



“Hello, Joe. How are you?” Whenever we see someone we know, we might greet him or her in this way. However, the Mass, the gathering of the family of God, doesn’t begin like this at all. Why not? Without a doubt, the Mass isn’t just like meeting people on the street. When we come to Mass, we aren’t just passing by an acquaintance: we are encountering and worshipping Almighty God. After the Sign of the Cross, the priest says, “The Lord be with you,” or one of the other versions given in the Missal, such as “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all;” or “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” This greeting indicates right away that what we are about to do is going to be very different from the normal daily routine. Also, it recalls that we are part of something greater—the universal celebration of the Liturgy—God with all his people.

### **Far from Ordinary**

If the only thing the priest said was something like, “I’m glad to see you” or “Boy, it’s cold today,” he might give the impression that we are just entering into familiar chatter. We could miss that something sacred is about to happen. So, the universal greeting helps us prepare to enter more fully into the celebration of the Mass and helps us to realize this will be a sacred gathering with Almighty God present before us. If you think about the words, they are actually a prayer said by the priest asking that the grace, peace, love, etc., of God be with each person—now that’s a way to start a gathering of God’s people! The faithful then respond with their own part of the prayer, asking a similar grace for the priest by responding, “And with your spirit.”

### **Whose Spirit?**

Why do we say, “And with your spirit?” Our English translation of the phrase is actually a direct word-for-word translation from the Latin prayers of the Mass: “Et cum spiritu tuo.” This phrase also clearly connects us to several places in the Bible. For example, we see the priest’s greeting, “The Lord be with you,” in Ruth 2:4; and we see the people’s response, “The Lord be with your spirit,” in 2 Timothy 4:22.

Okay, Father, I see where those lines are in the Bible. But what does “spirit” mean here? According to several saints and Christian writers, “spirit” refers not to the soul of the priest but to the spirit he has received through the sacrament of Holy Orders. As Edward Sri writes, quoting Jeremy Driscoll for support: “By saying ‘and with your spirit,’ the people are acknowledging the Holy Spirit’s unique activity through the priest during the sacred liturgy by virtue of his ordination. As Jeremy Driscoll 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 the 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 them now must be finely tuned to perform his sacred duties well’.” (A Biblical Walk Through the Mass, p. 28).

The greeting at the start of Mass is a prayer that the Lord will be present with the people and a prayer back from the people acknowledging the spiritual gift God has given to the priest to help lead us in prayer. It is definitely a more formal greeting than we would use out and about. However, what we do at Church is definitely different than meeting each other at a ballgame or a restaurant. The priest may very well go on to give some words of welcome or make a comment on the weather, but those comments follow the opening dialogue: “The Lord be with you,” “And with your spirit.” Now, let’s pray together as God’s family!