

Canon Alan Griffiths

Eight Short Homilies



The Lord be with you — And with your spirit (1)

Probably the first thing people will notice about the new translation of the Mass is that when the priest begins the Mass and says *The Lord be with you* (or its equivalent) there will be a new response. Instead of saying *And also with you*, the people's response will be: *And with your spirit*. Why this change?

It's easy to think that this exchange is just a formal way for priest and people to say "Hello" to each other. But there is much more to it than that. Here are three things to remember about those words.

First and most important, they are intended as a prayer as much as a greeting. They are a sort of invocation, meaning in effect "May the Lord be with you..." In the Liturgy, Christ the risen Lord is present with his people, as he promised (Matthew 28:20). This presence of Christ is fundamental to the Sacred Liturgy. That's what these words are about.

Second, these or similar words are used five times at Mass. If they just meant "Hello, everyone," they would not need to be repeated like this. They come at the beginning of Mass, before the Gospel, at the beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer, at the sign of peace and lastly, before the dismissal at the end of Mass.

These are special moments in the Liturgy. At the beginning, people have gathered, the procession with the Book of the Gospels and the Celebrant, has entered. The Church is ready. The words set the seal on our coming together.

The Gospel is the climax of the Liturgy of the Word, the Eucharistic Prayer is the centre and high point of the whole Mass; the Peace is the preliminary to Communion. The dismissal represents the point where what we have celebrated has to find expression in our everyday lives. All these key moments are marked as such by *The Lord be with you* or similar words.

Third, *The Lord be with you* is said only by ordained people, bishops, priests, deacons. Bishops say: *Peace be with you*. They speak directly the words of the risen Jesus. Priests and deacons do so indirectly. These words are Christ's greeting through his minister.

So it is important that we think of *The Lord be with you/And with your spirit* as more than just exchanging a "hello" but a real prayer of invocation.

The Lord be with you — And with your spirit (2)



In the previous mini-homily I asked you to think that these words are more than just a “hello” greeting. They are a prayer. They are used at key moments in the Mass, by those whose ministry is to serve and lead the people of God.

But what do they mean? What is being prayed for?

When the Archangel Gabriel comes to the Blessed Virgin Mary, he says to her *Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you*. This too is more than “hello.” *The Lord is with you* states as a fact what *The Lord be with you* asks for. The Angel is telling Mary what her vocation is to be, that God has chosen her to be the bearer of his incarnate Son. Truly, literally, the Lord is with her.

So we may understand *The Lord be with you* as meaning that the speaker is doing two things. He is praying that the Lord will be with his people. In doing this, he is naming their vocation as Christ’s faithful, the People of God.

Only bishops, priests and deacons use these words. This is another key to what they mean. Ordained ministers have received spiritual gifts given in ordination, which they must use to serve their people. Ordination is about service. The people’s response *And with your spirit* is referring specifically to that.

If *The Lord be with you* is addressed “in general” to the whole assembly identifying them as “The Lord’s own” then the reply *And with your spirit* is addressed personally, specifically, to the minister, as a prayer for him in the spiritual work of service, particularly that which he is about to do: gather the Assembly, proclaim the Gospel, offer the sacrifice of Christ, dismiss for service.

If *The Lord be with you* announces the presence of Christ to his assembly as a whole, then with its reply *And with your spirit*, the congregation affirms the special, spiritual, presence of Christ in his minister, the spiritual gifts of Christ to the deacon, priest or bishop.

So it is as if the priest is saying “May you, people, be truly what you are, the people to whom the Lord is present” and the people answering “May you, our priest, exercise now, at this moment, in this Mass, the spiritual gifts you have received in the service of Christ’s faithful people.”

The Lord be with you — And with your spirit (3)



In the previous mini-homily I tried to outline what is meant when the bishop, priest or deacon says to the people *The Lord be with you* and what their reply *And with your spirit* means. However, the changed words: *And with your spirit*, are a big change. What's "spirit"? Doesn't it go against our nature as embodied beings?

That's not the intention. We also speak of our "heart." At the beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer the priest calls on us to *Lift up your hearts*. Above all, the word "spirit" reflects biblical language, and particularly that of Saint Paul.

Like "heart" and "soul," the term "spirit" is actually trying to get at what it means to be human. St. Paul writes of a person's "spirit" (1Cor.2:10-16). The human "spirit" is given life by Christ (Rom.8:10). Our "spirit" represents what is essential to us; "spirit" gives us humans our particular character as "spiritual" beings; "spirit" makes us what we are. It is the "God bit" that makes the whole of us "godly," as it were.

To talk about our "spirit" is to refer to our core identity as beings created, brought to life by the breath of God. God *formed Adam* from the earth and *breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living being* (cf. Gen.2:7). The "breath of life" is the Spirit of God. It brings our "spirit" into being. Our "spirit" is nothing less than ourselves at our most truthful, most whole, before God the Creator. We are "spirit." We speak of someone's "spirit" as the most important, dynamic or enduring part of them. To say someone's "got spirit" is to say that they have vitality and life.

For a bishop, priest or deacon their "spirit," is the identity which the Holy Spirit bestows upon them in Ordination and which they exercise in the Liturgy.

Being a bishop, priest or deacon is more than something a man does. It is a way of being, in particular, a way of service to the Church. The "spirit" of the ordained person is one of sacrifice and service.

So when we say *And with your spirit* we are asking that the ordained person's ministry: gathering the Assembly, proclaiming the Gospel, offering the Eucharistic Sacrifice, sending forth for service, may be strengthened and affirmed by the same Lord who gave it and who never goes back on his gifts.

The Word of the Lord

At the end of the readings and the Gospel at Mass, we are used to hearing *This is the Word of the Lord; This is the Gospel of the Lord*. In the new translation, the words “This is” are being left out. So we shall have *The Word of the Lord* and *The Gospel of the Lord*. Why has this been done?



Firstly, it is because we have to translate the Latin faithfully. The Latin does not have any “This is ..” But there is more important reason for the change.

If the reader/deacon/priest were to lift up the Lectionary/Gospel Book at the end of a reading and say: “This is the Word/Gospel of the Lord,” the proper response of the congregation would be: “No it isn’t!” The point is that God’s Word is alive and active, spoken, proclaimed, and incarnate in Jesus the Word made flesh. It is not print, pages or book. For us, the Word is not something, but someone, the person of Jesus Christ.

At the end of a reading or of the Gospel, what is happening is a proclamation, the announcement of an event. It is not a teaching moment, or conveying a piece of information. If we leave out the words “This is ..” and say *The word of the Lord*, it makes the reader’s words into more of an announcement than a piece of teaching. There is a big difference between announcing and teaching.

If you are on the station and someone tells you that “This is the time of the train” - that is teaching you something about the train. The train itself does not have to be there. But if they want to show you that the train is actually coming into the station and that you should be getting ready to board, they are more likely to announce: “Here it is!”

“The word of the Lord” is dramatic rather than didactic. It is not teaching about something – “this is ..” but an announcement of someone being present.

The words at the end of the readings are not intended to teach, they are the “Here it is!” or “Here he is!” moments. They are announcing a great event. They ask us to be appreciative of what is happening. God has spoken. Christ is present. Our “appreciation” is expressed in an acclamation: *Thanks be to God*, or the equivalent. The Incarnate Son is truly present in the speaking of God’s Word. This is what is announced by the speaker, and prolonged with acclamation by the congregation in *Thanks be to God*.

Lift up your hearts

“Thought for the Day” on Radio 4 used to be called “Lift up your hearts.” Its intention was to provide “uplift” at the beginning of the day. But we know these words as the beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer. While it is natural to think of them as an invitation to be joyful, there is more to them than this.



Saint Paul tells his converts to let their hearts, or thoughts, be with the risen Christ (Col.2:2). In the First Eucharistic Prayer we ask that God’s Angel carry the sacrifice to the altar in heaven. The Vatican Council taught that to celebrate Mass is to enter the age to come (SC.). The Liturgy is not just something we do here on earth. We believe that Christ, the real Priest of the Mass, opens the doors of heaven for us. That is where our “hearts” should be.

The Latin words “Sursum corda” do indeed mean “lift up.” But their fuller meaning is better understood in the light of Saint Paul’s words. In fact, though the new translation retains the traditional wording, a better translation would have been “Let your hearts be on high.” A version proposed for Anglicans in the 1970’s paraphrased this as “Lift up your hearts to Christ on high.” Though this was not a straight translation, it succeeded in conveying something of the deeper sense of these words, as well as having a built in rhythm that somehow “did” what the words themselves implied.

In the Liturgy we often use words describing elements of human being to describe the whole. This is certainly true of “and with your spirit” but we also speak here of “your hearts.” Spirit, soul, heart, mind: in different ways all these words point to the “spiritual” focus of being human and also to the “spiritual” focus of the sacred Liturgy.

The Eucharistic Prayer, which begins with the words “Lift up your hearts” is described in the General Instruction on the Missal as the centre and culmination of the Mass. This is because it articulates the offering of Christ’s sacrifice. In the symbolic world into which the Liturgy is drawing us, this represents an “upward” movement from earth to heaven.

The prayers of the Missal often draw out the contrast between the earthly liturgy celebrated by the Church and the heavenly reality which it expresses and enacts. So to begin this most sacred moment of the Mass by looking upward to heaven, to the risen Christ, is a very natural thing to do.

The Mystery of Faith

After the words of consecration, when the bread and wine become the true Body and Blood of Christ, the priest says *Let us proclaim the mystery of faith*. This sounds like an invitation, and so the congregation replies with one of the acclamations such as *Christ has died ...* In the new translation, the priest will simply say *The mystery of faith*. Why?



In the old Latin Mass, the words *Mysterium fidei* – the mystery of faith were part of the words of consecration. They referred not to an idea or message but to the personal presence of Christ in the Sacrament. This meaning has not changed, even though in the Missal nowadays the priest says those words after the consecration of the chalice. It is still Christ himself who is being named here. Christ is *the mystery of faith*.

The idea goes back to Saint Paul. In his first letter to Timothy (1 Tim.3:16sq.), he writes: *Without any doubt the mystery of our religion is great: He was revealed in the flesh...* In this little hymn, Saint Paul means Christ. Christ is *the mystery of our religion*. Christ is the mystery of faith.

So when the priest says *the mystery of faith* he is not inviting the congregation to do something. He is acclaiming someone, the real and active presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament, the Christ who died and was buried and rose and ascended into glory and who lives for ever to intercede for us.

That is why the Missal specifically says that the congregation continues the acclamation. They are not replying to an invitation but continuing what the priest has begun. And their words are addressed to Christ: *we proclaim your Death, O Lord...* The acclamation we say most often at present: *Christ has died...* is more like a slogan, and is, in fact, addressed to no one.

It's the same thing as with *The word of the Lord, The Gospel of the Lord*; and later on in the Mass: *Behold the Lamb of God*. We are not thinking something or being taught something at these sacred moments in the Mass. We are being invited to acclaim, or welcome the Person, the presence of the Incarnate Word, our Lord Jesus Christ himself, who comes in word and in sacrament to strengthen us and make us holy.

Behold the Lamb of God

We are used to hearing the priest say *This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Happy are those who are called to his supper.* In the new translation of the Missal it will be different. The priest will say: *Behold the Lamb of God. Behold him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb.* What is behind this change?



These words are all words of Scripture. First comes John 1:29 where John the Baptist identifies Christ: *Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.* Then comes Apocalypse 19:9, where the Angel speaks to John about the Martyrs, who have shed their blood for Christ. Their glorious destiny is a wedding, *the Marriage of the Lamb has come and his Bride has made herself ready... Blessed are those who are invited to the Marriage supper of the Lamb!*

When the Missal was being translated, the translators were asked to keep as close as possible to the sense and shape of the Latin text, and especially to render Scriptural imagery accurately. This is what has been done here.

These words are full of meaning about what Holy Communion is. It is the real, true and substantial presence of Christ, the Lamb sacrificed for the life of the world, the Lamb victorious in the life of heaven. It is quite correct to say “This is the Lamb ..” However, *Behold, the Lamb of God* catches the Scriptural tone better. It is not teaching about something – “this is ..” but “behold!” - an announcement of someone being present. It is an invitation to receive, adore and worship Christ.

Holy Communion looks to the future, to the kingdom of heaven. In Holy Communion we anticipate the day when Christ will make all things new and call his faithful to his eternal supper, the wedding feast of the Lamb. The Latin says: *Blessed are those...* The current version “Happy ..” doesn’t catch the spirit of the Scriptural text. For us, “happy” does not mean “Favoured by God.” It is normally taken to signify contentment. In Holy Communion we are talking about eternal life.

In conveying the Scriptural basis of this invitation to Communion, the new translation also raises the tone of the words, makes them more solemn, more joyful and better able to look forward to what we all hope for, a place at Christ’s eternal wedding banquet.

Lord, I am not worthy

After the grandeur of the invitation to Holy Communion, the people's response is more intimate and personal.

As the priest invites us to receive Holy Communion, we say *Lord I am not worthy to receive you...* The new translation will change this to: *Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.*

One of the aims of the new translation of the Mass is to render more truly the Latin original. Another is that where words from Scripture are being used, they must be accurately translated: "let the scripture speak" is the idea. These words are entirely, with one single exception, from the Gospels.

In Matthew 8:5-13, a Roman Centurion begs Jesus to heal his servant. When Jesus says he will come to the Centurion's house, the man says that just his word will be enough. Here are his words: *Lord I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word and my servant will be healed.*

The response to the invitation to Communion changes only one word of the Centurion's speech, my servant becomes my soul will be healed.

The Invitation: *Behold the Lamb of God...* is very grand and visionary. It looks back to the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world and looks forward to the eternal supper of the victorious Lamb in heaven. The response is more intimate and personal: *my roof... my soul.* The response asks us to express our wonder and surprise that Christ invites us so graciously. Though we are sinners, he only has to say the word.

We will be saying *my soul will be healed* instead of *I shall be healed*. Why?

It is a bit like *And with your spirit*. It is more precise. We refer to the whole of us by referring to the part of us that is given by God's breath "my soul" as he brings us to life. Many people think of the soul being somehow "in" the body. In fact, it is the other way round. The soul gives form to the body. Perhaps we should say that the body is "within" the soul. And the healing of our soul means the healing of our whole being.

