

The Roman Missal: “In these or similar words”

The new English translation for the mass has raised fears of rigidity. Some Catholics feel that authorities are already cracking down on presumed legitimate variations in the celebration of the eucharist. As the Sacramentary is about to be replaced with the third edition of the Roman Missal, many fear that its translation will be just another scolding.

The fear outweighs the reality. The revised General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) invited the Church to scrutinize the way we celebrate mass, but the changes it implemented were rather few. Similarly, the instruction *Redemptionis sacramentum* from the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments directly aimed to correct perceived “liturgical abuses,” many of which are not widely practiced.

But some changes to the communion rite – notably the limited role of extraordinary ministers of holy communion and the elimination of glass vessels – seemed puzzling to many worshippers who found the practices of the previous decades acceptable, if not praiseworthy because they helped people pray and affirmed ecclesial ministries.

In this milieu new fears have arisen concerning the forthcoming translation; namely, that it will be just another attempt to stop us from doing something that seems to work rather well. The new translation will have to stand on its own merit, but considerable work is being done to ensure that the results will be articulate and prayerful.

Understandably, many people have asked about the parts of the missal marked “in these or similar words.” They assume that strident authorities, flush with victory in the battle for rigid uniformity, will try to restrict these as well. Again, the fear outweighs the reality. There is almost no change to these parts of the missal.

Some parts of the mass are designed to be composed locally. In many cases the missal does not even give a sample text to inspire the composition. Notable among these are “certain explanations” that may be delivered by the presiding priest. Paragraph 31 from the 2002 GIRM says,

It is also up to the priest, in the exercise of his office of presiding over the gathered assembly, to offer certain explanations that are foreseen in the rite itself. Where it is indicated in the rubrics, the celebrant is permitted to adapt them somewhat in order that they respond to the understanding of those participating. However, he should always take care to keep to the sense of the

text given in the Missal and to express them succinctly. . . . In addition, he may give the faithful a very brief introduction to the Mass of the day (after the initial Greeting and before the Act of Penitence), to the Liturgy of the Word (before the readings), and to the Eucharistic Prayer (before the Preface), though never during the Eucharistic Prayer itself; he may also make concluding comments to the entire sacred action before the dismissal.

The priest, therefore, is completely free to use his words – or words prepared by another competent person – at various times in every mass. He may introduce the entire celebration. Then before the lector starts the first reading, he may give an overview of what people will hear. After the prayer over the offerings, he may say something about the eucharistic prayer, perhaps explaining reasons why the community gives thanks today. Before the dismissal, he may sum up the celebration.

In practice, most priests do not speak this much. These explanations probably seemed a good idea when the mass first went from Latin to English after the Second Vatican Council, but today they could interfere with the flow of a liturgy that people understand rather well. Even with the new translation, the priest may still say something of his own choosing.

GIRM 31 offers some important practical advice. “[A]dapt,” but “keep to the sense of the . . . Missal.” And “express [these words] succinctly.” This differs from the laxity that appeared in GIRM 11 prior to the 2002 revision: “By their very nature these introductions do not need to be expressed verbatim in the form in which they are given in the Missal; at least in certain cases it will be advisable to adapt them somewhat to the concrete situation of the community.” The 2002 GIRM addresses some improprieties that apparently had evolved up to that point – introductions that diverged from the topic and burdened listeners with verbosity. Even so, the freedom to compose remains.

Unaddressed in the revised missal is the freedom to change texts in masses with a large number of children. This remains in force. Paragraph 23 of the Directory for Masses with Children says,

In speaking to the children [the priest] should express himself so that he will be easily understood, while avoiding any childish style of speech.

The free use of introductory comments (See GIRM, no. 11) will lead children to a genuine liturgical participation, but these should be more than mere explanatory remarks.

It will help him reach the hearts of the children if the priest sometimes expresses the invitations in his own words, for example, at the penitential rite, the prayer over the gifts, the Lord’s Prayer, the sign of peace, and communion.

Even more freedom accompanies the presidential prayers, where the priest may choose ones that better fit the needs of the children. Paragraph 51 goes farther:

Since these prayers were composed for adult Christians, however, the principle simply of choosing from among them does not serve the purpose of having the children regard the prayers as an expression of their own life and religious experience (See *Consilium*, Instruction on translations of liturgical texts for celebrations with a congregation, Jan. 25, 1969, no. 20). If this is the case, the text of prayers of the Roman Missal may be adapted to the needs of children, but this should be done in such a way that, preserving the purpose of the prayer and to some extent its substance as well, the priest avoids anything that is foreign to the literary genre of a presidential prayer, such as moral exhortations or a childish manner of speech.

With statements such as these, some priests took liberty to make similar changes in the texts of the mass with adults. This has especially occurred where the translations lack gender inclusivity. Arguing from principles of charity in thought and clarity of expression, some have expanded texts that say “men” to “men and women.” Other examples abound. The Sacramentary itself seemed to take the lead with a footnote to the invitation that precedes its Prayer over the Gifts. The priest says, “Pray, brethren, that our sacrifice may be acceptable. . .” But the footnote says, “At the discretion of the priest, other words which seem more suitable under the circumstances, such as ‘friends’, ‘dearly beloved,’ ‘my brothers and sisters’ may be used.” Furthermore, back in 1975, the words of institution in all the eucharistic prayers changed from “It will be shed for you and for all men” to “It will be shed for you and for all.” No official permission was given for additional changes, but the principles evident in those examples have often been applied more broadly.

Concerns about gender-inclusivity have been addressed in the forthcoming translation. It is anticipated that the words referring to the community (but not those referring to God) will sound more gender-friendly than those in the prayers we use today.

A tour through the Order of Mass indicates only a few places where the priest is told he may proclaim or change the words that follow. For example, when introducing the rite of blessing and sprinkling holy water, he may use the invitation from the missal or make up his own. The Sacramentary gives the priest the same freedom when introducing any penitential rite. However, this permission did not exist in the original Latin of the missal’s second edition. Nor does it exist in the third. Consequently, in this one instance, a permission to use “these or similar words” that appears in the Sacramentary today will not appear in the Roman Missal of tomorrow.

Penitential Rite C is a series of three acclamations to which the people respond, “Lord, have mercy” or “Christ, have mercy.” In the Sacramentary, the minister who leads these may choose one of eight samples provided, or compose a completely different set. It now seems that the missal will preserve only one sample, but the permission for composing a different set remains in force.

The homily, of course, is freely conceived by the priest or deacon who delivers it. There are sample homilies in some of the ritual books, such as those for confirmation and ordination. But none of these appears in the missal.

The prayer of the faithful may also be freely composed. The GIRM offers a guideline for its composition (70). The Sacramentary gives several samples in its first appendix. These will reappear in the missal, though with a new translation. They are just samples. All the components of the prayer of the faithful are still changeable: the introduction, the petitions, the response, and the concluding prayer.

Many priests and deacons vary some specific lines, even though the rubrics have never said these are delivered “in these or similar words.” Examples include the introduction to the Lord’s Prayer, the invitation to offer the sign of peace, the invitation to communion (“This is the Lamb of God”), and the dismissal. In the case of the first and last of these, the Sacramentary provides options, and priests and deacons have widely presumed that these were samples. The new translation will not say “these or similar words” in these cases – but the current translation doesn’t either. The practice of using similar words at these times may have evolved from the directory for masses with children, which permits it in all these cases.

Announcements at the end of mass, of course, are locally composed. These are made only if necessary and briefly (GIRM 90a).

On some days the Sacramentary gives a sample introduction to an unusual rite that will follow. The Presentation of the Lord and Palm Sunday of the Lord’s Passion both supply the priest an introductory paragraph to help him explain the significance of the blessing of candles and palm branches respectively. The missal will have a new translation for these introductions, but the priest will still say them “in these or similar words.”

The same is true of the Easter Vigil, which permits four freely composed introductions. Three of these have sample texts; they precede the fire blessing, the liturgy of the word, and the rite of baptism. The third one comes with musical notation, so if the priest wishes to use other words to introduce baptism, and to sing them, he may need to prepare this introduction more carefully. Just before communion, the priest may give a fourth introduction, addressed to the neophytes, stressing the significance of this sacrament that they will now share for the first time. No sample text is provided. All the other introductions will have a new translation, but the priest is free to change them.

Fears that the new translation will restrict the passages marked “in these or similar words” are understandable but unfounded. More of a concern is that some priests will change the new translation to simplify the structure or vocabulary of the prayers. As with anything new, the translations deserve a chance. They are the fruit of careful, loving toil. They will sound different, and the adjustment will be difficult. But the prayers will express more clearly the sentiments of the original Latin, reveal the biblical foundations of our faith, and unite English-speakers more closely with the vernacular translations of other cultures and climes. There will be times when freedom of expression is not only permitted but desirable. Together the fixed and flexible texts of the mass will form one Spirit-filled voice of praise.

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