

DEWFALL

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“So what brings you to South Africa?” my hosts asked me. I felt privileged to spend a few days in the home of this lovely couple. They were friends of my friend, Sister Sue Rakoczy IHM, whom I was visiting near the St. Joseph’s Theological Institute where she teaches spiritual direction. Sue had said to me once, “I know you’ll come to South Africa one day,” and I thought that was nearly impossible. But there I was. I had come for a meeting of the International Commission on English in the Liturgy and lingered for the reunion. Sue’s friends were Anglican, so I searched for the right words to explain what had brought me to South Africa. This was January of 2007. I said, “The Catholic Church will soon be receiving a new English translation of the mass. Almost every word we say and hear at the eucharist is a translation from a Latin original. The English we use now is 40 years old, the Vatican has established new rules for translation, a commission of English-speaking bishops from around the world convenes once or twice a year to review the work, and I’ve been taking an occasional break from my parish to act as a kind of recording secretary for them, keeping track of the proposed changes – which words are accepted, which are rejected, and why.”

This explanation seemed to satisfy my hosts. In fact the wife’s face beamed with understanding. “Oh,” she said eagerly. “So are you making the language more contemporary? More suited to the way people think and speak now?” “No, that’s not the idea. You see, there is some nuance in the original language that translators feel is still hidden, so the project is to get more meaning into the words we say.” With that, she cocked her head, raised her eyes and assumed the very same perplexed look that has fallen on the faces of quite a few Catholics in the four years since that conversation.

The case for the revised translation has been difficult to sell, but having watched it at the table over the past few years, I’ve become convinced there really is a good case. The whole process takes place because the liturgy, to borrow the theme of this conference, which is so spot-on that you’re going to tire of hearing it by the end of the week, is ever ancient and ever new. If making the translation more contemporary means making it more colloquial, then no, that is not happening, but if it means making it more suitable to the spiritual needs and capabilities of the people of God in the light of the Second Vatican Council, then yes, it is a very contemporary translation. It has to be. It can’t not be. It is the work of the Church today. Some are saying it is being handed to us from on high, and I suppose so, but I’m not convinced those who are “on high” are by definition inconsiderate of those below. We are living through a period in which the liturgy is adapting to its surroundings once again, and people will be encountering the eucharist in a different way that calls for good catechesis to prepare them for a fruitful reception.

For this talk, I’ve been asked to explain to you the role of preparation, catechesis and leadership in the history of liturgical adaptation and reception. That’s all. Unfortunately for you, they told me my talk would begin at 7:45, but they never told me what time it should

end. So I suggested that we take just one prayer, Eucharistic Prayer II, as a test case because it tells a great story about adaptation, catechesis and reception. With it you can slice into history to see why the liturgy changed over time, and how the church prepared people to receive it.

The earliest record of what we now call Eucharistic Prayer II is found in a work known as the Apostolic Tradition. No one is sure who wrote it, when it was written or even what the title of it really is, but everyone agrees it's very important. It contains advice for the liturgy and the good order of the church. It probably dates to the third and fourth centuries. For a long time people assumed the author was Hippolytus, who holds the distinction of being an antipope and a saint, holding out much hope for the rest of us, but recent scholarship has seriously challenged the belief that he was the author. It seems more likely that it was the work of several hands over a generation or two. Scholars even doubt that the title of the work is the Apostolic Tradition; Hippolytus wrote something called the Apostolic Tradition; however, scholars cannot say for sure that this work actually holds that title. But you have to call it something, and that's the best we can do right now. This same document gave us rich information about the early days of the catechumenate and the rites of Christian initiation. It also contains prayers for the ordinations of deacons, priests and bishops, which influenced the way we celebrate those liturgies today. At the time the Apostolic Tradition was written, the newly ordained bishop was expected to preside over the eucharist and offer a eucharistic prayer spontaneously. It was reasonable to assume that a bishop would know how to say prayers of thanksgiving to God over the bread and wine. However, not every bishop could do this well, and many of you might feel awkward praying out loud spontaneously in front of a large group of people. So, the situation was very credible and quite human. To help out a bishop in this situation, the author of the Apostolic Tradition wrote out the text of a sample eucharistic prayer. That's how we got the earliest version of Eucharistic Prayer II. It started out as a catechetical aid for new bishops. We may safely assume that people received it positively because it was copied and recopied in various languages and places. We have no record of any catechesis of the faithful to help them receive this prayer. But the prayer itself certainly catechized them, something that still happens today; its content affirmed the beliefs that the faithful held. Nor do we have any record of how the people received this prayer. For all we know, there were some who liked it and others who thought it wasn't very good. You can imagine the comments people would have exchanged at a fourth century coffee and donuts: "I like it because it's short." "I think the sentences are too long." "The words are beautiful." "The vocabulary is strange." "It's a fresh sound." "It's turning the clock back." "Other countries are imitating our prayer." "It sounds like a bad translation." And so on. But somehow this eucharistic prayer held on and we are glad that it did.

It was a new prayer, but it borrowed some older forms. For example, it opened with a dialogue between the bishop and the people. The first part was brand new: *Dominus vobiscum*, the bishop said. *Et cum spiritu tuo*, the people responded. There is no record of that dialogue prior to the fourth century, and it seems to have originated either with a sign of peace before the eucharistic prayer or as the beginning of the prayer as we use it today. The next part, *Sursum corda*, they took from the works of St. Cyprian of Carthage, a third-century

African martyr. The final part of the dialogue, *Gratias agamus domino deo nostro*, was in use in pre-Christian Jewish prayers. It was a new arrangement, this dialogue, and you have to wonder how they taught people the correct responses, and if they had any clue how popular this exchange would become. The same dialogue appears in the Apostolic Constitutions from the Eastern wing of the Church, which date from the same period, and where the dialogue shows up at the start of the eucharistic prayer as well. This short liturgical conversation established the dual roles of presider and people, and the combined role they shared in offering the great eucharistic prayer. They adapted the opening of the prayer to the needs of the contemporary church, and it worked so well, that we still use this dialogue today. Every time you start Eucharistic Prayer II this way, you are participating in this dialogue the way it was first used 1700 years ago.

If you look up the original version of this eucharistic prayer in the Apostolic Tradition, you will recognize it, but you will also think that it is missing a few things: you won't find a *Sanctus*, for example. That hadn't been invented yet. Nor did this prayer mention the saints or make intercession for the dead. Believe it or not, it was even shorter than Eucharistic Prayer II is today. Perhaps this accounts for its early popularity.

The prayer did include what we would recognize as a preface, words of thanksgiving to God, these telling about the life and ministry of Jesus. As today no preface asks God to do anything, so this one offers thanks for what God has already done. The part that we call the institution narrative came next, and it too is shorter than the one we use now; it quotes Jesus saying only this much: "Take, eat, this is my body that will be broken for you," and "This is my blood that is shed for you." Those words form part of the praise and thanksgiving that the first part of the prayer gives God – one reason people thanked God is what Jesus did in his life and specifically at the Last Supper.

The Apostolic Tradition then includes what we would recognize as an anamnesis or memorial of the death and resurrection of Christ, and an offering of the elements on the altar. Then came the epiclesis, the prayer for the coming of the Holy Spirit onto the Church's offering. What surprises most Roman Catholics reading this ancient prayer today is that the epiclesis comes after the institution narrative, not before. We ask God to send the Spirit on the gifts before we hear the words of Jesus at the Last Supper because we believe that the consecration happens as we repeat the words of Christ, but it appears that in this case our ancestors thought those words performed a different function – the account of the Last Supper was part of the prayer of thanksgiving, and the epiclesis coming just a bit later consecrated the offering and filled the people who would share it.

This ancient prayer concluded with a rather expressive doxology: "through your Child Jesus Christ, through whom be glory and honor to you, Father and Son with the Holy Spirit, in your holy church, both now and to the ages of ages. Amen." It almost appears as though the Church is an expression of the Holy Spirit, and that the prayer made with the Holy Spirit is made not just in the Trinity but in the unity that is the community of the Church. Once again, we don't have information about the catechesis or reception of this prayer, which had been composed with the intention that it be adapted to suit the needs of the bishop and his people. But the preservation of this prayer indicates it succeeded on those fronts.

Not long after the Apostolic Tradition was being written, St. Ambrose wrote a book about the sacraments that included a section on the eucharist. There he handed on the text of a eucharistic prayer he had received; it's the earliest record of the one we call the Roman Canon or Eucharistic Prayer I. It too was shorter than the version we use today: no opening petition, no prayers for the living and the dead, no listing of saints. However, the kernel of what we know as Prayer I is there. In this case, Ambrose records the prayer within a catechetical textbook. He reports the words and explains their significance. Again we can assume that the reception of this text was positive because it was already in use before he got it, and it has endured all this time. During the institution narrative, Ambrose quotes the words of Jesus at slightly greater length than those found in the Apostolic Tradition: "Take this, all of you, and consume of it, for this is my body, which will be broken for many." "Take this, all of you, and drink from it, for this is my blood," and then "As often as you shall do this, so often will you do a commemoration of me, until I come again." This prayer continued to be handed on from one source to another and even appeared in the seventh-century Gelasian Sacramentary in a more developed form. It underwent occasional embellishments as the centuries rolled until it took on the shape we know today.

Over time there were various catechetical studies of the Roman Canon, and these have provided some interest especially to scholars and clergy, but not much was written for the rest of the faithful. Through most of history, the priest prayed the canon in Latin in a low voice with his back to the people. As it was practiced, the canon lost its capability of providing catechesis to the people in the context of the liturgy until handheld missals with translations of the prayer became popular in the decades before the Second Vatican Council. We don't have good examples of sermons preached on the canon or its prefaces. But we do know a few prefaces that were based on homilies. Today our second Christmas preface draws from a homily of Pope Leo the Great, and the eighth preface of Ordinary Time relies on Cyprian's treatise on the Lord's Prayer; the very same work that gave us *Sursum corda*, "Lift up your hearts," as part of the preface dialogue. Instead, the medieval prefaces, which were sung aloud, offered catechesis to the people; since the Roman Canon was intentionally handed on without its own preface, it became a perfect vehicle for adaptation: the insertion of words that praised God and catechized the people at the liturgy just before the Sanctus Sunday after Sunday.

I mention this about Eucharistic Prayer I because it became the only eucharistic prayer in use in the Roman Rite for well over a thousand years; hence, it was called the "canon," the way that you do things. You may ask, whatever happened to the prayer from the Apostolic Tradition? Why wasn't it the one chosen to become the Roman Canon, the way that we prayed the eucharistic prayer for all the centuries of Christianity? Was there something wrong with it? Was it not sufficiently adaptable to the needs of the people? Did its reception become unpopular? No, not really. That wasn't the problem. The problem was much simpler. The reason people quit using the eucharistic prayer from the Apostolic Tradition can be summarized in three words: somebody lost it. A partial copy of it showed up in Ethiopia in 1691, but the first complete copy did not appear until the year 1848— the same year the United States under President James Polk acquired most of what would become the Southwest Liturgical Conference in the controversial treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo; the year

when the first women's rights convention opened in Seneca Falls, New York; and the year when a first baseman was finally allowed to tag the base not just the runner for the out. Gradually, the importance of the Apostolic Tradition became known, but at that time the only eucharistic prayer you could use at mass was the Roman Canon, so the one in the Apostolic Tradition became a historical curiosity.

That changed after the Second Vatican Council. Pope Paul VI established a commission, the Consilium, to implement the liturgical vision of the council, and when its members discussed the Roman Canon, they realized they would have the opportunity to add other eucharistic prayers to the Roman Rite for the first time in centuries. Over 100 years had passed since a complete copy of the Apostolic Tradition had been found. During that time the significance of the prayer had been widely praised by scholars, and the people at the table designing the postconciliar liturgy were well aware of the unique opportunity that had fallen into their laps. Because the liturgy is ever ancient and ever new, they considered the possibility of adding the eucharistic prayer from the Apostolic Tradition to the Roman Rite. It seemed the perfect candidate to expand the repertoire beyond the Roman Canon. So the committee put it to a vote. It was unanimous – unanimous. A no-brainer. Everyone wanted to rescue the Apostolic Tradition's prayer from the shelf of history's antique shop and put into use at the table of the Lord in parish churches. You'll never guess what the post-Vatican II commission called it when they circulated the first draft: "Shorter Eucharistic Prayer". Of all its theological and historical traits, that was the one that facilitated its reception, and, let's be honest, that's the trait that still facilitates its reception. Originally, the Shorter Eucharistic Prayer was listed as the first of the four options under development. Eventually, the Roman Canon took over the first place because of its antiquity, and the study group changed that cheesy title of the next prayer to a more serviceable one: Eucharistic Prayer II.

The Post-Vatican II study groupmembers did not adopt this eucharistic prayer word for word. They tinkered with it. For example, one version of the preface told God that Jesus, "when he was conceived and made flesh, was shown to be your Son, being born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin." That could be misunderstood to mean that Jesus became God's Son at his birth. That had to be fixed. In doing so, they allowed the repaired preface to be interchanged with other prefaces, to increase the practicality of the prayer. Also, as noted earlier, there was no Sanctus; it was added for the sake of uniformity. The Sanctus then needed a bridge to link it to the next section. The institution narrative had to be lengthened to match the version that now appeared in the Roman Canon. Intercessions were appended. And, very significantly, they moved the epiclesis. As you recall, the original version had it after the institution narrative, but this was unthinkable to the modern Roman Catholic mind – you couldn't ask the Holy Spirit to change what had just been changed. Consequently the epiclesis was split into two, straddling the institution narrative: in the first part the priest asked God to send the Holy Spirit upon the bread and wine, and in the second part, he prayed that those partaking in the eucharist be gathered into one by the Holy Spirit. The concluding doxology of the prayer from the Apostolic Tradition was also simplified. The mention of the church was eliminated in order to unify the conclusion among all the eucharistic prayers. The result of all this is the prayer that we have come to know as Eucharistic Prayer II.

It was a big hit. Its straightforward structure became the paradigm for every newly composed eucharistic prayer: preface dialogue, preface, sanctus, post-sanctus transition, institution narrative, anamnesis, offering, intercessions, the first of which prayed for the unity of the people in the Holy Spirit, and the concluding doxology with its amen. Paragraph 79 of the General Instruction of the Roman Missal lists these parts of the eucharistic prayer, and the outline works perfectly as long as you are not looking at the Roman Canon. For all the respect we owe that prayer, it had evolved into a form that made it difficult for many to follow, and the official prayer of the Church has essentially looked beyond it to the earlier record of Eucharistic Prayer II, and made it the model of eucharistic praying in the Roman Rite.

That should have been the end of the story for Eucharistic Prayer II, a wonderful tale of a prayer that proved malleable enough to serve the fourth-century church, and with appropriate adaptations and happy receptions, the twentieth-century church. But a funny thing happened. Eucharistic Prayer II got translated. Its first English translation has served the Church well – people love it. But scholars could detect that some intended nuances were missing, not just here but elsewhere. The first translators were given some freedom of expression, and they took it. Now translators have a new brief, and the result is a different rendering of Eucharistic Prayer II. For the most part, people will recognize it as the same prayer, but there are differences. There are plenty of examples where the revised translation has improved the present one, such as the conclusion of the preface dialogue, where “It is right and just” will flow more smoothly into the first line of the preface, “It is truly right and just,” and where we now pray that God will bring the departed into the light of his presence, we will now pray that God will welcome them into the light of his face. However, there are other examples where, I admit, the revised translation will cause some people to cock their heads, raise their eyes, and look perplexed. Here are three words that will require catechesis to facilitate the reception of Eucharistic Prayer II because they may otherwise be misunderstood.

One is the word “merit”. Today we ask God to “make us worthy to share eternal life,” but the revised translation asks God that “we may merit to be co-heirs to eternal life.” The question is how best to translate *mereamur*. This whole phrase does not appear in the Apostolic Tradition; it was added after the council as part of the intercessions that conclude the prayer, perhaps inspired by Paul’s Letter to the Romans 8:17, which says we are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ if we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. The word is troublesome because it smacks of the Pelagian heresy, as if we can earn our own salvation by our deeds. We believe that Christ alone has merited our salvation, and we share the benefit of his merits. So to pray that we may merit to be co-heirs to eternal life has to be understood not in the sense of earning, but in sharing what Christ has earned. It’s a difficult line, and we will have some ‘splaining to do. What saves this line for me is the word “co-heirs” – we are beneficiaries, not earners, of salvation.

A second example, and surely the most controversial single word in the entire translation of the Roman Missal, is the word “many”. We are accustomed to hearing during the words of consecration that Jesus shed his blood “for you and your all,” where the revised translation has “for you and for many.” Christ shed his blood for all; that can be proven from many

passages in the New Testament, such as Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians chapter 5, verses 14-15: "For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them." There are many other similar passages, but not in the accounts of the Last Supper, where Matthew and Mark both have Jesus say he would shed his blood "for many." Scholars believe Jesus said this to allude to the fourth servant song in Isaiah, which concludes with the statement, "he bore the sin of many." On Jesus' lips, the word is not meant to say who will be saved, but who does the saving: He fulfills the prophecy of the suffering servant. We have been hearing that line from Isaiah at the conclusion of the first reading on Good Friday for the past 40 years, and we have quoted Jesus saying the word "many" at the Last Supper in the proclamation of the Passion on Palm Sunday in Years A and B, and in the gospel on the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of the Lord in Year B for the same 40 years. Of course now, during the consecration at every mass, people who hear the word "many" are going to think "few" because they are used to hearing "all". This will require catechesis. The whole controversy could have been avoided by the insertion of the word "the" – "poured out for you and for the many," but to be honest, that word is not in the New Testament; Greek has a word for "the"; it ain't in there in Matthew and it ain't in there in Mark. Another solution, radical, but justifiable, would have been to take the words of Jesus as reported in the Apostolic Tradition – to adopt them, not adapt them: "Take, eat, this is my body that will be broken for you; this is my blood that is shed for you." The Apostolic Tradition did not include the expression "and for many," not just because it was difficult but because it does not appear in the other two biblical accounts of the Last Supper from Luke's gospel and 1 Corinthians. Changing the words of institution would have been even more controversial; that is actually what the first translators did 40 years ago when they put on Jesus' lips a word he did not say. The word "many" is defensible from the biblical tradition, but it will be misunderstood, and its proper reception is going to require patient and hope-filled catechesis.

A third example of a difficult word in the revision of Eucharistic Prayer II comes in the lines following the Sanctus. The present translation says, "Lord, you are holy indeed, the fountain of all holiness. Let your Spirit come upon these gifts to make them holy." But the revised says, "You are indeed Holy, O Lord, the fount of all holiness. Make holy, therefore, these gifts, we pray, by sending down your Spirit upon them like the dewfall." This line did not appear in the Apostolic Tradition. The post-Vatican II study group borrowed it from the Gothic Missal, which dates to the 7th or 8th century. One goal of the post-Vatican II missal was to incorporate a wider variety of prayers from the various streams that have fed the Roman Rite, including the Gallic tradition represented by the Gothic Missal, which borrowed this image from the bible. In Hosea 14:5 the Lord says, "I will be like the dew to Israel," a dew that causes plants to take root and blossom in strength and beauty. In Psalm 133:3, the pleasantness of shared company is compared to dew falling on the mountain, a sign of God's blessing. In Isaiah 45:8, the Lord asks the heavens to bring down the dew of righteousness; this passage inspired the Advent hymn *Rorate, coeli*, which asks the heavens to send forth the Savior like life-giving dew. So the pedigree of the image is quite long and rich. But its translation posed a problem. So the first translators did what they were allowed to do: they

left the word out. The new rules want all the Latin words represented in English, so “dewfall” has fallen in. When the revised translation was leaking over the past few years, ICEL had translated it, “Let the dew of your Spirit come upon these gifts.” That translated the Latin words faithfully, but some people objected that the image was arcane, and the translators were ignoring an offensive colloquial reverberation. In the United States we pronounce the word “doo” rather than “dew”, and we often think of the Spirit as a dove, so people ridiculed the image of doo falling from a dove over our gifts. But the final version has changed the word to “dewfall” hoping to make the meaning clearer. ICEL had considered “dewfall” but some objected that it sounded too much like an ad for the hymn “Morning Has Broken” with its sweet rain’s newfall like the first dewfall. But the final translation is out, and “dewfall” is in. Still, when you resolve one problem, you often create another. In this case, a biological one: dew, unfortunately, does not fall. It condenses. However, one theory on the etymology of that word is that it is related to a word like “nightfall” – that is, it has more to do with the time of day than with the method of producing moisture. Other metaphors are coming to light in the revised translation, including “soul”, “spirit”, and “roof”. The idea is to let these ancient words have a chance to speak to new ears, and in general I think this is a good principle. So, although “dewfall” may sound strange, it has biblical roots, it rescues an image from an ancestral missal, and it permits resonances that have not echoed in English before now.

These three words come from the latest development in a eucharistic prayer that was created to be adapted in the fourth century, was adapted by the Second Vatican Council for the modern-day Church, adapted again for the first English translation, and adapted again for the second translation, all in an effort to provide a prayer that would suit, catechize and inspire an ever-renewing Church.

That is how Eucharistic Prayer II came to be from its origins to its revised translation. It is a microcosm of the path followed by the countless prayers and dialogues of the missal. All of them have endured a series of adaptations based on the reception of the text. I would like to make three points by way of conclusion.

First, the main locus of catechesis is the text itself. This has been true throughout history. There is scant evidence of any preparation of the people for liturgical change ever in the history of the Church. We have more catechetical abilities now than we did in the past, so our preparation for this translation is vaster and deeper than has ever happened before. But above all, texts catechize. For the most part, the revised translation will do this very well, sharpening up the theology of what we believe. I have pointed to some words in Eucharistic Prayer II where the text may catechize inadequately, but there are a whole lot more words in that eucharistic prayer and throughout the rest of the missal, and they will do their job. They will even provide a springboard for homilies, meditation and study.

Second, the prayers of the missal affirm the Church’s abilities to adapt to the times. Eucharistic Prayer II is one example of an ancient prayer that was rehabbed for modern usage, but there are plenty more of these. People rightly ask why can’t we use more modern prayers in the official liturgy of the Church, and I agree we have the ability to contribute lovely prayers that will capture the soul of our generation. Still, let’s remember that the

postconciliar study group that gave us this missal did precisely that task: they searched the huge storehouse of our traditional prayers; some of them they preserved word for word; others they retrofitted; and where they found no prayer to suit our needs today, they created one. You need look no further than every other eucharistic prayer besides the two I've mentioned in this talk for ample evidence that most of the most important prayers we say as a Church were newly composed after the Second Vatican Council. When those prayers first appeared on the scene, their shorter length and sensible structure responded to a pastoral need of the faithful. We can expect that more opportunities will arise. As a Church, we can adapt to the times; we have done it in the past, and we will continue to do so in the future.

Finally, a translation has to do with forming people, not just informing people. Once we have a clearer understanding of what we are praying, we will have a clearer understanding of what we should be doing. This talk has considered how the liturgy has adapted and how the people have received it, but the point of this reception is not just to help people understand the words, but to act on them. I hope we will let the prayer of the Church form us in charity, communion, wisdom and joy. To say that a new translation is handed to us from on high is to miss the point that it results from the faith and experience of the entire Church. Liturgical prayer reminds us where we come from and where we should be going. Liturgical prayer is like, well, it's like dewfall. It doesn't fall on us. It condenses around us; it binds us together as one; it provides nourishment for the thirsty world; it makes us glisten with the love of God. So, let me just warn you about the power of prayer: you can study the words of a prayer, critique the words, teach the words and say the words, but if you're not looking you may miss out on something more important than all these things: those words are studying you, they are learning you, teaching you and forming you. They will put you to work; they will send you out on mission. They aim to make this a better Church because of the person each of us becomes when we enter into prayer and let the Spirit engulf us like dewfall.