

THE NEW ROMAN MISSAL - ORIGINS

What Catholics in the English-speaking world began to experience in worship five years ago began in 1963 during Vatican Council II when a commission of English-speaking bishops from around the world gathered to begin what would be a ten-year process of translating the “new” Mass from Latin into English. Now, if you’re old enough to remember, we were celebrating Mass in English for about seven years before the publication of the official 1973 Roman Missal (or *Sacramentary* as it was then called), but with what was merely a provisional text. For the next twenty-four years, the *Sacramentary* would be revised or amended five times, though most of us would have been unaware of the additions or subtle changes contained in those editions.

But by the time the last edition of the Roman Missal was published in 1997, the Church’s Congregation for Divine Worship in Rome had already begun a re-evaluation of the principles of translation of the Missal from Latin to the vernacular – whether English, German, Italian, Polish, etc. Those new guidelines were published in 2001 and required Conferences of Bishops throughout the world, in every language group, to essentially “go back to the drawing board” and re-translate the Latin version of the Roman Missal of Vatican II into the languages used by their local Churches. That English re-translation was finalized and approved in 2010 and all the local Churches in all the countries of the English-speaking world were charged with establishing a timetable for introducing this New Roman Missal to their communities.

Now lots of questions can arise when we consider all of this, the foremost of which might be: what’s the big deal with Latin? For the first seven centuries of the Church (longer in some places), the Mass was celebrated in the language of the people. It wasn’t until the 8th century when the Emperor Charlemagne set a goal for himself of re-creating the Roman Empire as the *Holy Roman Empire* that political pressure was placed on the Church to make Latin the language of worship in support of Charlemagne’s ambition. Thus, there’s nothing innately sacred about Latin in worship; it’s far more of an archaic political accommodation that became “sacred” through centuries of practice. But the issue of Latin and its relation to the post-Vatican II translation process is a subject I’ll consider in the next article in this series.

Looking back five years, I’m sure you faced the same challenge I did in learning a new way to pray at Mass. I was certainly skeptical about all of it until I, along with about 1,000 other priests, had the privilege of hearing the priest/scholar/composer Jan Michael Joncas delve into the history of liturgical translation while unfolding the poetic beauty and theological richness of the new mass texts—which, admittedly, are occasionally obscured by some convoluted phrasings and run-on sentences. Over the next weeks and months, I’ll invite you to appreciate, just a bit more, the beauty and richness of this five-year-old Mass.

Fr. Bob