

New words to old prayers: A new Roman Missal

As most Catholics are aware by now, the prayers we pray at Mass will sound different beginning Sunday, Nov. 27. That's because we will be praying from a new edition of the Roman Missal.

Don't mess with my Mass!

That's the plaintive cry I hear over and over when I begin to talk about the changes coming to our Mass prayers.

But we've always said them that way. ... I don't like change. ... No one can tell me how to pray!

Why are the words to the prayers we've recited for years now being changed? Were we not praying correctly in the past? It is not a question of right or wrong, but rather of a different perspective on translating texts. There are several reasons for a new Missal, which we'll explore more in depth in subsequent articles, but to understand these reasons, one needs to clarify some liturgical jargon and offer a bit of historical perspective.

What's a Roman Missal? It is the large red book used at Mass by the priest, occasionally held by the altar server, and placed on the altar during the Eucharistic Prayer. On its spine is written + SACRAMENTARY + in gold letters. In this book are found all the prayers of the Mass for Sundays, feasts, weekdays, sacraments, etc. This includes the prayers we speak or sing at every Mass and the prayers that the priest recites alone. The introduction to this book is known as the "General Instruction of the Roman Missal," or GIRM.

Why is the name of the book changing from Sacramentary to Roman Missal?

As early as the sixth and seventh centuries, sacramentaries were collections of booklets of prayers used by priests for the celebration of Mass. There was also a lectionary for lectors, an antiphonal for cantors, liturgical calendars and other books for sacramental rites. Many versions of these existed side by side, until eventually

they were united in one volume, the missal. The first printing of a Latin “Missale Romanum” (Roman Missal) appeared in 1474.

Various versions existed until after the Council of Trent, when a new uniform missal was promulgated by Pope Pius V in 1570. It came to be known as the “Tridentine Missal.” Over the next four centuries minor modifications were made by several popes. Greater modifications appeared in the early 20th century, and radical changes were made to it as a result of the Second Vatican Council in the late 1960s. One of the changes resulted in the separation of the lectionary readings from the Order of Mass and prayers. In English, the term Sacramentary was restored to this second book, perhaps to recall those earlier sacramentaries. Now, however, the term Roman Missal is to be used in English, as it was already in most languages.

Is the Missal we are using at present the same as the one that first appeared in 1965?

No, the first interim rite that was issued in Latin was quickly translated into the vernacular languages of the people. In English, that translation was a more literal one than the ones that followed in 1970 and 1973. At that time, for example, the response “Et cum spiritu tuo” was translated “And with your spirit,” and the translation of the Gloria closely resembled the text of the Glory to God that we will soon be using.

The process of translating texts into English, the reason why these texts changed in 1970, and the many reasons they are doing so again make for a fascinating – at least to this liturgist – discussion and will be the topic of my next article, on the third edition of the Roman Missal. Until then, you may want to consult the Roman Missal website of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, USCCB.org/RomanMissal.