

The Mass (Part IX)

by Fr. Tim Church

In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit

The priest announces the Mass with the sign of the cross and the “name” of the most Holy Trinity: “In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.” There are a plethora of things going on here. The first is the sign of the cross. This is a most ancient act of blessing. Tertullian, a priest from Carthage in North Africa who lived in the later part of the second century, wrote many famous descriptions of Christian life and liturgy. His description of the custom of the sign of the cross tells us of its importance: “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 lying down, in sitting down, whatever employment occupies us, we mark our forehead with the sign of the cross.” The sign of the cross, either traced over one’s person or in the air, has been an important signification of discipleship and dependence on God’s mercy, the mercy of the cross.

The reference to the “Name” of God at the beginning of the Mass is a dramatic statement of our purpose, the reason we are gathered here. A flood of meaning stands behind this statement. The holiness of God’s name is a constant part of our faith stretching back to its beginnings. Even a lengthy study of this would not be adequate. Remember that among the Ten Commandments is the one that makes it clear that God’s very name is regarded as holy. Jesus commissioned his Church with the name of the Holy Trinity: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the of name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit.” (Matthew 28:19) As the Church gathers to begin the Mass, we do so as a fulfillment of that ancient commission. In a sense it says, “We are the people that have gathered here to fulfill the commission, the work (liturgy) that the Lord gave us to do.”

In another sense, it is a claim that the Lord has authority over us as a people. It is not just that we claim him and that what we are doing is with his authorization. It is certainly that, but it is also that we submit ourselves as his servants and followers. We do not come in our own “name,” the name of some important person, a country, or a set of opinions or philosophies. Even who we are as a people is defined by God.

One last thing about the sign of the cross, the number of these has been greatly reduced in the directions for the Mass. Most commentaries on the development of that Mass mention many places that became customary opportunities to make the sign of the cross. Many of these are very old. Nonetheless, the Second Vatican Council reformed the liturgy and reduced dramatically the number of these. The ones retained are also very ancient but the motive for reducing the number seems to be simplicity.

34. The rites should be distinguished by a noble simplicity; they should be short, clear, and unencumbered by useless repetitions; they should be within the people’s powers of comprehension, and normally should not require much explanation. (Vatican II, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy)

The opening statement is followed by a greeting: “The Lord be with you.” This greeting appears at points at which we are encouraged to pay especially close attention. It announces something important. It is an ancient everyday greeting that we can find in the Old Testament: “Boaz himself came from Bethlehem and said to the

harvesters, 'The LORD be with you!' and they replied, 'The LORD bless you!'" (Ruth 2:4) (See also Luke 1:28, Judges 6:12; 2 Chronicles 2:2; Thessalonians 3:16) The meaning of the greeting refers to the fulfillment of Christ's promise: "Behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20) That this fulfillment should take place in the liturgy is an echo of a similar promise: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." (Matthew 18:20)