

The New Translation of the Holy Mass: The Gloria, Continued

by Brian W. MacMichael

After examining the first part of the Gloria last week, we turn to the second half of this beautiful, ancient hymn. It is helpful once again to reproduce the entire text of the new Gloria translation:

**Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to people of good will.**

**We praise you,
we bless you,
we adore you,
we glorify you,
we give you thanks for your great glory,
Lord God, heavenly King,
O God, almighty Father.**

**Lord Jesus Christ, Only Begotten Son,
Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father,
you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us;
you take away the sins of the world, receive our prayer;
you are seated at the right hand of the Father, have mercy on us.**

**For you alone are the Holy One,
you alone are the Lord,
you alone are the Most High,
Jesus Christ,
with the Holy Spirit,
in the glory of God the Father. Amen.**

The first half of the hymn is addressed to God the Father, whereas the remainder is addressed to God the Son. Right at the beginning, we notice a change, with “only Son of the Father” being replaced by the title, “Only Begotten Son.” The phrase “Son of the Father” is moved to after “Lord God, Lamb of God.”

The addition of “Only Begotten Son” recovers a key phrase from the Latin text – “*Fili Unigenite*.” This is a venerable title of Jesus Christ, which speaks of the fact that the Son of God comes forth from the Father, yet is no less an eternal Person of the Divine Trinity. We may draw a connection to the Nicene Creed, in which we profess that Jesus Christ is “begotten, not made.”

The subsequent lines contain the final changes in the new Gloria. Unlike our current translation, this text includes two lines (rather than one) that begin with “you take away the sins of the world,” thereby reflecting the Latin text. By regaining this line and an additional “have mercy on us” in the next line, the new translation features a classic threefold structure of supplication: “have mercy on us...receive our prayer...have mercy on us.” We also see this sort of structure in the Kyrie and Lamb of God.

In addition, there is a slight change within the phrase, “you take away the sins of the world” (which comes from John 1:29). The current translation has “sin of the world,” while the new translation will have the plural, “sins” (in Latin, “*peccata*”). Though a seemingly minor change, it does give greater emphasis to the fact that Christ does not just conquer sin in general, but also forgives all our individual sins.

Having examined the text of the Gloria, it is appropriate to say a few words about the musical implications. The new translation of the Order of Mass will, of course, necessitate that new sung settings be written for the parts of the Mass. Due to substantial changes in wording, the Gloria will be the most challenging piece for sacred music composers to render in English. For instance, the fivefold description of worship – “We praise you, we bless you, we adore you, we glorify you, we give you thanks for your great glory” – is quite different from the current phrasing.

It is important to recognize that the Gloria really should be sung whenever possible – it is a hymn, after all. The text of the Gloria is also most clearly expressed when it is sung straight through (“through-composed”) without refrains (i.e., repetition of the opening line). This maintains its overall structure and flow. Recall again that the first half is addressed to the Father, and the second half to the Son – interjecting lines from one part into another disrupts the content.

Having musical settings that are simple to learn, yet very beautiful, will contribute greatly to making Mass more reverent and giving proper glory to God. The best-known Latin chant version of the “*Gloria in excelsis Deo*” (the one from Mass VIII) is both simple and sublime, allowing the singer to linger gracefully upon such phrases as the aforementioned five descriptions of worship, all within the fluid rhythm of Gregorian chant. Official, intuitive English chant versions of the Gloria and other Mass parts have also been developed, drawing inspiration from various traditional Latin settings.

The new translation will present many similar opportunities in the area of sacred music.

Gloria text reproduced with permission of the International Commission on English in the Liturgy.