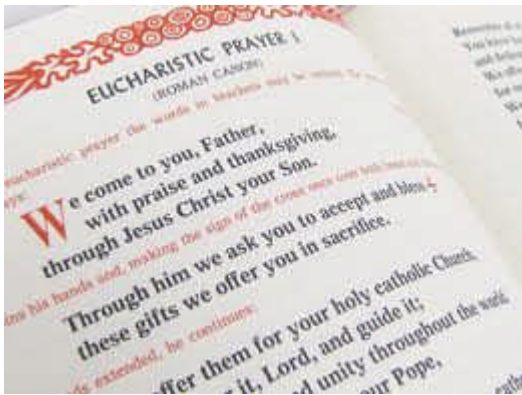


And With Your Spirit

Some folks think George Gershwin had some insight into the upcoming changes to the words we use in our celebration of the Mass: *to-may-to, to-mah-to, po-tay-to, po-tah-to*. They believe that the church has more important things it ought to be doing and so they conclude, “Let’s call the whole thing off.”



But the Mass, as poetic as it can sound, is not the equivalent of a Gershwin tune. The words it contains aren’t there because they cleverly rhyme. The words are there because they mean something. And that meaning has power and consequences in our lives. The words are part of the revelation of God’s love for us and they remind us of what God the Father has done for us in his Son Jesus Christ through the working of the Holy Spirit. And from time to time we need to be reminded and take a look anew at the gift we have been given in the Holy Mass.

Sometimes, all it takes is a small change because that change can lead us to ask deeper questions. Something as simple as changing our very familiar response to the greeting “*The Lord be with you.*” What once so easily came “*And also with you*” will soon be rendered “*And with your spirit.*” The phrase seems a bit awkward to the modern sensibility – after all who greets someone’s spirit?

Actually, most of the Catholic world does. That is the way it always has been in Spanish (*Y con tu espíritu*), French (*Et avec votre esprit*), Italian (*E con il tuo spirito*), and in the official language of the Catholic Church, Latin (*Et cum spiritu tuo*, literally “And with your spirit”).

The revision is not just about translation accuracy. The response “And with your spirit” conveys something different than “And also with you.” Where the latter is often assumed to be the conclusion of an exchange of welcome greetings, that’s not what the Latin phrase means. It’s not just another way of saying “hi” to the priest. Consider that the words are spoken by the worshipping assembly at four significant moments in the Mass: at the beginning, at the proclamation of the Gospel, at the Eucharistic prayers and when the assembly is dismissed to go out into the world to share the Good News. *Et cum spiritu tuo* is a liturgical response given to the priest when the priest is about to do something that by virtue of Holy Orders he has been ordained to do. The words are the assembly’s agreement with and reminder to the priest that it’s the spirit of Christ, to which his own spirit has been conformed, which allows him to carry out those sacred tasks. It is a reminder that this isn’t “Father’s Mass.” It is about allowing Christ to act in him. The words are not a suggestion that the priest is any holier than his parishioners. It expresses a prayer that the ordained may be made worthy of the dignity of their calling.

These explanations are nothing new. Much the same was said by St. John Chrysostom, a fourth-century Doctor of the Church. In one homily, he preached that in responding, “And with your spirit,” the congregation calls out, not to the priest *per se*, but to the Spirit that the priest received in his ordination that he may attain peace with the Spirit. It is a prayer for the priest that he well carry out his sacred charge.

Another fourth-century preacher, Theodore of Mopsuestia, spoke of “And with your spirit” as a sort of epiclesis, an invocation of the Holy Spirit to come down in blessing upon the priest and his people, just as the Spirit comes down upon the offering of bread and wine. This is a needed blessing because at every new beginning in our Mass, we draw nearer to the divine mystery. We draw closer than Moses was on Mount Sinai, closer than the high priest had been in the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple. We need the Lord to be with us. We need the Spirit of Christ as we advance. Because that’s the only way we can be safe, so close to the divine fire.

“And with your spirit” does add a degree of liturgical formality in hopes that we are reminded of the reverence needed for the worship we are about to commence. St. John Chrysostom pointed out that in the first and second centuries people’s houses became churches when the community gathered on the Lord’s day. He lamented that in his day the churches were becoming mere houses, where Christians behaved with casualness and carelessness, heedless of the divine mystery in their midst.

To-may-to, to-mah-to, po-tay-to, po-tah-to? Hardly. The exchange: “The Lord be with you” and “And with your spirit” is a reminder we are together called to worship God in the Eucharist and to pray for each other. And from time to time we all need reminders. Let these changes allow us to take a look anew at the gift we have been given in the Holy Mass.