

Meet Yourself: Coming and Going

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One of my earliest childhood memories of Grandma Turner is from a Christmas Eve. My dad started our family in New Orleans, but when I was too young to remember, we moved to Kansas City because of his job. Dad's father had died before I was born, so Dad's mother often flew to Kansas City for Christmas. This was the plan for Christmas Eve: After dinner, my parents would put their six kids to bed. We would all fall asleep. Santa and his elves would then place the gifts under the tree. Santa and his elves would then go to sleep. That was the plan. This is what did happen: After dinner, we went to bed but did not fall asleep. My grandmother stretched out on the couch next to the tree so that she could protect the presents from any incursions during the night. Sure enough, "when all through the house not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse," we children "nestled all snug in our beds" un-nestled ourselves and tiptoed toward the living room intending to inspect the bounty beneath the tree. It wasn't my idea. My brother John probably led us there, but none of my siblings remembers this night the way I do, and today John is a trial lawyer, so let me make it clear that I am not implicating him. But I remember that as soon as we entered the dark living room, my grandmother's voice shattered the silence of the night: "Get back to bed, you bad eggs." Not exactly "Go in peace," but it was one of my first experiences of a dismissal formula.

The theme for this year's Southwest Liturgical Conference Study Week is one of the dismissal formulas from the mass: "Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life." I've been asked to open the conference by looking back at the history of the dismissal and forward at its implications today. How is it that we came to use these words? What do they expect of us as mass comes to an end? We'll look back and forth, and we'll meet ourselves coming and going.

There may be other dismissals during mass: one for children beginning their own liturgy of the word, and another for catechumens completing the community's liturgy of the word. But I will focus on the final dismissal.

The elephant in the room is what's not in the room. As everyone knows, Catholics have a deep devotion to holy communion, but a rather shallow devotion to the dismissal. When the deacon begins to distribute communion, he sees the full assembly, but when he orders the dismissal, he notices something else. Many Catholics have already left the room. They perceive that they have more pressing needs than receiving the deacon's commission to go forth.

<<They have come to receive communion, not to sing a communion hymn in praise of God, not to accompany other members of the community as they receive communion, not to spend time in silence giving thanks to God, not to listen to the prayer after communion to put into words the faith and hope they feel, not to hear the announcements of ways that they can meet with others this week, and not to be sent forth into the world to bear witness to Christ together

with everyone else. No, they got their communion; they got what they came for. So they leave.

<<We're supposed to leave together as a sign of our common purpose. Throughout the mass we sing hymns together; we make responses together; we observe silence together; we sit together; we kneel together; we stand together. We're also supposed to be dismissed together as the body of Christ. It doesn't work. We can't force people to stay. So I wonder if we should add a special dismissal at communion time. Maybe before the distribution of communion the deacon, standing behind the altar, should announce something like this: "Would those of you who have to leave mass early today please step forward?" Then he'd wait until they all line up in front, coats on their shoulders, car keys and purses in hand. The deacon would then continue: "We understand that you have other duties that keep you from remaining with us to sing praise, to give thanks to God for the communion we receive, to offer a final prayer, to hear announcements about opportunities for service, and to obtain God's blessing through the words of the priest. After you receive communion, we assure you of our prayers that next week tranquility will so return to your lives that you may join us all for the conclusion of the mass and the final dismissal. Now, receive your communion and go without peace."

<<Seriously, the final dismissal is the important conclusion of the liturgical service and the beginning of our apostolic service. We have a weighty responsibility, the same one Jesus gave the first disciples: "Go into the world and tell the good news." It's a little scary. We don't know what that commission may cost us - perhaps even our very lives. But we don't have to go alone. We go with one another. The fruits of our labor do not rest on our efforts alone. They rely on the Holy Spirit. With God's help we bear witness to the world. [from "I Witness," Gulf Coast Conference, 2015]>>

History

Where does the dismissal come from? Sometime in your life you've probably learned the phrase in Latin that concludes the mass: *Ite, missa est*. In fact, that's where we get the word "mass". <<More or less, it means "Go, you are sent." The root word, *mitto*, appears in English words such as "transmit" - to send across, "submit" - to send in, and "omit" - not to send anywhere. But the Latin word *missa* came to mean the entire celebration of the eucharist, so *Ite missa est* could also be translated, "Go, that's all there is to the mass." [from "I Witness," Gulf Coast Conference, 2015]>>

There is a theory, though, that it had a completely secular origin. It could be rendered colloquially in English as, "You may go now" or even "The meeting is adjourned." It may have been brought from secular society into the holy eucharist in the same way that the basilica started as a completely secular building suitable for public gatherings that Christians then adopted for celebrating mass.

By the fourth century, the *Apostolic Constitutions* report that the eucharist ended when the deacon said, “Go in peace.” So, at least by then, at least in some places in the East, the formula and its minister were already established.

That formula has a neat connection with a healing story in Mark’s gospel. It’s actually two healing stories that Mark assembled as a miracle sandwich. Jairus, a synagogue official, approached Jesus, fell at his feet and pleaded for the life of his daughter: “Come, lay your hands on her that she may get well and live.” Jesus complied, but as soon as he started off, he felt something, turned around and asked the crowd, “Who has touched my clothes?” The disciples scoffed at this question. Many people brushed against Jesus in the crowd. He noticed one person? But then a woman approached, fell at his feet and confessed. She had been afflicted with hemorrhages for twelve years and believed if she could just touch Jesus’ clothing, she would be healed. She did and she was. Jesus was anxious to go on his way to cure the daughter of Jairus, but before continuing his journey, he said to the newly healed woman, “Go in peace and be cured of your affliction” (Mark 5:21-43). She was already cured, but Jesus said it anyway. She was fearful of him, so Jesus gave her peace. He also gave a command: “Go.” That is the command that Christ gives us whenever we encounter him, especially in the eucharist: “Don’t just stay here. Go. You have work to do.”

A deacon gives the dismissal; that has been part of his responsibility since the fourth century. He speaks with hands joined as when he greets the people before the gospel or commands the sign of peace. Even when a priest says these words in the absence of a deacon, he does so with hands joined to show that these are diaconal functions. A deacon does not extend his hands as a priest does when he prays; he joins his hands to talk to you. This makes sense when you reflect on the entire ministry of the deacon. He is an example of charity, devoting his life to apostolic activity. Even during the mass, he is the one to give directions: He commands the sign of peace. On Good Friday he declares, “Let us kneel,” and “Let us stand.” The deacon leads the petitions of the universal prayer because he knows from his ministry who needs prayers. He makes announcements at the end of mass because he knows what needs to be done, and he requests your help in his apostolic ministry. When a deacon proclaims the gospel, you know from his ministry that he expects you to do something with the words that he speaks. He announces good news like the angels at the resurrection. When you hear this good news, you expect the command to go and tell it. So, to hear a deacon say at the end, “Go”, is to hear something like “Come with me.” You discover who you are as a Christian. You meet yourself coming and going.

In the West the earliest version of the dismissal formula is from *Ordo Romanus I*, which probably dates to the seventh century and describes a pope’s mass from the sixth century. There we find the formula we know so well, *Ite, missa est*, given by the archdeacon (124). Incidentally, the same source says that the archdeacon makes an announcement just as communion is getting underway. It was customary for the pope to celebrate daily mass at different churches. The people needed to know where to go tomorrow. The best way to inform them was

through a public announcement - There was no tweeting in the sixth century. The archdeacon made this announcement not at the end of mass but at communion. Similarly, the Gelasian sacramentary from about the same period calls for announcements to be made before communion. These concerned days of fast, prebaptismal rites, prayers for the sick, and the feast days of the saints (1260). In the sixth century, deacons made these announcements before communion. They probably had the same problem we do: people left mass early.

Current Practice

Over the centuries the Order of Mass expanded to include other features. After the Council of Trent, the Roman Missal put the dismissal formula before the final blessing, and it remained that way for centuries. One reform of the Second Vatican Council was to put the dismissal after the final blessing. This added weight to its words. But in practice we have compromised it. Almost all parish churches add a final hymn to the mass, which is not in the missal. Some parishes have introduced prayers that the Church removed from the missal, such as the one to Saint Michael. These practices veer from the intent of the liturgy, which has striven for authenticity. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal says that the dismissal takes place “so that each may go back to doing good works, praising and blessing God” (90c). When the deacon says, “Go”, he really means “Go do good works.” He doesn’t mean, “Go, but let’s sing a little something first.”

The priest may offer some commentary at specific times during the mass (GIRM 31). We’re accustomed to this in the opening rites, for example. But “he may also make concluding comments regarding the entire sacred action before the Dismissal.” This is rarely done, though the Directory for Masses with Children calls it “important” because children “need some repetition and application of what they have heard, but this should be done in a very few words. In particular, this is the appropriate time to express the connection between the liturgy and life” (54). Most priests have found this unnecessary, but you could imagine a situation where people would hear some final encouragement based on the homily or readings of the day before the deacon sends everyone forth.

Translations

In the previous English translation of the mass, the Sacramentary gave the deacon three formulas for the dismissal: “Go in the peace of Christ;” “The Mass is ended, go in peace;” and “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.” It did not say, “in these or similar words,” but many deacons and priests interpreted them that way. In Latin, there was only one formula: *Ite, missa est*. All three of these tried to interpret what it said in Latin. In fact, the group revising the mass after the Second Vatican Council, anticipating that parts of it were going to be in vernacular languages, expressed concern over the possible translation, “Go, the mass is ended,” because the people’s response, “Thanks be to God,” would sound as if people were grateful that mass had finally ended. The danger still exists, but most have realized that these words mean something more.

Perhaps that is why the third edition of the Roman Missal contains for the first time in Latin additional formulas for the dismissal. Pope Saint John Paul promulgated the missal in the year 2000 as part of the jubilee, even though the book was not yet ready. Only in the Catholic Church can you promulgate something that does not yet exist. The book appeared in 2002, and it reappeared in 2008 with a few corrections and updates. That's the edition that added three more dismissal formulas, including the one that is the theme of our conference. It is said that Pope Benedict XVI himself composed these new formulas. Snarky purists have said that the originals are stylistically more Italian than Latin. Our theme, for example, looks like this in Latin: *Ite in pace, glorificando vita vestra Dominum*. It would be more authentic to say *glorificantes*, but the English translation is good in either case.

Here are all four formulas from the third edition of the Roman missal in English: "Go forth, the Mass is ended." "Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord." "Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life." "Go in peace." The first is the closest to the traditional *Ite, missa est*. It adds one word, though, that makes a big difference: not just "Go", but "Go forth. You have a mission ahead of you." The last has been a popular way of ending the liturgy because it says more than the presumed secular origins of the dismissal: "You are dismissed." It sends you forth in peace, not as bad eggs. Incidentally, when a priest or deacon presides at the Liturgy of the Hours, the formula is *Ite in pace*. Literally, "Go in peace." It avoids the word *missa* because that is interpreted as a reference to the Mass, and this is the Liturgy of the Hours. If you're going to respond, "Thanks be to God," "Go in peace" provides a better reason than "The Mass is ended." Perhaps that is why Pope Benedict decided we could do better with the final words of the Mass. He added two formulas that imply you have work to do. It's not just that mass is over; it's not just that you may leave now; it's that you may go forth now. In one formula, you are to announce the Gospel. In the other, you are to glorify the Lord. Without question, these are richer formulas that not only conclude the mass but begin the ministry to the world. Notice that all four of these options begin with the same word: "Go." I still hear some deacons and priests end the liturgy this way: "The Mass is ended. Go in peace." But that's not one of the formulas, and in light of the ones we have, it seems weak. Even in Latin the declaration to the people does not begin with *missa est*. It begins with *Ite. Ite*. "Go, go." Some deacons end the mass with "Let us go," including themselves in the formula. Well, that's nice, but this is a moment when the liturgy expects the deacon to take control. Give a command. Tell us what we are supposed to do.

There are times when I prefer the Spanish translation of the missal to the English, but in this case I think English has better dismissals. Spanish formulas include - and not always at the beginning - *Pueden ir*. It's a little more polite than English. "You may go." The last one uses a different verb: *En la paz de Cristo, vayan a servir a Dios y a sus hermanos*. "In the peace of Christ, go to serve God and your brothers and sisters." That's good, but I still like the word "Go" at the beginning, though I can see if you were to start only with *Vayan*, it would sound too much like "Get outta here." You've probably noticed that somehow the four

Latin formulas got together and gave birth to a fifth one in Spanish. For the sake of balance, I love the way that the Lord's Prayer begins in Spanish. English is one of the languages that requires the possessive pronoun to precede the noun it modifies, so we have to start the prayer with the word "Our," as if the first thought is of ourselves. But in Spanish, as in Latin, Greek, Italian, Catalan, German, Swahili and many other languages, it goes the other way: *Padre nuestro*. The first word is "Father", then "our".

Variations

As important as the dismissal is, at times we omit it. At a funeral, for example, the mass is suspended following the prayer after communion. The final commendation and farewell take place, the procession to the cemetery forms, and the dismissal happens there. Some priests ignore this and put the blessing into the funeral mass because many mourners aren't going to the cemetery. But the liturgy focuses on the people who participate fully, not on those who do not.

Two main services in Holy Week end without dismissals. The Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord's Supper concludes with the prayer after communion, and then a procession with the Blessed Sacrament forms. Adoration continues into the night, but no blessing and no dismissal conclude the service. It is as if the community suspends its worship on one night to continue into the next.

Similarly on Good Friday, the priest concludes with a prayer after communion and a prayer over the people. But he does not bless them and does not dismiss them. A blessing usually begins with the words "The Lord be with you," but those words are completely absent from the Good Friday liturgy in the places where you normally expect them: at the beginning, (which on that day skips right to the prayer), at the gospel (which on that day starts instead with the announcement of the Passion), at the opening of the eucharistic prayer (which is not offered on Good Friday), and before the blessing, (which on that day is not given.) The Latin words for "The Lord be with you" are *Dominus vobiscum*. Literally, it means "Lord with you." There is no verb. We usually supply "be" because it seems that is what it implies. But *Dominus vobiscum* could mean something else. It could mean, "The Lord is with you," "The Lord will be with you," or even "The Lord was with you. Sorry." Because it could mean, "The Lord is with you," we never say it on Good Friday. On that day we observe the day on which the Lord underwent death, the day that the Lord was "not with" the disciples. When the liturgy ends, the people disperse without a dismissal: no sending forth, just a sense of loss, sorrow and reverence.

On some days, eucharistic adoration may take place immediately after mass. Then, too, there is no dismissal. Before the communion prayer, the priest takes a host that he consecrated at the same mass, places it in the monstrance, sets the monstrance on the altar, and offers the prayer after communion. He does not bless or dismiss the people because benediction will conclude the period of adoration later. Normally, the liturgy is anxious to send us forth, but on such occasions it invites us to stay and adore a little longer.

By contrast, during Easter Time, we have several occasions when, far from omitting the dismissal formula, we extend it with two alleluias. Both the dismissal and the people's response end this way. I'll bet you know how to sing it. How do you respond when the deacon sings this? "Go in peace, alleluia, alleluia"? "Thanks be to God, alleluia, alleluia." The proper days for that conclusion are the Easter Vigil and Easter Sunday, as well as daily mass throughout the Octave of Easter, including the Sunday after Easter. Then it returns for Pentecost. We're not supposed to sing the double alleluia on all the Sundays of Easter Time, even though some deacons and priests do. I guess they could argue God will not punish us for singing too many alleluias, but the idea is not to wear it out and to make the Easter Octave and Pentecost something special.

Singing

Although many Catholics can sing the response to the Easter dismissal formula, not as many know how to sing the formula during the rest of the year. Try it after me: "Thanks be to God." "Thanks be to God." Now sing it as the response: "Go forth the mass is ended." "Thanks be to God." The committee that prepared those notes for the third edition of the Roman missal did a clever thing. They gave you a formula that follows the same pattern as the one for Easter. If you sing the regular formula throughout the year to conclude the mass, then when Easter comes, the alleluias sound like a true decoration of the melody you've sung so often. Try it again with me: "Go forth the mass is ended." "Thanks be to God." "Go in peace, alleluia, alleluia." "Thanks be to God, alleluia, alleluia." Do you hear it? One melody prepares you to sing the other.

Now, here's a true story from my own daily mass community. Last year I started singing the final dialogues with them: "The Lord be with you." "And with your spirit." "May almighty God bless you, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." "Amen." "Go forth the Mass is ended." "Thanks be to God." I really like that musical unit, but in my parish they had a hard time learning it. I taught them before mass what to sing, but then at the end of mass, they'd forgotten it, and one member of the community added another note to the very end: "Thanks be to God." Or "Thanks be to God." But that's not correct. And because someone added another note, people were starting to learn it the wrong way. It took a few days, but they got it down, and now they sing those dialogues very well. We don't conclude daily mass with a hymn, so it gives us a little music at the end.

Suspended

But I learned something from their mistakes. The congregation's sung response feels inconclusive. It feels as though the notes can't possibly end there. Something else has to happen. Even when there is a dismissal, the mass somehow feels suspended - like it needs another note. Well, it does. It needs you. It needs you to be the final note. You go forth to be the note that finishes the mass. That is what your life is about. That is how you glorify the Lord.

You don't just leave. You go. And you will discover who you are. You meet yourself, a person who goes and a person who comes. You are an apostle, sent to

bring the gospel to the world. You go glorify the Lord with all that you do, and then you come back to do it again. Before you go from your pew, you pick up your belongings, thanking God for what he gave you. You step into the sun, treasuring its light and the earth, our common home. You walk to your car, mindful of how you may use it this week for the sake of the gospel. You return to the safety of your home, the house church where you will pray daily to God this week. You look around your house and behold your family. You will glorify God who gave you life. You will glorify God by your life.

The final words of the mass are “Thanks be to God.” They tell us more than anything how to glorify God by our lives. We live each day in thanksgiving, each moment, every glance, every sound, every touch becomes a moment in which we can give thanks to God, glorifying him.

I'll tell you one more story about Grandma Turner and my brother John. He doesn't remember this one either. I told him I'm going to tell it anyway. Some of the first words I remember Grandma saying were words of dismissal, as were her last words. As she grew older, her only daughter died, her own health weakened, and she had no immediate family left in New Orleans. My father wrote her a letter in the early 1970s to suggest that she move as he had done 20 years earlier from New Orleans to Kansas City. We all thought she'd say no, that New Orleans was her home. But she said yes. My mother gathered all six of us kids together before Grandma arrived to deliver this message to us: “Your grandmother is not coming here to die. She is coming here to live.” It was a joy to have her home each day, though surely a challenge for my parents. But they accepted her out of love. As I was beginning my studies at Kenrick Seminary in Saint Louis in the fall of 1975, Grandma Turner fell so ill at the age of 89 that she entered a hospital in Kansas City. I was 250 miles away, so I never saw her in the hospital, but other members of my family did, including my brother John, who together with his wife now continues to visit the sick and elderly in his spare time. So in 1975, at the age of 24, John visited our grandmother at the hospital, not knowing that he would be there for her last words. As she was able, she turned to him at one point of their conversation and said this: “But I do want to thank you for....” And with that, she fell silent. I cannot think of better words to rest on the lips of a dying Catholic. They were words of gratitude and of a sentiment left suspended. By not completing the sentence, Grandma completed her life in the most expansive way possible. She also taught a final lesson. If you want to glorify the Lord by your life, let your life be spent in thanksgiving - not in haste, not in envy, not in materialism, not in selfishness, but in the realization that all that we have comes from one source, God, to whom our lives should all cry out, “Glory!”