

Understanding the Mass: The Sign of the Cross, Greeting, and Introduction

Why do we make the sign of the cross at Mass after the procession, entrance chant, and the veneration of the Altar? In his book “What Happens at Mass,” Fr. Jeremy Driscoll O.S.B, writes, “*A solemn and more meaningful beginning cannot be imagined.*”¹ In thinking of the actual sign of the cross itself Fr. Driscoll

explains, that, “*the sign expresses the central event of our Christian faith. We trace it over our own bodies as a*

way of indicating that that event shall make its force felt on our bodies. The body on the Cross touches my body and shapes it for what is about to happen.”² Using the words “*In the name of the Father,*



and of the Son, and of

the Holy Spirit reveal the mystery of the Holy Trinity in the Death of Jesus on the Cross...at the very beginning of the Mass summarizes all that is about to happen.”³ Fr. Driscoll

points out the great commission from Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel quoting Jesus saying “*Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age*” (Matthew 28:16-20). Furthermore, Fr. Driscoll explains some of the words in the

periscope. He writes

‘In the name’ could be more accurately put as ‘into the name.’ To baptize literally means ‘to dunk or plunge.’ Thus, the Christian is plunged into the name of God in Baptism. It is a sacrament, a concrete something. By means of it we are plunged into the very life of God, and this life is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—a Father who

¹ What Happens at Mass, Driscoll, Pg. 20

² Ibid Pg. 20

³ Ibid Pg. 21

begets a Son, a Son who yields utterly to the Father, and a Spirit from whom their love proceeds. Into this exchange every Christian is plunged at Baptism. There is nothing abstract about this. For Baptism is also the sacramental plunge into the Death and Resurrection of Christ... [Ultimately], we are reminding ourselves of our Baptism and choosing it again in our lives. ⁴

Hence, *“to place this sign and the holy name of God at the beginning of Mass is the only way to begin. The only door through which to enter at Baptism”* which ultimately is what is happening eternal life; *“that Resurrection of name Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”* Any other way to start the Mass *“will be banal (trivial) by comparison.”*⁵



In his book, *“A Biblical Walk through the Mass: Understanding What We Do and Say in the Liturgy,”* Edward Sri writes, *“The sign of the cross is not simply a way to begin praying. It is itself a powerful prayer that is meant to pour out tremendous blessings on our lives.”* Sri adds,

*Whenever we make the sign of the cross—whether at Mass or in our private devotion—we enter a sacred tradition that goes back to the early centuries of Christianity, when this ritual was understood to be a source of divine power and protection. In making the sign, we invoke God’s presence and invite him to bless us, assist us, and guard us from all harm.*⁶

True disciples of Jesus understand the meaning and power of the sign of the cross and make it many times during a given day.

⁴ Ibid Pg. 22

⁵ Ibid Pg. 22

⁶ A Biblical Walk through the Mass: Understanding What We Do and Say in the Liturgy Pg. 17

In his book “The Mystery of Faith: A Study of the Structural Elements of the Order of the Mass,” Lawrence J. Johnson summarizes the sign of the cross this way. He writes, “The sign of the cross, a traditional prelude to prayer, is a form of self-blessing with strong Baptismal overtones: in the rite of Christian Initiation a person is signed with the cross, for it is from the victorious Cross of Christ that salvation comes to us.”⁷ The people respond “Amen,” which means I believe, or as Fr. Driscoll puts it, “I agree to it. I ratify it.”⁸

Historically, Johnson adds, the “signing with the cross was a gesture practiced by Christians as early as the second century. By the late fourth century this action was incorporated at many points within the celebration of the sacraments.” Later on “a signing at the beginning of the Mass appeared in the Roman Liturgy only with the medieval introduction at the foot of the altar, i.e., private prayers originally said by the Priest on the way to the sanctuary.”⁹ A greeting, however, Johnson explains, by the “presiding minister, on the other hand, is among the most ancient elements of the introductory rites.”¹⁰ The sign of the cross is a simple way to pass on the Christian faith.

The Greeting

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal summarizes the action thus far. It reads,

When the Entrance Chant is concluded, the Priest stands at the chair and, together with the whole gathering, signs himself with the Sign of the Cross. Then by means of the Greeting he 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

⁷ The Mystery of Faith: A Study of the Structural Elements of the Order of the Mass Pg. 16

⁸ What Happens at Mass, Driscoll, Pg. 22

⁹ The Mystery of Faith: A Study of the Structural Elements of the Order of the Mass Pg. 15

¹⁰ Ibid Pg. 15

manifest. After the greeting of the people, the Priest, or the Deacon, or a lay minister may very briefly introduce the faithful to the Mass of the day. ¹¹

The 3rd Edition of the Roman Missal allows three options of greetings for priests, and one for the bishop, within the introductory rites. It reads,

Priests:

1. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.
2. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
3. The Lord be with you.

Bishop:

1. Peace be with you.

Lawrence Johnson comments on the greetings. He writes, “The first, ‘The

grace of our Lord
of St. Paul’s Second
The second option,
formula often used



Jesus Christ’...is the conclusion
Letter to the Corinthians (13:13).
‘Grace to you and peace’...is a
by St. Paul to begin his letters,

e.g. Galatians 1:3...The third option, ‘the Lord be with you’...appears in Ruth 2:4. They are often found as a simple statement of God’s presence to those being addressed.” ¹² Moreover, Edward Sri confirms, “this liturgical greeting [The Lord be with you] expresses the profound reality of God’s life dwelling within our souls by virtue of our Baptism.”¹³ Furthermore, Sri backs up this statement by listing several scriptures where God affirms his presence with his people. For example, “for the Lord God is with you wherever you go (Joshua 1:9), the angel greeted Gideon with the words, ‘the Lord is with you’ (Judges

¹¹ GIRM Par. 50

¹² The Mystery of Faith: A Study of the Structural Elements of the Order of the Mass Pg. 15

¹³ A Biblical Walk through the Mass: Understanding What We Do and Say in the Liturgy Pg. 24

6:12), [and] the assurance of [God's] presence with Moses in this challenging mission [to free God's people from the slavery in Egypt] 'I will be with you, God says'" (Exodus 3:12-4:12).¹⁴

The People respond: "and with your spirit." Fr. Driscoll, clarifying that this is not simply "a good morning, how are you doing" exchange writes,

*This exchange uniquely belonging to the Christian community and particular to this moment in the community's life when it begins to celebrate the source and summit of its life. It is an exchange that immediately acknowledges the roles that will be played in this ritual action. The priest greets the people not as an individual, some friendly person, whom they may or may not know especially well. He greets them in his sacramental role of representing Christ at the head of his body as Christ who will lead his body in prayer. And he speaks to the people not merely as one may speak to a group whom he may or may not know especially well. He recognizes in them the assembly that God has called together. He sees them as an assembly of baptized people who are poised for the great sacrifice and act of worship to which their Baptism has admitted them.*¹⁵

The response of the people has significant theological meaning for the priest and the assembly. When the people respond "and with your spirit" the people "are addressing the 'spirit' of the priest; that is, the deepest interior part of his being where he has been ordained precisely to lead his 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."¹⁶

Ultimately, the exchange acknowledges who we are on a most profound level, and reassures us that God is with us in the innermost depths of our beings.

¹⁴ Ibid Pages 25-26

¹⁵ What Happens at Mass, Driscoll, Pg. 23

¹⁶ Ibid Pg. 24

Introduction

The introduction, “may briefly introduce the faithful to the Mass of the day.”¹⁷ Basically, “the introduction, always very brief, should not be a duplication of the Greeting, much less a mini-homily. It focuses upon the special character of the celebration or those who are present.”¹⁸ For example, the presider may briefly introduce concelebrating priests, may comment on the saint of the day, describe the feast or solemnity, or comment on the scripture passages.

¹⁷ Roman Missal Pg. 366

¹⁸ The Mystery of Faith: A Study of the Structural Elements of the Order of the Mass Pg. 16

Photo Sources:

Pope Francis making the sign of the cross pg. 1

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Pope John Paul II Baptizing Pg. 2

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Pope Benedict greeting the faithful Pg. 4

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