

The Dialogues of the Mass

The New English Translation

Within the next year or so we will begin to use a new English translation of the *Roman Missal*, which will replace the book we currently use for Mass, the *Sacramentary*. The new translation comes from the Third Edition of the Latin Missal, approved by Pope John Paul II in 2000.

This translation will bring some changes in the wording of the familiar responses and prayers we use at Mass. While this may cause some difficulty at first, the very unfamiliarity of the new language may help us reflect more deeply on the meaning of what we are saying or singing. This series of reflections presents the biblical background and liturgical significance of the dialogues and responses of the Mass to help us appreciate more fully what we are saying. Both current and the new wording will be given.



Full, Conscious, and Active Participation

The primary goal of the reform of the liturgy at the Second Vatican Council was to promote the participation of the faithful in the liturgy. The key paragraph of the *Sacrosanctum concilium* (SC), The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, called for people to be led to “that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations called for by the very nature of the liturgy.” [SC 14]. To the question “How do we participate fully, consciously, and actively?” the Constitution answers “To promote active participation, the people should be encouraged to take part by means of acclamation, responses, psalms, antiphons, and songs, as well as by actions, gestures and bearing.” [SC 30].

Much of our celebration of the Mass is punctuated by short dialogues between the presiding priest and the liturgical assembly. From the opening greetings with their responses (The Grace and Peace of God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you/ And also with you) to the familiar (The Lord be with you/And also with you), or even the response “Amen” that we make to “Through Christ our Lord” or the other endings of prayers, there is a continual series of dialogues between the presider and the rest of liturgical assembly.

In the liturgy as in daily life, we rely on a number of standard formulas and familiar forms of words for the invitations and responses. “Hi, how are things?” “Fine, thanks. What’s new with you?” When we meet a neighbor or colleague on the street, we don’t frantically rack our brains trying to think of something to say. We have within us a set of familiar responses that we automatically use to respond to and greet others. So, too, when we celebrate the Eucharist there are a number of customary dialogic exchanges with the priest that engages us in the liturgical celebration. These responses also tell part of the story of who we are as Catholic Christians.

Our Response is to God’s Action

The ritual dialogues at the Eucharist reflect the pattern of salvation history seen throughout the Bible. God takes the initiative; our words and actions are in response. God called the chosen people, the Israelites, to enter into a covenant relationship, to seek forgiveness after breaking that covenant, and to welcome the salvation that comes from trust in God alone. Their response was to be seen not just in acts of worship but in deeds of justice also.

Now God calls us, the followers of Jesus Christ, to embrace the everlasting covenant with this world that Jesus established through his suffering, death and resurrection. Our response is to worship in Spirit and truth, and to serve Jesus himself in the poor.

The ritual dialogues between the priest and the rest of the liturgical assembly reflect this pattern of divine initiative and human response. They mirror the loving dialogue that God holds with us in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. The priest speaks words that convey the saving work in Christ in which God now invites us to share. We respond in words of praise, thanksgiving, petition and contrition inspired by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

As we shall see throughout these reflections, much of the wording of these ritual dialogues draws upon the words of Sacred Scripture.

Words that do Things

When we greet someone with the words, "Happy New Year!" our words do not automatically guarantee or effect what we wish for another. The ritual dialogues between the priest and the assembly are different. They are "words that do things", "performative speech", that is, words that actually bring about what they declare or express. Such words do not merely describe things as they are or comment on them. Rather, they change things. The power of performative speech is attested to in the healing miraculous healings of Jesus. Our Lord told the paralyzed man, "Your sins are forgiven" (Matt 9:3), and they were forgiven. "Be made clean," Jesus said to the leper. "And the leprosy left him immediately" (Luke 5:13-14). The words of Jesus brought spiritual and physical healing to those in need.

When the bride and groom exchange their marriage vows, the words they speak unite them in the bond of marriage. A judge in a courtroom uses performative speech in declaring, "We are adjourned." These words bring the trial to a conclusion. Similarly, when the priest or deacon says, "Go forth, the Mass is ended," the eucharistic celebration is officially over. Our response, "Thanks be to God," expresses our gratitude for the Eucharist that we have celebrated in company with Christ. Here we glimpse the truth that "the dialogues between the priest and the faithful gathered together...are not simply outward signs of communal celebration but foster and bring about communion between priest and people" (General Instruction of the Roman Missal, no. 34). They also deepen our union with God as we respond in words we have received from our ancestors in the faith.

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