

The New Translation of the Holy Mass: The Eucharistic Prayer, Part I

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Last week, we began looking at the new translations we shall encounter in the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and we made our way to the Preface. At the conclusion of the Preface comes the Sanctus, which in Latin means “Holy.” The Sanctus, like the Gloria, is intended to be sung – in fact, many different settings of the Latin text exist even in Gregorian chant. Here is the English translation we will begin singing this Advent:

Holy, Holy, Holy Lord **God of hosts.**
Heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.

The only textual difference from our current version is that “God of power and might” becomes “God of hosts.” The word “hosts” refers to a great gathering or multitude, and speaks here of God’s command over the heavenly host of angelic armies. This reference has a Biblical foundation in Isaiah 6:1-3, where the prophet writes, “I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne...Seraphim were stationed above... ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts!’ they cried one to the other. ‘All the earth is filled with his glory!’” And in Luke 2:13, a “multitude of the heavenly host” also announced the birth of Jesus to the shepherds.

The words of the final three lines can be found in the Gospel of Matthew, during the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem before His Passion, as the people shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David; blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord; hosanna in the highest” (Mt 21:9). Versions of this acclamation appear in the other Gospels, and the “Blessed is he...” line comes from Psalm 118, amidst a passage that became understood as a reference to Christ.

The Sanctus reminds us that all creatures on “heaven and earth” owe thanksgiving to God (“Eucharist” actually means “thanksgiving”). And if we truly believe that the angels are also present and worshiping with us as we celebrate the Holy Eucharist, then every fiber of our being should reflect the utmost reverence. Therefore, immediately after the Sanctus, we kneel. Kneeling is a sign of respect and humility that is distinctly human and bodily – it is something that even the angels, being pure spirit, cannot do.

There are four main Eucharistic Prayers used during the Mass. Eucharistic Prayer I (the Roman Canon) was formerly the only Eucharistic Prayer used in Roman Catholic worship. As the name suggests, it came from Rome, and invokes many early Roman Popes and Martyrs (“We honor Linus, Cletus, Clement, Sixtus...”). After the Second Vatican Council, we received Eucharistic Prayers II, III, and IV – all of which also have origins in regional liturgies of the Early Church.

The Eucharistic Prayers are rich texts, but here we will examine just a couple of noteworthy translation changes. The first is in Eucharistic Prayer II, when the priest asks God, “Make holy, therefore, these gifts, we pray, by sending down your Spirit upon them like the dewfall.” This new mention of “dewfall” may sound odd, but it is actually a powerful Biblical image. In Exodus 16, the Lord tells Moses that He will rain down a daily portion of bread, which would appear as “dew” in the morning. Numbers 11:9 says, “When the **dew fell** upon the camp in the night, the manna fell with it.”

The Eucharistic connection between manna and the dew becomes even more profound when we consider that the Our Father, which we pray before Holy Communion, also speaks of our daily bread. The manna was only to be gathered as a daily portion, in order to cultivate complete trust in the Lord. The Eucharist, as the fulfillment of the manna, is our constant recourse and sustenance.

The second example comes in Eucharistic Prayer III. There is a familiar line that currently reads: “from east to west, a perfect offering may be made to the glory of your name.” This will instead become a more faithful rendering of Malachi 1:11: “from the rising of the sun to its setting a pure sacrifice may be offered...” While the geographic east-west imagery is beautiful in its own right, it does not carry the full cosmic scope of both space and time implied in the rising and setting of the sun. The new imagery conveys the sense that the Holy Mass and the one Sacrifice of Jesus Christ have a truly eternal quality.