



## What's a Missal, Anyway?

By Father Greg Friedman, O.F.M.

**T**HE LITURGY is the public work of the Church, all over the world. Across the globe, our creed and our prayers capture what we all believe as Catholics.

Even in the early Church, a time when the presider improvised many of the prayers at Eucharist, some common phrases and expressions were used. The leader would recall the words of Jesus at the Last Supper. Teachings of Jesus and the apostles would be quoted from memory or read from collections of sayings and letters circulated throughout the Church. Parts of the Hebrew Scriptures were used, such as the Book of Psalms.

As the Church grew and became the official religion of the Roman Empire, common, agreed-upon forms of the prayers, gestures and order of the Mass took shape. Eventually, these became organized into what we know today as rites. Rite is the term for "a standardized way to worship."

### Ancient prayers for today

The ceremonies of the Roman Rite were eventually collected, over time, into a book commonly called a missal. *Missal* comes from the Latin *Missale*, "Mass book." The Roman Missal (the red book that you see on the altar) contains the prayers of the priest and the responses of the people, as well as the instructions for liturgy and the Order of the Mass. (Another book, the Lectionary, contains sacred Scripture. It is often carried in the opening procession and put in a prominent place, then is used to proclaim God's Word.)

In a powerful way, our Sunday liturgy is rooted in ancient gestures and words, translated anew for our time. As we adapt to the new translation of the Roman Missal, we have an opportunity to delve into our history, discover ancient treasures again and allow the Holy Spirit to work—as the Spirit always has—to transform us at Eucharist into the Body of Christ.

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## Why Missals Change

By the time of the 16th century, many of the Church's practices, including the liturgy, had fallen into disrepair. We all know about the Protestant Reformation, how what started as a need for reform within the Church became much more than that! Reacting to the upheaval of that Reformation, the Council of Trent met, on and off, from 1545 to 1563. It offered clear statements of Catholic teaching and introduced many reforms, including a major revision of the liturgy.

### The Gloria

A BIG CHANGE in the new translation of the people's parts of the prayers for Mass comes in the Gloria. It's more faithful to the Latin original. You'll notice a different opening, closer to the angels' familiar words from St. Luke's Christmas story: "on earth peace to people of good will." Then the Gloria breaks out in five statements expressing our praises of God—a rhythmic litany which builds phrase on phrase. Our new English version has a subtle emphasis on our personal sinfulness later in the prayer.

A new, comprehensive "Roman Missal" was promulgated by Pope Pius V in 1570. This Roman Missal governed the way people in the Western Church celebrated Mass until the time of the Second Vatican Council.

That 1960s Council, like the Council of Trent, saw the need to reform the liturgy once again. But Vatican II didn't discard all that history and tradition. Instead, it built upon it. Following the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI gave us a *revised* edition of the venerable Roman Missal, with lots of changes—changes which my generation lived through.

Now, less than a half-century later, a *third* edition of the Roman Missal has been prepared and translated from Latin, the official language of the Church. It's that book which will guide us in common prayer for the foreseeable future.

As you think about the changes in the Mass prayers, and perhaps ask why we have certain structured prayers and actions, let me try to give you "my take."

All of us as Catholics understand something of the meaning of the Mass deep in our hearts! But the external words and gestures at Mass help to bring us that meaning. They link us to what Jesus did in his life, death and resurrection. They help us to open ourselves to God in common prayer. The external structure helps a lot—even if it may seem strange or different to outsiders, or even to Catholics at times!

The wide acceptance of the changes begun by the new missal offers a more literal translation of the official Latin text, which may seem to some a step backward. It more clearly translates some Scripture passages used in the liturgy, and is more poetic in places. The language is more formal, but some of the new translations require explanation so that we may pray them well. I'll address some of these changes later in this series.



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*This brief handout series is adapted from the 18-segment video, Catholic Update Guide to Changes in the Mass, produced by St. Anthony Messenger Press and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.*

### Questions

- 1 Why is it important that Catholics share the same prayers at liturgy?
- 2 How is changing public prayer a challenge?
- 3 How are the changes an opportunity?

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