

On-line Class on the Mass #4

The Parts of the Mass - Part 1

1. The Sign of the Cross

St. Paul instructed that we should pray without ceasing. The entirety of the Mass is a continuous prayer to God. We begin with the sign of the cross, which is far more than just an action to begin the Mass. The sign of the cross is itself a very powerful prayer. It is a sacred prayer dating back to the very beginning of Christianity, which was understood to call upon God to grant a Christian divine power and protection. In making this sign, we invoke God's presence and invite him to bless us, assist us, and guard us from all harm. It's no wonder then why early Christians made the sign of the cross regularly, invoking God's power in every aspect of their lives.

Tertullian (160-225 AD) described the common practice of Christians marking themselves with the sign of the cross by saying:

“In all our travels and movements, in all our coming in and going out, in putting on our shoes, at the bath, at the table, in lighting our candles, in laying down, in sitting down, whatever employment occupies us, we mark our foreheads with the sign of the cross.” (Tertullian, De corona, #30)

Further on in Christian history, other Church fathers saw the sign of the cross as a powerful aid in fighting temptation, protection from evil, and even bringing terror to demons. Saint John Chrysostom (347-407 AD) exhorted his people to turn constantly to the power of Christ found in the sign of the cross:

“Never leave your house without making the sign of the cross. It will be to you a staff, a weapon, an impregnable fortress. Neither man nor demon will dare to attack you, seeing you covered with such powerful armor. Let this sign teach you that you are a soldier, ready to combat against the demons, and ready to fight for the crown of justice. Are you ignorant of what the cross has done? It has vanquished death, destroyed sin, emptied hell, dethroned Satan, and restored the universe. Would you then doubt its power?” (St. John Chrysostom, Instruction to Catechumens #2 and #5)

All this truly begs the question, what did these early Christians see that we so often miss? Why did they so eagerly make the sign of the cross in every aspect of their daily lives, while we so often only perform it out of meaningless routine? Why did

early Christians see it as a powerful prayer to God for favor and protection, while so often we take it for granted today?

2. The Greeting: “The Lord Be with You”

Biblically speaking, “The Lord be with you” is no ordinary greeting. This isn’t some friendly way to begin an exchange or conversation, as if the priest is saying “good morning,” and the people are responding, “Good morning to you also, Father.” Modern Catholics might easily overlook what they may view as an unimportant part of the Mass, however if we understood the Scriptural background of these words, we might approach the Mass with far more seriousness.

To begin with, these words convey the reality of the presence of Christ within the congregation of believers assembled in his name, living out the words of Christ in Matthew 18:20, “When two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst.” This liturgical greeting also expresses the profound reality of God’s life dwelling within our souls by virtue of our baptism. With these words, the priest is praying that the divine life we received may continue to grow within us.

This greeting, however, goes far beyond that. It takes us back to all the heroes in the Bible that were called by God to fulfill a difficult mission. These are the men and women of the bible that were forced to leave their comfortable lives and routines, and instead depend on God like they never had before. Their divine missions were not for themselves, but rather they were called to shape the very history of God’s people. And the way they answered their call played a huge roll in God’s plan of salvation. We think of people like Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, King David, Jeremiah, and the Blessed Virgin Mary. On several occasions when they receive their calling, either God or his angels reassure them with the message, “The Lord is with you.”

The response, “And with your spirit,” acknowledges that the people of God believe that the Holy Spirit uniquely works in and through the priest during the Mass by virtue of his ordination. The author Jeremy Driscoll, in his book “What Happens at Mass”, explains “The people are addressing the ‘spirit’ of the priest; that is, that deepest interior part of his being where he has been ordained precisely to lead the people in this sacred action. They are saying in effect, ‘Be the priest for us now’, aware that there is only one priest, Christ Himself, and that this one who represents him now must be finely tuned to perform his sacred duties well.” (Jeremy Driscoll, What Happens at Mass, page 25)

For Reflection:

“I ask all Christians to pray earnestly for us priests that we learn to perform the holy sacrifice in a holy way. I ask you to show a deep love for the Holy Mass. In this way you will encourage us priests to celebrate it respectfully, with divine and human dignity: to keep clean the vestments and other things used for worship, to act devoutly, to avoid rushing.”

Saint Josemaria Escriva, “Christ is Passing By”