

**Daniel McCarthy. *Listen to the Word:*
Commentaries on Selected Opening Prayers of Sundays and Feasts
*with Sample Homilies. Appreciating the Liturgy.***

Documenta Rerum Ecclesiarum Instaurata. London: The Tablet publishing Company Limited, 2009.
xv+145 pp.

The opening prayer of the mass is eminently forgettable. The priest can say it in a matter of seconds. Moments later, very few people would be able to tell you what it was about.

When hearing that the Catholic Church is poised to introduce new translations of the opening prayers that they might adhere more closely to the Latin original, many people wonder, “Why bother?” Why give so much attention to such an insignificant part of the mass? Many are surprised to learn that the alternative opening prayers available now in the Sacramentary will not be included in the new translation of the Roman Missal. People are used to variety and flexibility in these prayers. The Directory for Masses with Children allows the priest to swap opening prayers or to alter the contents of them if it will make them more understandable to children. We are accustomed to listening but not really hearing the prayers, to having a choice, and to adjusting their contents. What is the point of retranslating them so that they resemble their original versions?

Now we know. You already know if you have faithfully followed Daniel McCarthy’s column “Listen to the Word,” featured the last several years in the London-based Catholic periodical, *The Tablet*. McCarthy has so opened up the meaning of the opening prayers (or collects) of the mass that readers have gained a new appreciation for them. And many have wished that his articles would be gathered into one book. Now they are.

Even non-subscribers to the journal can now benefit from McCarthy’s labor of love. *Listen to the Word: Commentaries on Selected Opening Prayers of Sundays and Feasts with Sample Homilies* is a most welcome scholarly and pastoral aid for appreciating the opening prayers of the mass.

For each Sunday and major feast of the liturgical year, McCarthy provides the English text of the opening prayer from the Sacramentary together with the Latin

original from the *Missale Romanum* of 2002. After a brief introduction, he explains where this prayer comes from, its grammatical structure, its vocabulary, its scriptural allusions, its meaning, and its spiritual bearing. For people who think the opening prayer of mass has been time for a quick snooze, this work is an eye-opener.

The book reveals the wide variety of sources from which these prayers have come. Very few are new compositions. Most originate with the Gelasian Sacramentary, compiled by the early 8th century, but some date all the way back to the Gregorian and the Verona – 6th century texts. It is astonishing to think that a prayer from the late 8th c., for example, assigned at that time to a Sunday in January, has been in use on the 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time ever since the Council. Most people are totally unaware of its historical link to the same month of the year.

Once in a while, the history of a single prayer makes a novella. For the 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time, for example, McCarthy shows how a prayer from the 6th century Verona Sacramentary underwent revisions in the 7th, 8th, 9th, 20th, and 21st centuries.

The complex structure of each prayer, somewhat obscured by the flowing English translations currently in use, is clarified in a remarkable chart on p. xv, a work that McCarthy attributes to Renato De Zan, and which is indispensable for grasping the sense of the prayer within its component parts. The chart waylays many objections to the length of the prayers in the forthcoming revised missal.

Having all these commentaries between two covers is a real treat. The book can be consulted again and again from week to week and year to year. Even though these prayers will all appear in the revised missal in a new translation, this work will still be beneficial, especially in the first years when people are wondering why the prayers we are getting are better than the ones we have. McCarthy's book will show the way.

The sample homilies that conclude the book were all addressed to gatherings of vowed religious, but they still suggest ways that a parish preacher could use presidential prayers for spiritual content in a homily.

Some editorial hazards arise when making a regular column into a book, and one wishes that the editors – or even the author – had addressed these more directly. The book feels like a series of articles, rather than a series of chapters. Much of the material about sacramentaries, for example, is repeated in various articles. This could have been collected in introductory comments, saving some repetition as the book unfolds. The journalistic origins of the work show up in the oddest places – the Third Sunday of Lent, where McCarthy introduces the purpose of his column, and the Second Sunday of Lent, where he explains – on page 17 – that the series is now coming to an end. On the 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time, a reference to a quirk of the 2006 calendar is increasingly irrelevant. The surprise appearance of Corpus Christi before Trinity Sunday is also hard to explain.

The book is generously dedicated to Reginald Foster, a Latin teacher *nulli secundus*. His comprehension of the language has inspired many a student to share the revelations of his classroom, of which this book is a testament.

“Liturgical Catechesis: Book Review. *Listen to the Word: Commentaries on Selected Opening Prayers of Sundays and Feast Days with Sample Homilies.*” *Pastoral Liturgy* 41/5 (September | October 2010):18.