

31st A October 30, 2011

On the First Sunday of Advent, in just 28 (27) days, English-speaking Catholics will experience the greatest change in Mass in 40 years. You may recall that a few weeks ago, I mentioned how we moved from Jesus' words at the Last Supper to the new translation: How Jesus spoke Aramaic, a cousin of Hebrew. How pretty quickly the Mass began to be prayed in Greek, the language of the people. How in about 300 AD, the Mass prayers began to be written down. In perhaps 600 AD, Mass was celebrated in Latin, which everyone could understand. There was some variation in the Mass prayers until 1570. By then, Martin Luther had begun the Protestant Reformation and the Church had called the Council of Trent. From that Council came the Roman Missal, used throughout the Catholic world from 1570 to 1970.

Meanwhile, Vatican II was held in Rome from 1962 to 1965. The pope and bishops decided to reform the liturgy. The goal of the reform was the "full, conscious, and active participation" of the people at Mass. To help that participation, Mass would be permitted in the language of the people. The new, reformed Catholic Mass was translated into English and published in 1970.

In 1978, Pope John Paul II took office. He knew many languages including Latin, and John Paul realized that the 1970 English translation was inaccurate—very inaccurate. Pope Benedict, who also knows Latin perfectly, agreed. To give one example, when the priest says, "The Lord be with you," the Latin says, "Et cum

spiritu tuo." [And with your spirit.] The 1970 translation—the one we use today—simply says, "and also with you." So in four weeks, we will be using a new English translation of the 1970 Latin. The wording will be more formal, less our everyday language. Sentences will be longer, because the Latin sentences are longer.

This new Roman Missal will make a difference: if we try to be here every week; if we try to understand the prayers, and try to participate. And, of course, if Jesus means something to us.

Catholic Mass really is about Jesus: about the Old Testament, which looked for him and was part of Jesus own faith. Mass is about his life and his teachings. Mass brings the Last Supper to us, when Jesus took bread and wine and said "This is my Body and Blood, broken and poured out for you. Do this in memory of me." To be at Mass is to be seated at the Last Supper.

To be at Mass is also to be at the Cross on Good Friday, when the Body of Jesus was literally, physically was broken and shed blood. At Mass, we are supposed to give own lives completely over to God the Father, just as Jesus did on Good Friday.

To be at Mass is to be with the apostles on Easter Sunday, when they realized that Jesus really was again alive and in their midst. The Risen Christ is here when we gather for Eucharist—in you, the baptized assembly, in the Word proclaimed, in the person of the priest, and in the form of bread and wine, which have become his actual presence. Mass is not a visit to a museum; it is a direct encounter with God in Jesus, an encounter that joins us all together.

Finally, to be at Mass is to be at Pentecost, in the upper room. Jesus pours out the Holy Spirit upon us so that we can continue his work on earth. Mass is not like a long sleep on a cruise ship; it is more like landing briefly on an aircraft carrier—for reviewing the mission, for refueling, and for a new set of directions.

Usually during Mass I gaze up toward heaven, as it were. A few months ago, I looked down on the consecrated bread and wine, and had the wonderful realization that the whole story of Jesus is here on the altar: his life, his teaching, the Last Supper, his death, his resurrection, Pentecost. That view alone makes it worthwhile to be a priest.

Four weeks from today. New words, new music, same Christ.