

A NEW TRANSLATION OF THE MASS WILL BE USED BEGINNING NOVEMBER 27

As you may have heard, the Roman Catholic Church in English-speaking countries will be using a new translation of the Mass beginning the First Sunday of Advent this year. The new translation, the first since the early 1970s, attempts to achieve a more literal rendering of the Latin in the prayers that the priest says and in those that the congregation says in unison. This translation is in a book called the Third Edition of the Roman Missal which replaces a liturgical book called the Sacramentary, in use since shortly after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). The Council mandated that the Mass and the Sacraments be in the language of the people. The book known as the Lectionary, containing the scripture readings for Mass and itself revised a few years ago, will remain the same for now. The new translation of the Mass prayers will affect the priest celebrant more than anyone because most of what is in the new Missal (like in the old Sacramentary) are texts that he traditionally says. But the “common” parts of the Mass like the Penitential Rite, Gloria, Creed, Holy, Memorial Acclamation, and Lamb of God are also changed somewhat. These new changes in the liturgy are but the latest in the long history of the celebration of the Holy Eucharist.

In the early church, the believers in Jesus as the Messiah faithfully followed his command to celebrate his supper “in memory of me.” The first Christian prayer services were modeled after Jewish synagogue services and are the ancestors of what we now call “The Liturgy of the Word” – i.e. the scripture readings and homily. At the same time, the earliest Christians also gathered for a meal which included the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. This latter practice gave rise to abuses because people might become rowdy from too much drink and there were disparities between the rich and the poor in the food that was eaten. Gradually, therefore, the word service and the celebration of Holy Communion were combined and we begin to see clearly the outline of what we call the “Mass.” St. Justin Martyr (ca. 100-ca.165) inserted an account of the Rite of Baptism and the celebration of the Eucharist in his work called *Apology*. But the earliest known full description of the Eucharistic sacrifice appears in the *Apostolic Tradition* (ca. 215 A.D.) of the Roman priest St. Hippolytus who lived between about 170 and 236 A.D. This remarkable document clearly shows that the basic structure of the Mass and particularly the Eucharistic Prayer (containing the consecration) was set at this early date. It is interesting to note that it is likely the prayers published by St. Hippolytus were a direct development from the Eucharistic Prayer circulated in the churches of our patron, St. Paul the Apostle. Please note also that St. Hippolytus inspired the current (short) Eucharistic Prayer II of the Mass we have been using after Vatican II.

The earliest celebrations of Christian word services and the Lord’s Supper were, of course, in Aramaic, the language of Jesus and his Jewish followers. But what St. Justin and St. Hippolytus describe for us is a liturgy that is in Greek, the language of the common people in the Roman Empire at that time. But by the end of the fourth century, the Eucharist was celebrated completely in Latin and this was due to the gradual change in the language spoken by most Christians from Greek to Latin. (But the *kyrie eleison* remained in Greek, the only remnant of that language.) However, this was the end of the use of the vernacular for the sacraments until modern times. The Mass remained in Latin until after Vatican II despite the slow development of the Romance languages (from Latin) and the existence of the Germanic languages and English (which is a combination of the Germanic Old English and medieval French) – not to mention the numerous other vernacular languages of peoples who converted to Catholicism in Africa and Asia and other areas of the world.

The Latin Mass as we knew it before Vatican II was pretty much set by the time of Pope St. Gregory the Great (590-604). Still there were some changes worth mentioning. Many elements were gradually added to the Mass, such as the Gloria and the Lamb of God. The beautiful services of Holy Week, especially the rites of the Easter Vigil, were a development of the fertile period of liturgical ferment during the time of the ascendancy of the Frankish kings – particularly during the reign of Charles the Great or Charlemagne whom the pope crowned Emperor of the Romans in 800. Unfortunately, there were also significant deletions from the Mass. The Prayer of the Faithful all but vanished in the period before the year 700 A.D. – only to be restored after Vatican II. By the year 1200 the offertory procession had also dropped out and the people thus no longer brought up the gifts for the sacrifice (as they now do again). Most lamentable of all was the end of the practice of communion under the species of both bread and wine for the laity by the twelfth century. After that time, only the priest received from the cup. Of course, communion under both kinds has also been restored in our time. But in the medieval period, the Mass became more and more the province of the clergy; and the laity became mere observers instead of participants and there was even a gradual decline in the frequent reception of Communion. The

phenomenon of priests saying “private Masses” as a source of income from stipends was one of many abuses of the medieval period. At the same time, there was much tinkering with the Mass texts in some places and too much experimentation with the liturgy.

After the Protestant Reformation, sparked in 1517 by Martin Luther, the Catholic Church tried to put its house in order during the Council of Trent (1545-1563). Foremost among the reforms of Trent were those of the Mass and the Sacraments. What ensued was uniformity in the celebration of the liturgy imposed from Rome. But this system also stopped the gross abuses that existed in some parts of the medieval world. In addition, a seminary system was established and priests were trained to serve the needs of the worshipping community. The Latin Mass which came down to my generation from Trent was beautiful in its simplicity and mystery. It served the church well for 400 years.

There then followed the developments after Vatican II which I mentioned above. The most important facet of the liturgical reform was the emphasis on the greater participation of the faithful in worship, especially in the Mass. It is hard to exaggerate the significance of this change which included the priest facing the people and the Mass celebrated in the peoples’ language and the gradual development of many liturgical ministries. The priest was no longer virtually the only actor at Mass.

The Mass texts in the post-Vatican II Sacramentary and Lectionary were promulgated in Latin under Pope Paul VI in 1969. These texts were soon translated into English and other languages; but these translations were never intended to last forever. Times change and the needs of the people change. Thus in 1998 the American bishops and the conferences of bishops of English speaking countries throughout the world approved a new translation of the Sacramentary which seemed to balance the need to be faithful to the 1969 Latin edition of the Mass with the need to be intelligible to modern English speakers. However, Rome subsequently concluded that this 1998 translation was not enough of a literal rendering of the Latin. And this conclusion led to the new Missal which our bishops have asked that we begin to use in the United States this Advent. Between now and then, clergy and parish leaders will try to prepare you for this change. It is not a hard change for the congregation to learn. As I suggested above, priests and deacons have the major task of familiarizing themselves with the new texts.

Sincerely in Christ the Priest,

Fr. Charlie

P.S. By the way, the little word “Mass” came from the phrase of the dismissal at the end of the Eucharistic celebration which in Latin is “*Ite Missa Est*” and which is translated in English today as “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord” (one option). But a more literal translation of this Latin phrase would be “Go you are sent” or something like that; this is because the word “*missa*” has the connotation of being sent out and, indeed, the English word “mission” comes from a related Latin word. So the true meaning of the dismissal is to go out and be a “missionary” by spreading the good news in word and deed. But the word “*missa*” became a succinct way of describing the whole Eucharistic Liturgy and this word is translated into English as “Mass.”