

The Order of Mass: Orderly Transitions?

“Why are they doing this?” is bound to be one of the most frequently asked questions when we start using the new translation of the mass in the near future. The most honest answer is “To make the English closer to the Latin.” That is true. But not to be lost is another principle: “To help us hear the Bible.”

The retranslation of the book we know as the Sacramentary is well underway. It will now carry the title Roman Missal. Significantly, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments has already released the new translation of the Order of Mass – the unchangeable parts of the service from the sign of the cross at the beginning to the dismissal at the end. You can see this for yourself at www.usccb.org/liturgy/missalformation/OrdoMissaeWhiteBook.pdf. You may not use it at church yet, but you may use it for study.

Some people love it. Some people don't. You will probably find something to like, and something you think you could have done better. But there it is.

Much ink is being spilled over some phrases such as these:

From	To
And also with you	And with your spirit
Lord God of power and might	Lord God of hosts
from east to west	from the rising of the sun to its setting
shed for you and for all	poured out for you and for many
I am not worthy to receive you	that you should enter under my roof

Why are they doing this? To make the English closer to the Latin, but also to make these phrases resonate with the Bible. When the translation makes that connection clearer, it will help us hear the scriptures better. We will rediscover that the roots of our prayer are found in the Word of God.

THE GREETING

For example, the greeting and response that appear several times at mass goes, “The Lord be with you. And with your spirit.” The greeting can be found in Ruth 2:4, where it appears to be a normal way of saying hello. It reappears with minor variations in Judges 6:12 and in 2 Chronicles 15:2. In fact, the angel Gabriel uses it to greet Mary at the annunciation in Luke 1:28. At the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus promised he would be with us to the end of the

world. So saying “The Lord be with you” carries a lot of punch. It connects us with God’s faithful people in both the Old and the New Testaments. It connects us with Jesus’ promise.

The response can be found in a number of New Testament epistles. Paul uses it in 2 Timothy 4:22, Galatians 6:18, Philippians 4:23 and Philemon 25 – always at the end of a letter, as a way of expressing a final word of good will. For example, on the Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time Year C, the second reading ends with the final verse of the Letter to the Galatians: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.” In all these instances, Paul is addressing the Christian community, and he prays that the Lord will be with their spirit – that they will possess the spirit of God. Does he mean the Holy Spirit? Or just their good temperament? Knowing Paul, he hopes that their attitude will be infused with the Holy Spirit, so that their spirit will be God’s Spirit.

In the dialogue at mass, the response is made by the community back to the priest. But it seems to imply that the priest has meant something similar when he greets the people. Since the Lord and the Spirit are one, each is praying that the other be filled with the spirit of God.

Incidentally, the other greetings the priest may use at the beginning of mass also quote Saint Paul. “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” That comes from the last line of the Second Letter to the Corinthians (12:13). And “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” can be found many times in Paul’s letters; for example, at the beginning of the First Letter to the Corinthians (1:3). All these call for the same response at mass: “And with your spirit.”

This opening dialogue may sound a little strange at first, but it quotes an early Christian example of extending a greeting that means something deeper than “Good morning.”

THE HOLY

Another notable change is the first line of the Holy. We’re accustomed to singing, “Lord God of power and might,” but it’s going to change to “Lord God of hosts.” The reason again has to do with the Bible. This line refers to Isaiah’s mystical vision at the time of his call to serve as a prophet (6:3). He sees the glory of God, and angels are singing to one another about how holy God is.

God is *their* God – the God of the angels. They call him “Sabbaoth” – which seems to mean “powerful”, or “in control of all creation,” including the powers that the angels themselves represent. So God is not God of just any power and might, but of the particular manifestation of power and might that is expressed in the hosts of angels.

When you hear, “Lord God of hosts,” don’t think of communion wafers. Think of the first verse of Hark! The Herald Angels Sing: “with th’angelic host proclaim, ‘Christ is born in

Bethlehem.” Or of the second verse of Silent Night, Holy Night: “Heav’nly hosts sing alleluia; Christ, the Savior, is born!” It’s those hosts – the angelic ones. God is God of them.

EUCCHARISTIC PRAYER III

Many people are welcoming a change to Eucharistic Prayer III. Currently the priest says, “so that from east to west a perfect offering may be made to the glory of your name.” But the expression will change to “so that from the rising of the sun to its setting a pure sacrifice may be offered to your name.” Many people like this more poetic rendering. However, the new translation can be heard to mean something temporal rather than spatial, in which case the translation is not as strong. Is a pure sacrifice being offered to God only from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.? Or is it being offered everywhere in between the place where the sun rises and the place where it sets? The translation can mean the former, but it probably means the latter.

In either case, it alludes to Malachi 1:11, a passage that unfortunately never appears in the lectionary. The Lord of hosts is speaking in the prophecy, where he states that his name is great among the nations, and that they bring a pure offering in his name from the rising of the sun to its setting. Many people will like the image, but they may not realize at first that it pertains to a prophecy, in which God explains the kind of offering that affirms the greatness of his name.

INSTITUTION NARRATIVE

Perhaps one of the most contentious words in the new translation is “many”. Up to this point, when the priest lifts the cup in the eucharistic prayers, he has said that the blood of Christ “will be shed for you and for all.” But the new translation will have him say that it “will be poured out for you and for many.” At first, it will appear that Jesus has had a change of heart.

Without question, Jesus came to save all. The Bible backs this up on numerous occasions. In John 11:52 the evangelist interprets a statement of Caiaphas the high priest as proof that Jesus has come “to die for the nation, and not only for the nation, but also to gather into one the dispersed children of God.” Referring to Jesus, Paul says twice in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 that “one died for all.” In Titus 2:11, Paul says, “The grace of God has appeared, saving all.” The First Letter of John 2:2 says that Jesus “is expiation for our sins, and not for our sins only but for those of the whole world.” All these passages appear in the lectionary. In fact, the last example opens the second reading for Christmas midnight mass. So people have learned over the years that Jesus poured out his blood for all, not for many.

The problem is that at the Last Supper, according to Matthew 26:28 and Mark 14:24, Jesus said something else. He said “many”. It has been said that he used a word that in his day and language meant “all”. In French, for example, it is translated by the cognate of our word “multitude”. That captures the ambiguity rather well. But others have maintained that even

though Jesus came for the salvation of all, not all are going to be saved, so in fact, the forgiveness of sins is extended to “many” and not “all”.

Without question, this change, occurring right in the heart of the mass, is going to wake up some drowsy ears. In reality, the translation is not trying to make a point of exclusion or inclusion. It’s just trying to represent what’s in the Latin – and what’s in Greek in the Bible. Jesus came for all, but at the Last Supper he used a different word.

LORD, I AM NOT WORTHY

Another line that will cause some confusion comes just before the sharing of communion. We’re used to saying, “Lord, I am not worthy to receive you.” But the new translation will have us say, “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof.” To a lot of English-speakers, this will sound like a reference to the roof of the mouth, as though we are not worthy to swallow communion – even though, immediately after saying these words, we drop everything and enter the communion line.

Once again, a reference to the Bible is behind the new translation. The story in question, of course, is Jesus’ cure of the centurion’s slave. The centurion, a Gentile, has heard of Jesus’ power, so he sends some elders of the Jews humbly to ask Jesus for personal assistance on behalf of a good slave. These advocates also tell Jesus that the centurion is a good guy who loves the Jewish nation and actually built the synagogue for them. Jesus starts off to help, but the centurion’s messengers stop him from traveling any further. They explain this to Jesus by giving him this message from the centurion: “I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof” (Luke 7:6). The centurion knows that Jesus can just say the word and the miracle will happen from afar. Jesus never meets the centurion or the slave in this story. He works the miracle at a distance because he is impressed by the centurion’s faith, and certainly by his humility as well.

Every time we approach communion – every time – we remember this story, and we quote a Gentile with a slave, a generous heart, a respect for foreigners, a faith in Jesus, and an awareness that he is not worthy to have the master visit. Jesus still comes. So it is at communion. By quoting the story more directly, the new translation invites us to step more deeply into the Bible.

BIBLE AND LITURGY

The revised translation will be controversial. Many good points will be made in support and in question of some of the new words and phrases. But in the midst of it all a very important value has been retained: making clear the connection between the liturgy and the Bible. Our prayers are part of a long tradition, but they are inspired by the Word of God. That inspiration lends a holiness to them, and invites us to meet Christ who steps forth from the scripture to greet us at prayer.

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