

Q&A on the Roman Missal

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Why are we getting a new translation of the Sacramentary?

- The book is now in its third Latin edition, which includes all the eucharistic prayers, revisions to the calendar of saints, and some editorial improvements. The content of the Sacramentary needs to be updated.
- The Vatican has issued new rules for translating from Latin into vernacular languages. There aren't many changes in Latin between the second and third editions, but the changes in English will be extensive.
- Even the title of the book will change. It will be known as the Roman Missal.

How will this affect me?

- Some of what you say at mass will change, including the words in the Glory to God, the Creed, and the responses to the preface dialogue.
- The texts you hear the priest say will have a new style.

When will all this take place?

- Within the next few years. The translation is directed by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy, which has nearly finished its work on this project. But the missal must be approved by the English-speaking episcopal conferences and by the Vatican's Congregation on Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments.
- Once the complete text is approved, publishers will need time to produce readable, accurate, and beautiful books.

Praying at mass is not as easy as it sounds. You come with the cares of the day and the plans for tomorrow. Not everyone joins in the songs. Someone's cell phone will go off. Kids will

squirm. The infirm will cough. When the priest says, “Let us pray,” you want to. But you may find it hard to concentrate on what he says next. Prayer is work. Those prayers you hear the priest say are being retranslated from Latin to English. No one expects that this will suddenly make everyone more attentive. But the prayers are being sculpted in a way that will make them worth the effort. These “presidential prayers” derive from a variety of sources. Most are hundreds of years old. To pray them is to stand in the stream of believers who labored to put into words a mystery that cannot be expressed. The first translation is now almost 40 years old. Those who wrote it deserve the admiration of a grateful Church. They helped the faithful pray the mass in English for the first time in history.

The new translation will be controversial. All change is a struggle. But the quality of the work on the presidential prayers bodes well for the forthcoming publication. The translation is not yet available to the public. It is passing through stages on the way to its final form. The excerpt quoted in this article should be taken for what it is: a draft. Translators have revised these prayers in the light of new rules from the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. They are striving to honor the intent of the original prayer, express it with a vigorous vocabulary, and translate it in a style that can be proclaimed on sight and understood upon hearing.

As an example, consider the prayer that opens the mass on the Fourth Sunday of Lent. The Sacramentary gives you two options. The first is based on the Latin text.

Father of peace,
we are joyful in your Word,
your Son Jesus Christ,
who reconciles us to you.

Let us hasten toward Easter
with the eagerness of faith and love.

We ask this. . . .

The second is a free-flowing translation of these sentiments.

God our Father,
your Word, Jesus Christ, spoke peace to a sinful world
and brought mankind the gift of reconciliation
by the suffering and death he endured.

Teach us, the people who bear his name,
to follow the example he gave us:
may our faith, hope, and charity
turn hatred to love, conflict to peace, death to eternal life.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Here's the Latin original, for comparison:

*Deus, qui per Verbum tuum
humani generis reconciliationem mirabiliter operaris,
praesta, quaesumus, ut populus christianus
prompta devotione et alacri fide
ad ventura sollemnia valeat festinare.
Per Dominum.*

The revision proposed by the translators adheres closely to the Latin content and structure, while achieving a text conducive to proclamation in English:

O God,

who through your Word
accomplish in a wonderful way
the reconciliation of the human race,
give the Christian people strength, we pray,
to hasten with keen devotion and eager faith
towards the solemn celebrations to come.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ. . . .

Structure and length. In the Sacramentary texts, the body of the prayer is split into two sentences. This helps the hearer move through a rich prayer section by section. However, the first sentence can be heard as if the priest is lecturing God, announcing something that would otherwise remain unknown. In Latin these halves are more interdependent. The revision duplicates this structure, showing how the spiritual progress of the Christian people flows from God's design for the reconciliation of the human race. But the sentence is longer, and the grammar more complex.

Worshippers accustomed to hearing these prayers as a succession of independent clauses may struggle with this style. However, the single-sentence structure has already been in use in other languages, including Spanish. When English speakers adjust to the structure, they can anticipate the various parts as the prayer unspools. Some of the prayers have proven unwieldy. The collect for Holy Thursday, for example, may be broken into two independent clauses for better comprehension. The prayer is still dense, but this special night has attracted a more solemn text to set the tone for the Triduum.

Rhythms. The revised translation strives to avoid collocations of stressed and unstressed syllables. English sounds better when spoken in poetic feet of no more than two consecutive

stressed or unstressed syllables. For a comparison, start with line 2 of the first Sacramentary prayer. Three unstressed syllables appear in a row: “-ful in your”. The same happens in the span between lines 5 and 6, “-er with the”, followed by one stress, “ea-“, and then three more unstressed syllables “-gerness of”. The revised translation has three consecutive unstressed syllables in each of lines 3 and 4, but on the whole, the rhythms of the prayer are improved.

This text begins with “O God.” Whenever the direct address “Lord” occurs later in the prayer, an “O” is inserted only if it breaks two stressed syllables. In this case, “O” appears at the start to avoid the otherwise impertinent sound of “God”.

Inclusive language. The revised prayer uses the gender-neutral word “God” instead of “Father”, which appears in both versions of the Sacramentary’s prayer. The Latin is “Deus”. The first English translation preceded an awareness of inclusive language issues. In fact, it provoked them. At the time, the word “Deus” was almost consistently rendered “Father” because it warmed up the prayer. A more faithful rendering of the Latin word bypasses an overly masculine vocabulary. Throughout the missal, masculine pronouns are used in reference to God, but there is a notable shift in the way the divinity is addressed. Similarly, the Latin words “humani generis” are rendered literally as “human race”, avoiding the word “mankind” that appears in the current alternative prayer.

Vocabulary. The translators now use a broader vocabulary than the Sacramentary employs, in order to imitate the medley of Latin words throughout. It isn’t easy. One of the prefaces for the Rite of Marriage, for example, uses five Latin synonyms that are all rendered in the Sacramentary as “love”. Recent translators have not managed much of an improvement here. English cannot do all that Latin does. This prayer uses a straightforward vocabulary, but noteworthy is the word “wonderful” in the third line. In other places the missal uses “wondrous”,

and a related Latin word sometimes appears as “awesome”. That word came under scrutiny because of its colloquial usage. In the end, though, all these words have been retained in places throughout the draft missal because they have unique resonances, and they unleashed a more expansive vocabulary of words that appear so liberally in Latin.

The first Sacramentary prayer uses the word “joyful”, which appears nowhere else. It may refer to the entrance antiphon that gives this Sunday its moniker, “Laetare”. “Easter” in the same prayer is translated now as “the solemn celebrations to come,” a reference to the entire Triduum.

Quaesumus. One of the most frequent words in the missal is “quaesumus”. It is usually translated “we pray”, as at the end of line 5 in the revised prayer. The Sacramentary moved it to the doxology, introducing a third independent clause to conclude the prayer: “We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ. . . .” The revision restores “we pray” to the body of the prayers as a parenthetical expression, and the doxology depends on the prayer’s main verb, as in Latin: “Through our Lord Jesus Christ. . . .” “We pray” is not supposed to draw any attention. It functions as a modest oratorical comma. Its reappearance may be noticed at first, but that is not its design. It’s a dash of salt, not the whole entrée.

Clarity of expression. From one draft to the next, words have been changed for clarity of expression. Sometimes two lines are reversed. Sometimes words that looked clear on paper were misunderstood in speech. Other times the entire prayer seemed too abstract and required a rewrite. In this prayer, the translation was rather clear from the start. An earlier version started line 3 with “are accomplishing”, but that seemed an unnecessary embellishment. The line was understandable with fewer syllables and a more forceful verb, so the words were shortened to “accomplish”.

Grammar. Sometimes simple points of grammar become major issues. Should there be a comma here? Should the main verb of a given clause be closer to its subject? Are the antecedents to the pronouns clear? This prayer provided no such challenges, but others required more attention. In some cases, a comma not otherwise demanded was inserted to help the priest proclaim the text. It slows him down, helps him understand the meaning and communicate it well to others.

Doxology. One of the liveliest discussions concerned the translation of the doxology that concludes the collects. The Sacramentary uses this formula:

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

The Latin goes this way:

*Per Dominum nostrum Iesum Christum Filium tuum,
qui tecum vivit et regnat in unitate Spiritus Sancti, Deus,
per omnia saecula saeculorum.*

Here is a proposed revision:

Through our Lord Jesus Christ your Son,
who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God,
for ever and ever.

There's quite a bit at stake here. The main question concerns "one God", which the Sacramentary takes from the two Latin words "unitate" and "Deus." But the first word is better translated within the phrase "in the unity of the Holy Spirit." Many people assume that the word

“God” refers to the entire Trinity. But it does not. Grammatically, “Deus” is in the nominative case, and it has to go with “qui”, which in turn refers to “Iesum”. The doxology that concludes the collects makes this Christological affirmation: Jesus is God. Other languages (Italian and Spanish, for example) translate it this way: “Through our Lord Jesus Christ, who is God. . . .” That works in English, but the proposed translation leaves it a bit more ambiguous by imitating the Latin word order.

Again, no one expects that all this work will suddenly make people listen more attentively to the collect on the Fourth Sunday of Lent. But it will reward them if they do. In time, it is hoped that the quality of the prayers at mass will deepen the spiritual lives of the people who pray them.

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This article appeared in *Ministry and Liturgy* 35/7 (September 2008):17-18, 23.