bernard Botte examined this question in an article critical of the French translation of the Mass, which had also left out the part about “and with your spirit.” (The article has been published in English by the Antiphon Journal.) He pointed out that an early liturgy from ancient Syria had as a response to the sign of peace the words, “And with you and with your spirit.” Thus “you” and “your spirit” are indicated to be different things.

Botte quotes the famous French scholar, Ceslas Spicq, who said that for St. Paul, “The pneuma is the spiritual part of man most closely united to God, the immediate object of actions and of divine influences...it is notably the receptacle of the Spirit of God.” Thus the “your spirit” of the priest is that dimension of him open to the Holy Spirit.”

So the people are saying something about the priest’s relationship to God when they respond, “and with your spirit.” That is my conclusion, although I must confess I had never seen put that way so explicitly. A liturgist told me not to worry about what the phrase meant and be satisfied that St. Paul would like it that way. As a matter of fact, in the past I had just thought that the greeting was a proclamation, like saying, “The Lord is with you./ As he is with you.” But that is obviously not the case. If it were a declaration, “the Lord is with us here,” there would be no need for the distinction about the spirit. Nor would it be a prayer.

What then does it mean for the people to say, “And with your spirit”? For one thing, it appears to make a distinction between the roles of priest and people. There is thus a recognition not just of office but of the special character of the minister. The priest has a special spirit, a dimension of his person that is open to God and that openness is somehow in play in the liturgy.

St. Paul says to St. Timothy, “I remind you to stir into flame the gift of God that you have through the imposition of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather of power and love and self-control” (2 Tim. 1:7). There was a book published years ago to help priests in their liturgical ministry called “Strong, loving and wise,” based on this greeting of St. Paul to his disciple.

Can it be that the congregation is saying to the celebrant, “Remember who you are, the Spirit given to you by God?” A German theologian has recently criticized the many innovations and irresponsible “creativity” of some liturgies. His book is called, “How to go to Mass and not lose your faith.” The prayer of the people, “and with your spirit,” is a reminder that the Mass does not belong to the priest but to the whole Church. It has to do with the priestly character.

These are my own reflections, but the distinction recalls so many of the old prayers of the priest before offering Mass. There are prayers attributed to Saint Ambrose for the priest for every day of the week. All of them insist on the misery of man and the glory of God. The priest asserts his unworthiness as he prays to offer the sacrifice with purity of heart for the good of all.

Others, perhaps more commonly known, address the Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph. There is a beautiful prayer to Mary that says, “You stood by your Son as he hung dying on the cross. Stand also by me, a poor sinner, and by all the priests who are offering Mass today

here and throughout the entire Church. Help us to offer a perfect and acceptable sacrifice in the sight of the holy and undivided Trinity, our Most High God. Amen.”

In the old Mass, the role of the priest was very clearly different from that of the people. For instance, in the Confiteor (“I confess to almighty God”), we didn’t say, “and you my brothers and sister,” but only said, “and to you, Father.” The familial aspect was a little too compressed when we mentioned only “Father” and “brothers and sisters” is a better expression.

But we cannot forget the special sacrament of priestly ordination. And I do not mean just the lay people. The priest must remember his particular vocation and the power, love and self-control that should be manifest in his “spirit”uality. The priestly character is part of the mystery of the Eucharist. Without priests, there would be no Eucharist. That mystery of the priest’s vocation seems to be evoked by the new response, “and with your spirit.” It is a detail, but very important.

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