

# “The Lord who is the Spirit be with you”—“And may the Spirit be also with you”: Some Pre-Pentecost Ponderings

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*AIM* (Summer 2001), 22–27

There is a simple greeting we pray at liturgy the meaning of which is almost totally forgotten: “The Lord be with you”—“And also with you.”

Many gray-or-scant-haired cradle-Catholics remember that the greeting in Latin was “*Dominus vobiscum*”—“*Et cum spiritu tuo*.” So only older Catholics get the point of the old joke about the altar boy named Dominic who took up the collection again and again, all during Mass, because he thought the priest was ordering him, “Dominic, go frisk ‘em.”

“The Lord be with you”—“And also with you” is more than a nice greeting. Cardinal Yves Congar, O.P., tells us that this greeting is actually a prayer which means “The Lord who is the Spirit be with you, the baptized and confirmed, as you pray”—“And may the Spirit be also with you as you lead us in prayer.” This prayer was considered so sacred that it was used only once during the Mass, at the beginning of the eucharistic prayer, when the presider asked the assembly to pray that he be inspired to improvise well the Eucharistic Prayer (it was not written down in this era). After much overuse at Mass (hence the altar boy Dominic joke), it has been reserved for the beginning of Mass, the beginning of the gospel, at the beginning of the eucharistic prayer, before the sign of peace, and the dismissal rite.

Why it is so sacred is because it is a prayer to the Holy Spirit poised, so to speak, between the presider and the assembly for the rekindling of the gift given all in baptism/confirmation and the gift given the presider in ordination in order that what was about to be done *could* be done and could be *fruitful*. This awareness recalls the warning Pope St. Gregory the Great gave many times: The ministers of the Church cannot legitimately consecrate the Eucharist without a People who offer it with them. And ministers and people can accomplish nothing without the Trinity, especially the Holy Spirit, not to mention the assistance of all the angels and saints.

So our inadequate translation of the reply, “*Et cum spiritu tuo*” as “And also with you” and the deterioration of the invitation into forms like “The Lord is with you” or worse are symptoms of a larger lack of recognition of the work of the Holy Spirit in the liturgy and the sacraments.

To remedy this situation, one need not go as far as consulting the theologians listed in the “for further reading” section at the end of this article. All of us—including [this is a true story] the bishop who recently boasted, from the pulpit, that in a few minutes “*I am going to change the bread and wine into the body [sic] of Jesus*”—have only to study the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [hereafter “the Catechism”]. This would be a good preparation for the solemnity of Pentecost.

The four-part Catechism is full of teaching about the Holy Spirit; indeed, the Holy Spirit is the key to the Catechism. Part One unpacks the meaning of the Apostles’ Creed. So ¶683–¶741 tells us what we mean when we say, “I believe in the Holy Spirit.” In fact, the last five paragraphs (¶737–¶741) show that the work of the Holy Spirit is the organizing principle of the entire Catechism. Just as the Spirit had four roles in the life of Mary, so the Spirit has four roles in the Church and four roles in the liturgy. The

Spirit *prepared* Mary by his grace (¶722), *fulfills* the plan of the Father’s loving goodness (¶723) and *manifests* the Son of the Father in Mary (¶724), and, through Mary, begins to bring us *into communion* with Christ (¶725)—my italics.

The Spirit *prepares* men and goes out to them with his grace, in order to draw them to Christ. The Spirit *manifests* the risen Lord to them, recalls his word to them and opens their minds to the understanding of his Death and Resurrection. He *makes present* the mystery of Christ, supremely in the Eucharist, in order to reconcile them, to *bring them into communion* with God, that they may “bear much fruit.” (¶737)

Part Two of the Catechism is devoted to the liturgy, especially the sacraments. There the Holy Spirit is called “artisan of ‘God’s masterpieces,’ the sacraments of the New Covenant.” (¶1091) This paragraph evokes the Eastern Christian idea of *synergy* (joint effort): “the liturgy [is] the common work of the Holy Spirit and the Church.”

This part of the Catechism emphasizes that the Holy Spirit has four chief roles in every sacrament, corresponding to the four parts of every sacrament: The Spirit [1—Gathering] “*prepares* the Church to encounter her Lord”; [2—Liturgy of the Audible Word] “*recalls and makes Christ manifest* to the faith of the assembly”; [3—Liturgy of Visible Word] “. . . *makes* the mystery of Christ *present* here and now”; and [4—Sending] “. . . *unites* the Church to the life and mission of Christ.” (¶1092—my italics—each role is described at loving length in the seventeen paragraphs between ¶1093 and ¶1109).

Notice I said “*every* sacrament.” Many of us know the two solemn prayers for and gestures used in the work of the Holy Spirit (called “epiclesis,” the “calling down upon”) in the Mass—more about them later.

But epicleses (plural) are part of every sacrament and of every sacramental having to do with the consecration of people (reception into full communion, religious vows, acolytes, lectors, abbots and abbesses) and churches and altars. I won’t cite them all of them but here are the most important.

(Note: The Spirit is invoked in the liturgy’s invitations to the “silent prayer of all” and is often spoken of indirectly as the Blessing, the Seal, or the Gift.)

in baptism, the blessing of the water, the profession of faith, the actual baptism, the first use of chrism

in confirmation, the profession of faith, the laying on of hands, the epiclesis by the bishop (which includes the silent prayer of all for the sending of the Spirit), the actual confirmation throughout the eucharist (which is the context for the most solemn celebration of all other sacraments and sacramentals, except penance)

in penance and reconciliation, in the absolution with the gesture of laying on of hands

in the anointing of the sick, in the epiclesis over the oil and in the gesture of laying on of hands

in the ordination of bishops, priests, and deacons, in the invocation of the Spirit and the silent prayer of all, in the prayer of consecration with the gesture of laying on of hands

in marriage, in the prayer for the sealing and strengthening of love and in the gesture of laying on of hands (in Byzantine marriages, in the crowning of the bride and groom)

Hence, there is a bold claim in the third word of ¶1127 of the Catechism: “The Father *always* hears the prayer of his Son’s Church which, in the epiclesis of each sacrament, expresses her faith in the power of the Spirit” [my emphasis].

How can the Church makes this claim —

*always?* Because of its confidence in the way St. Luke remembers Jesus' teaching on prayer!

If you look at the Sermon on the Mount in St. Matthew's gospel, Jesus says, "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:9–11, NRSV). But if you look at the Sermon on the Plain in St. Luke's gospel, Jesus says, "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the *Holy Spirit* to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:11:13, NRSV). In other words, the Holy Spirit is the best "good thing" you can ask from the Father. If you are looking to pray a sure-fire prayer, a prayer God can never refuse, ask the Father in the name of Jesus—"the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name" (John 15:16, NRSV; see also John 16:23–26)—to send the Holy Spirit.

So in every sacrament there is an epiclesis and this is why sacraments "work."

However, in the two epicleses of the Mass one work is completed and one work is continued. We are most familiar with the Third Eucharistic Prayer but the following is true of all the eucharistic prayers, even the Roman Canon which finds the epicleses "in the power of [the Father's] blessing" (§ 1353, note 178). The first epiclesis takes place when the presider joins his hands and holding them outstretched over the offerings, says: "And so, Father, we bring you these gifts. / We ask you to make them holy by the power of your Spirit, / that they may become the body and blood / of your Son, our Lord

Jesus Christ, / at whose command we celebrate this eucharist." The Father's answer to this prayer is the completed work of the Spirit whereby the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ.

The second epiclesis takes place when the presider, with hands extended, says: "Look with favor on your Church's offering, / and see the Victim whose death has / reconciled us to yourself. / Grant that we, who are nourished by his body and blood, may be filled with his Holy Spirit, / and become one body, one spirit in Christ." It's easier for bread and wine to become the body and blood of Christ than it is for us human beings to become one body, one spirit in Christ. This is the work that commences at every eucharist and continues in life, the other 167 hours of the week when most of us are not at Mass. (Perhaps this is why the New Testament borrows the Hebrew word for "down-payment" to express this dimension of the work of the Spirit; see Romans 8:23, 2 Cor 1:22; 5:5; Ephesians 1:14.)

In the words of "The Church, the Eucharist and the Trinity," the 1982 statement by the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue Between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church: "The Spirit transforms the sacred gifts into the body and blood of Christ (*metabole*) in order to bring about the growth of the body which is the church, In this sense the entire celebration is an *epiclesis*, which becomes more explicit at certain moments. The church is continually in a state of *epiclesis*." I love that last idea, don't you?

We might ask then, What is the eucharist for? It is not just about transubstantiation. That's the easy part. The Body and Blood of Christ, available to us under the signs of bread and wine, are meant to transform us into the Mystical Body of Christ.

This theology has been constant from the

beginning. Witness the many times Jesus mentions his desire that “all may be one” in St. John’s version of the Last Supper, or the justly famous first century hymn from the *Didache* translated by F. Bland Tucker (made inclusive with his permission):

Father, we thank thee who hast planted  
Thy holy name within our hearts.  
Knowledge and faith and life immortal  
Jesus thy Son to us imparts.

Thou, Lord, didst make all for thy  
pleasure,  
Didst give us food for all our days,  
Giving in Christ the bread eternal;  
Thine is the power, be thine the praise.

Watch o’er thy Church, O Lord, in  
mercy,  
Save it from evil, guard it still,  
Perfect it in thy love, unite it,  
Cleansed and conformed unto thy will.

As grain, once scattered on the hillsides,  
Was in this broken bread made one,  
So from all lands thy Church be gathered  
Into thy kingdom by thy Son.

There may be no better way to conclude this meditation on the Holy Spirit and the liturgy than to use the hymn St. Ephrem of Edessa, deacon and doctor of the Church (feast June 9), quoted by Cardinal Congar:

There is fire and Spirit in Mary’s womb;  
there is fire and Spirit in the river in  
which you were baptized.  
Fire and Spirit in our own baptism,  
in the bread and in the cup, fire and Holy  
Spirit.

In your bread is hidden the Spirit who is  
not eaten;  
in your wine dwells the Fire that cannot  
be drunk.  
The Spirit in your bread, the Fire in your  
wine,  
a remarkable miracle that our lips have

received.

So the next time you take your part in the prayer, “The Lord be with you”—“And also with you,” get ready to receive the fiery, the transforming, the guaranteed Love-Gift of God.

### **for further reading**

“The Church, the Eucharist and the Trinity,” the August 1, 1982 document by the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue Between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, June 30–July 6, Munich (*Origins*, August 12, 1982 Vol. 12, No. 10).

Louis Bouyer, *The Church of God* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1982), especially Part II, Chapter IV: “The Church: The Body of Christ.”

Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* (New York: Crossroads, 1983), especially Volume III: *The River of Life Flows East and West*—Part Two, “The Holy Spirit and the Sacraments,” pp. 217–274).

Jean Corbon, *The Wellsprings of Worship* (New York: Paulist, 1988).

Enrico Mazza, *The Eucharistic Prayers of the Roman Rite* (Collegeville: Pueblo, 1986).

W.C. Van Unnik, “*Dominus Vobiscum*: the Background of a Liturgical Formula,” in *New Testament Essays: Studies in Memory of T.W. Manson 1893–1958*, edited by A. J. B. Higgins (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959), pp. 270–305).