

1. Exchange: "The Lord be with you. And with your spirit."

Was this change really necessary?

A more accurate translation from the Latin was called for, since English was virtually alone in not rendering it literally. But more than mere verbal accuracy is at stake here.

The greeting is deeply embedded in the biblical tradition, especially in Saint Paul's letters, but more familiarly in the annunciation scene when the angel greets Mary with the same words: "The Lord be with you." The greeting-and-response is found, moreover, in the major liturgies of the ancient world, whether of Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome, Milan or Alexandria, as well as in the earliest liturgical documents.

We find this exchange at four strategic places: first, at the opening of the liturgy (with some variants), then at the gospel, next at the beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer, and finally at the dismissal. According to liturgical tradition and church law, moreover, the greeting with the response "and with your spirit" is reserved for ordained ministers. This is a pointer to the difference between the priest's greeting and the people's response. It is clearly more than a simple greeting.

The turn of phrase, "with your spirit," is certainly a strange one. It was unusual in the early centuries too, being used only by Christians. It would have sounded as foreign to Greek and Latin speakers as to us.

What does the term "spirit" mean? It is one of three words – body, soul and spirit – Saint Paul uses in talking about human beings. None of these refers to parts of the person. For a Jew like Paul, even when writing in Greek, these terms designate *the whole person under a certain aspect*.

By *body* is meant the person in his/her relatedness to the world. *Soul* refers to the vital force, especially the inwardness of the person, while *spirit* points to the person in his/her openness to the divine, to God's Spirit.

The exchange of greetings, then, is a way of marking, at certain strategic moments in the rite, that we are here in "sacred space." We are entering a dimension of existence accessed only on the level of spirit. It is *the Lord's* supper; the risen Christ is its principal actor. What we do here, we do "in the Lord." Reminding each other – priest and people – of this helps us to maintain our awareness that here faith is crucial.

The term "spirit" also helps us to see why the people's response is not symmetrical with the priest's greeting. It is a way of recalling to him that his role is a representative or *sacramental* one. Presiding at the liturgy, he acts in the place of Christ, thanks to a *spiritual gift* conferred on him for the sake of the community. So our wish is that he be conscious of acting in function of that gift, being for us an instrument of the Lord who is now associating us with his supreme act of worship and nourishing us on our journey of faith.