

THE NEW ROMAN MISSAL - LATIN, ROMAN: WHAT'S THAT ALL ABOUT?

Before the *New Roman Missal* came into use five years ago, the book the priest used at Mass was called the *Sacramentary*. I honestly don't know who decided on that name after Vatican II, but it did make sense. That book contained the prayers used at every mass as well as the prayers for all the other *Sacraments* celebrated in the context of the Eucharist such as Confirmation, Anointing of the Sick, Matrimony, etc.; so *Sacramentary* clearly made sense. But so does *missal* which is defined as—big surprise—“the book containing the prayers used at *Mass*.” If you're my age or older, that word should be a familiar word, since it wasn't uncommon for many of us to carry a *missal* to church so we could understand the prayers the priest was saying in Latin.

But what about *Roman*? Well, we are, after all, members of the Roman Catholic Church. *Roman* doesn't make us residents of Rome or citizens of Italy, but simply identifies the *rite*, the ritual by which we celebrate the sacraments, particularly the Mass. Whatever one might think of the seamier side of Church history, including the “bad” Popes (far too many of them) or the Inquisition, it's hard to imagine the survival of the Church without the Edict of Constantine in the fourth century which legitimized Christianity in the Roman Empire, falling just short of making it a state religion. In many ways the Catholic Church owes its survival, strength and universal expansion to the organizational ability of Rome. So, for better or worse, depending on your point of view, *Roman* Catholic is what we are and we are connected inseparably to the universal Church headquartered in Rome with (thankfully these days) Pope Francis as our leader.

Finally, there's the issue of Latin and the mandate given to conferences of Bishops to go back to the drawing board in 2001 to make vernacular translations of the mass correspond more closely to the Latin originals of Vatican II. This is often the most problematic issue for contemporary Catholics and I am certainly one of them. But as I mentioned last week, I acquired a new appreciation of these newly translated prayers when I heard Fr. Jan Michael Joncas explain to Chicago priests the process by which those Vatican II prayers were composed—something that, unfortunately, my generation never learned in the seminary. It turns out that the Fathers of Vatican II didn't just re-translate the pre-Council Latin Mass or go back to the Tridentine Mass of the 16th century. Instead, they gathered liturgical experts from around the world and went back to the **earliest** mass texts they could find—mostly in Greek—from as far back as the third century, to create a new liturgy that would be as faithful as possible to the original prayers of some of the most ancient Christian communities. That was a brilliant and revolutionary thing to do because they were actually scraping off the barnacles of poor translations that had accumulated in the prayers of the Mass over the course of many centuries.

Those international experts after Vatican II were working in a language they could all understand—Latin—and created the prayers of the Mass in that same language with the understanding that conferences of Bishops around the world would then undertake the translation of the Latin Mass into the vernacular of their communities. And so it came to pass that the English-speaking bishops of the world created a committee called ICEL, the International Commission on English in the Liturgy, composed of scholars charged with the task of translating the new Latin Mass into English-speaking Catholics of the world, from here to Canada, Ireland, Australia and beyond. That sounds like a great idea, right? Well it didn't work out so well because of the way the scholars were instructed to do their translations. But that's for the next article a few weeks from now.....

Fr. Bob