

The New Translation of the Holy Mass: Christmas

by Brian W. MacMichael

Christus natus est nobis! Christ is born unto us! After our Advent time of preparation, we rejoice in Jesus Christ's coming at Christmas. The celebration of Christmas is so sacred (it ranks second in the liturgical year after the Easter Triduum), that it is observed with an Octave – that is, eight days, symbolizing a heavenly perfection that transcends our earthly reckoning of a seven-day week. The Octave of Christmas culminates in the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God on January 1.

Although Advent of 2010 is now complete, our preparation must continue for next Advent, when we will begin using the new English translation of the holy Mass. The liturgical observance of Christmas actually provides many opportunities to reflect on the fruits of the new Missal, because the Nativity of the Lord is celebrated with four different sets of Mass texts, corresponding to different times. The Masses of Christmas are: the Vigil in the evening of December 24, the Midnight Mass, the Mass at Dawn on December 25, and Mass during the Day on December 25. Let us examine a couple of the anticipated translations of the proper prayers for Christmas.

The following is the current Prayer over the Offerings for the Christmas Mass at Dawn, said by the celebrant after the gifts of bread and wine are brought forward before the Eucharistic Prayer:

**Father,
may we follow the example of your Son
who became man and lived among us.
May we receive the gift of divine life
through these offerings here on earth.**

The new translation of this same prayer will look like this:

**May these gifts, O Lord, we pray,
offered on this feast of our Savior's birth,
be worthy of the mystery we celebrate:
just as he who was born a man
shone forth also as God,
so may these earthly gifts bring us gifts divine.**

The new translation makes explicit reference to the day of Christ's birth, and the entire prayer flows much more poetically. In addition, it maintains the imagery of light that characterizes the prayers of the Christmas Mass at Dawn. Light not only corresponds to the hour of daybreak at which this Mass is celebrated, but also is a revered symbol for Christ. When the prayer says Christ "shone forth also as God," it especially calls to mind the prologue of the Gospel of John, wherein the Word who "was God" became man "and made his dwelling among us" as the light that "shines in the darkness."

Another example is the Collect for Christmas Mass during the Day. This is the current translation, which this year we are hearing for the final time:

**Lord God,
we praise you for creating man,
and still more for restoring him in Christ.
Your Son shared our weakness:
may we share his glory.**

That prayer will be replaced by the new translation next year:

**O God,
who wonderfully created the dignity of human nature
and still more wonderfully restored it,
grant, we pray,
that we may partake in the divinity of him
who humbled himself to share in our humanity.**

Once again, in fully conveying the rich content of the original Latin prayer, the new translation achieves both beauty and eloquence, while also expressing the great mystery of the Incarnation more clearly – Christ “humbled Himself (Phil. 2:8) to share in our humanity” so that we might share in the divine nature (2 Pt. 1:4) in heaven.

Certain texts from the Order of Mass also have a special connection to the Nativity. The Gloria, which returns at Christmas after being absent for most of the Advent season, recalls the angels’ chorus of praise before the shepherds on the night of Christ’s birth: “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests” (Lk. 2:14).

Moreover, at Christmas and on the Solemnity of the Annunciation (March 25), we genuflect during the Creed at the words that reference the Incarnation, because these two feasts are the primary liturgical celebrations of Christ’s coming as man, with Christ’s birth observed exactly nine months after the Annunciation. By touching a knee to the ground, we reverence the fact that the Son of God humbled Himself to dwell on earth.

In the weeks to come, we will examine both the Gloria and the Creed in more detail. For now, let us welcome the holy Infant Jesus into our hearts and homes, and ask the incarnate Word to help us readily receive the words of His sacred liturgy with joy.