

DO YOU UNDERSTAND THE MASS?

Homily given by Fr. Dennis Koliński, SJC

St. Peter's Church in Volo

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If you haven't already read the bulletin about the upcoming changes in the prayers of the Mass, I strongly urge you to do so. Most of you have probably been unaware that a new translation has been in the works and some of you have perhaps wondered why we even need one. Those of you old enough to remember the sweeping changes in the liturgy following the Second Vatican Council may even ask if still one more change is even a good idea. We've had to already adjust to so many changes—is yet one more even wise? In this case, the answer is “Yes”, because the new translations will be far better than what we have had up to this point.

When the new liturgy (often called the *Novus Ordo*) was introduced after the conclusion of Vatican II, it was almost immediately translated in its entirety from Latin into many languages, despite the fact that this was not the original intent of the Council Fathers. Some countries produced very good translations, both faithful to the original Latin text and beautiful from a literary perspective, while others left much to be desired in both regards. Our English texts of the Mass, unfortunately, fell into the second category. Produced during the late 1960s, a period dominated by a very specific cultural and ideological perspective in our country, they turned out to be lackluster and pedestrian. In trying to make the texts supposedly more relevant and accessible to the modern English speaker, they ended up lacking a sense of the sacred and the literary beauty that has traditionally been the hallmark of our liturgical texts.

Aware of these shortcomings, Pope John Paul II issued a document in 2001 outlining the principles that are to be employed in a correct and faithful translation of liturgical texts. Guided by this, the new translation will now finally give us liturgical texts that are faithful to the original Latin, as well as texts that are truly beautiful, noble and sacred.

But because we are all creatures of habit, this will require a period of adjustment, for we have all gotten used to the same words, the same phrases, the same prayers that we have used now for over forty years. Even those of you, who perhaps have an attachment to the Traditional Mass, even instinctively reply “And also with you” and will also have to reprogram yourselves to say what the Latin text has always said, “And with your spirit.”

But a proper and beautiful translation is only one element in one’s experience of the Mass. The prayers, whether poorly translated or well translated, are still external to us which we then have to internalize so that each of us may experience the Holy Sacrifice personally within the depths of our soul. The new translation will help us do that, I believe, in a better and more exalted manner than we have until now, but as we begin to use these new texts, it is equally important to really listen to what they say, so that we can better understand what we are really experiencing during the course of the Mass. Otherwise, they will be only words that will flow through our ears without an impact on our souls. What it comes down to is: You may hear the words, but do you really know what is being said and why?

The Mass is a single cohesive text with a beginning and an end. It is not a random collection of prayers but is a consciously structured liturgical text that follows a precise

sequence, which leads us through an experience of and allows us to intimately participate in Christ's work of redemption, His Sacrifice on Calvary.

The Mass is divided into two main parts, which we now call the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The very first Christians, who still considered themselves Jews, continued to attend the services of the synagogue, which consisted of readings from Sacred Scripture and reflections on them, after which they would retire to their homes where they would gather at an altar to offer the Holy Sacrifice, which Christ had commanded them to do at the Last Supper. Eventually, when these new Christians were completely rejected by the broader Jewish community, they joined the reading of Scripture and commentary, together with the sacrificial part, into one continuous ceremony, which then assumed the structure of the Mass as we know it.

In ancient Christian times, the Liturgy of the Word used to be called the Mass of the Catechumens because it was the only part of the Mass, which those preparing to receive Baptism could attend. This was followed by the Mass of the Faithful (which we now call the Liturgy of the Eucharist) and the catechumens were invited to leave because the Church felt that the experience of the Eucharist was a mystery so great that only those, who were baptized members of the Body of Christ were worthy to partake in it.

As the Liturgy of the Eucharist begins, after the homily and on Sundays the Creed, the priest prepares the altar for the Holy Sacrifice and we have what is called the Preparation of the Gifts. This used to be called the Offertory because it was here that the bread and wine to be used for the Eucharist, were offered to God as acceptable to be transformed into the precious Body and Blood of His Son.

At the Preface, we begin the Eucharistic Prayer, also known as the Canon of the Mass. In the name of all the faithful, the priest states his intention and asks the Lord to remember all of us as we offer Him this Holy Sacrifice. A characteristic element of this part of the Canon is the Memorial of the Living in which the priest calls to mind his special intentions for the living. But you, who by virtue of your Baptism belong to a royal priesthood, can participate in the priest's action at the altar by calling to mind in your heart your own intentions for the living.

At the very center of the Mass is the Last Supper narrative in which the priest, acting in the person of Christ, transforms the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, and in so doing, makes Calvary once again present on the altar as he re-presents the one sacrifice of our redemption again to the Father.

Following the consecration, the priest gives thanks for this great gift and asks that the Father look with favor on these offerings, pleading that His angel take this Holy Sacrifice to His altar in heaven. Then, just as the living were remembered in the first part of the Canon, the priest recalls the deceased in the Memorial of the Dead. And just as at the Commemoration of the living, you too can include your intentions for the deceased to be placed on the sacrificial altar along with those of the priest.

The sacrifice having been completed, preparation for Communion then begins with the Our Father, the prayer that Christ Himself taught us. In the *Agnus Dei* we ask Him once more for mercy and peace, as we prepare to receive Our Lord in Holy Communion—"Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world. Have mercy on us. ... Have mercy on us. ... Grant us peace." The priest fractures the Host, turns to the people and before long, echoing the words of the centurion, we will once again say: "Lord, I am

not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.” The Sacrifice having been completed and the Victim consumed we conclude our liturgy in the Roman Rite simply and without greater fanfare with a blessing over the people and the dismissal.

It is so easy for us to let these ceremonies and the words that accompany them become second nature to the point that we repeat them over and over again without even thinking about what they really mean. We will soon have words that will give a sense of the sacred and the transcendence of the Almighty God. They will be words truly worthy of the most important event that we could ever experience in our life: the Holy Sacrifice of the God-Man on Calvary. As you little by little prepare to make the new words your own, don't just memorize them but let them sink deep into your soul, so that in their beauty and profound meaning you will join yourself with the priest so that just as the bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ, you may be transformed to become the new man in Christ that you are called to be.