

The New Translation of the Holy Mass: The First Sunday of Advent

by Brian W. MacMichael

Several weeks ago, we published an introductory article about the new English translation of the Roman Missal, the prayer book for the Holy Mass. All of us will start using this new translation in one year, on the First Sunday of Advent (November 27) in 2011. Advent is the beginning of the Church's liturgical year, therefore offering an ideal time for such an important change, which has been four decades in the making.

There will be a great many benefits to the new translation of the texts of the Mass, and we will examine them in detail in this series of articles. The prayers will be much closer to the original Latin, which remains the official language of the Roman Catholic Church. By fidelity to the Latin, we will also find that our liturgical prayer in English is much closer to what is being prayed in other languages. All the vernacular translations of the Mass are meant to reflect the Latin texts, which are many centuries old and have a tremendous history behind them.

The prayers of the Mass are also very Scriptural in their origins, and the new translation will more effectively draw out the Biblical references that have not been as clear in our current translation. Again, accuracy in translation will be a hallmark of the new Missal, and this will bring with it stronger theological content and catechetical opportunities.

Another fruit of the new translation will be its beauty. It will feature a rich, dignified, and often poetic language – markedly different from our everyday conversational English today, or from the style of our current Mass prayers.

The advantages of the new texts are best illustrated by example. The following is the current opening prayer for Mass this Sunday, the First Sunday of Advent:

All-powerful God,
increase our strength of will for doing good
that Christ may find an eager welcome at his coming
and call us to his side in the kingdom of heaven...

Now, when we begin using the new texts in a year, the same prayer from the same Mass will look like this final draft translation:

Grant, we pray, almighty God,
that your faithful may resolve to run forth with righteous deeds
to meet your Christ who is coming,
so that, gathered at his right hand,
they may be worthy to possess the heavenly kingdom...

What is immediately striking about the new prayer is its eloquence. It is also longer than the current translation, because the translators who worked on the new Missal made every effort to preserve and convey the full content of the Latin. The result is the much grander imagery of not simply waiting to welcome Christ, but running forth to meet Him "with righteous deeds."

This beautiful prayer is appropriate on several levels. First, it is a terrific way to begin the Advent Season, which is actually meant to be a penitential time during which we prepare ourselves for Christmas. We properly welcome the incarnate Messiah by repenting of our sins and seeking Him out, as did the shepherds and the Magi in the Gospels. Imitation of Christ is the goal of our entire lives as Christians, with the ultimate hope of joining the Saints in His “heavenly kingdom.”

It also reveals an eschatological trajectory to the Church’s calendar (“eschatology” is the theological focus on the “last things” – death, judgment, and eternity). At the end of the liturgical year is the Solemnity of Christ the King, which we celebrated just last Sunday. Christ is the alpha and the omega; the beginning and end.

Finally, this prayer will set a very good tone at its inaugural use on the First Sunday of Advent next year, as we welcome the new English translation of the holy Mass and seek to draw closer to Our Lord through a renewed sense of reverence in the sacred liturgy. In the meantime, I encourage individuals or families to consider collecting examples of these new texts to pray at home. May we resolve to enter more deeply into the words of the Mass over the next twelve months, in the interest of an ever more fruitful encounter with Jesus Christ.