Since it first appeared in 1969, the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) has claimed continuity with the Missale Romanum of 1570, revised by decree of the Council of Trent and implemented by Pope Pius V, and, indeed, with the whole history of liturgy in the Church. It has also claimed to improve on the 1570 missal because “countless learned studies have shed light on the ‘norm of the holy Fathers’ which the revisers of the Missal of St. Pius V followed” (GIRM 2002, 8). And, as that earlier missal adapted liturgical practice to the challenges of its time, so today’s missal “marks in its own right a step of great importance in liturgical tradition” (GIRM, 10) but one that continues to “bear witness to the Church’s continuous and unbroken tradition” (GIRM, 1). It is, in fact, a realization of the “efforts of the last four hundred years to bring the faithful closer to the sacred Liturgy” (GIRM, 15).

In his NPM Webinar on the new English translation of the Missale Romanum (February 11, 2010), Father Paul Turner reminded participants that the translators are working on this missal of Paul VI, reformed during and after the Second Vatican Council. They are not “reforming the reform” by returning to an older text but are trying to prepare a more accurate translation of the prayers and other texts gathered with great effort, extraordinary scholarship, and intense papal oversight in the years between 1964 and 1969. He also reminded webinar participants that this work builds on the remarkable work of those who first translated the missal and other ritual books into English—the first time that the liturgy of the Latin Church has been prayed in a living vernacular language since it was first translated from Greek and Hebrew into Latin.¹

Because that reformed missal has been under attack in recent years as a break with the tradition, and because there have been claims that the revised Order of Mass and other texts were prepared and foisted on the Church by a liberal cabal of Protestant-leaning and neo-Modernist liturgists,² it might be good to remind ourselves just what went into the process of preparing the new missal and how involved Pope Paul VI and other bishops were in reviewing, revising, and criticizing whatever was presented. It’s also
good to remember that the modern process of reforming the liturgy first began at the request of Pope Pius XII in 1946 and that a papal commission on liturgical reform existed from 1948 to 1960, whose work included the revision of the Easter Vigil (1951), all of Holy Week (1955), and the Code of Rubrics (1960). This commission ended when preparations began for what the Second Vatican Council would say and do about liturgy.

**CONTEXT**

The first thing to observe about the postconciliar liturgical reform is that orthodox theology about the Eucharist was a central concern of Pope Paul VI, expressed not only in his encyclical *Mysterium fidei* (September 3, 1965), but in frequent addresses to Eucharistic congresses, letters to bishops, and other texts. It follows, then, that he watched closely the development of the new missal. Again and again, he affirmed that Christ’s presence in the Eucharist “has such profoundly theological, religious, spiritual, moral, and liturgical implications as to constitute the heart of the Church.”

He applauded and emphasized two underlying principles of the work of reforming the liturgy: its ecclesial nature and, therefore, the importance of full participation by all gathered for worship. In *Mysterium fidei*, for instance, he said: “The whole Church, exercising with Christ the role of priest and victim, offers the sacrifice of the Mass, and the whole Church is offered in it.” In that same letter he reminded the Church of the pastoral implications of such a truth, highlighted by the bishops in council: “Nothing [is] more important than urging the faithful to participate actively with sound faith and utmost devotion in the celebration of this most holy mystery; to offer it with the priest to God as a sacrifice for their own salvation and for that of the whole world; to nourish themselves with it as a spiritual food.”

A related concern, as the reform moved forward, was catechesis. Beginning with the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC), the pope and the various Vatican congregations affirmed the importance of sound teaching about the liturgy if the reform were to be effective (see SC, 19). In particular, the Sacred Congregation of Rites pointed out in 1967, priests needed to explain to people that active participation does not mean merely external participation, but especially joining themselves in mind and spirit—as well as voice through singing the responses—in “giving thanks to God as they are mindful of the Lord’s passion, death, and resurrection; offering the spotless Victim not only through the hands of the priest but also together with him; and, through the reception of the Body of the Lord, entering into the communion with God and with each other that participation is meant to lead to.” Noting that the Council of Trent had earlier called for such catechesis, the Congregation urged pastors to explain “the meaning of [the] rites and prayers, especially those of the great Eucharistic Prayer, and lead the people to grasp the mystery that the rites and prayers signify and accomplish.”
GRADUAL REFORM

Although some simplification of the existing rubrics and the first introduction of vernacular languages (for the readings; chants of the ordinary; and acclamations, greetings, and dialogues) were approved at the end of 1964, the actual reform of the Order of Mass began on March 7, 1965, with the implementation of an adapted version of the Ordo Missae and of the Ritus servandus (the “rite to be observed” in celebrating Mass). This first revision was prepared by forty study groups, working for fifteen months under the guidance of a committee of forty-two bishops. In that same year, the bishops gathered for the fourth session of Vatican II tried out this revised order of Mass and the revised and newly created texts for these celebrations. They also experimented with “different styles of singing . . . in order to bring out more clearly the wide range of possibilities for using the repertoire of sacred music, according to the capabilities of each individual worship assembly.” Questions immediately followed about how the revision was to be implemented—detailed questions from around the world addressing not only, for example, whether at a Mass facing the people the priest could pray the prayers at the foot of the altar with his back to the people (yes) but also such major issues as the relationship between a sung Sanctus and the rest of the Eucharistic Prayer. These questions—and responses to unauthorized and illegitimate experimentation coming from Pope Paul VI and the Consilium (the special body appointed to implement Sacrosanctum Concilium)—helped to guide further reforms, as the bishops and their periti charged with development of new liturgical books continued their work.

New rites, revised texts, and an initial version of the weekday Lectionary for Mass were tested carefully in various countries, beginning in 1966. In response to some negative reactions to new parts of the ritual, Annibale Bugnini, secretary to the Consilium, explained that one goal of the reform was to restore while creating: “Clearly, these two must be brought into perfect harmony if the resulting work is still to be called the liturgy in the pure Roman tradition, created by the Church over the centuries, and at the same time is to be the liturgy suited to our age. The first condition is basic and indispensable for the second. We build upon rock . . . because in its acts of worship the Church has expressed its faith and, in a sense, its own being.”

In response to suggestions and proposals made by bishops around the world that were reviewed both by the Consilium and by the wider Congregation of Rites, additional adaptations to the celebration of Mass followed in 1967—primarily a reduction in the number of collects and a simplification of gestures and vestments. At the request of various bishops’ conferences, Pope Paul approved an expanded use of the vernacular to include the Canon of the Mass. At this time, only the Roman Canon was being used, but three new Eucharistic Prayers were being prepared for trial use, and once again the draft liturgy was “tested” in use by a body of bishops—in this instance, the 1967 Synod of Bishops (and, somewhat later, by Pope Paul VI)—and the schema of what was now called the “normative” Mass was revised accordingly. After some more careful attention and several emendations by the pope, the new Order of Mass was published in 1969.
NEW MISSAL

This Order of Mass, contained in a revised *Roman Missal* and governed by the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, was put into use in 1970. It was the result of six years of careful scholarship, guided experimentation, conservative trial use, and episcopal and papal oversight. Those preparing and overseeing the reform battled constantly against incorrect interpretations of theology and ritual, unauthorized experimentation, dogged rejection, and incomplete catechesis. In 1970, the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship issued *Liturgiae instaurationes*, the third instruction on implementing the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. In describing the process and the difficulties that the reform had faced to that point, it said:

The liturgical reform bears absolutely no relation to what is called “desacralization” and in no way intends to lend support to the phenomenon of “secularizing the world.” Accordingly the rites must retain their dignity, spirit of reverence, and sacred character.

The effectiveness of liturgy does not lie in experimenting with rites and altering them over and over, nor in a continuous reductionism, but solely in entering more deeply into the Word of God and the mystery being celebrated. It is the presence of these two that authenticates the Church’s rites, not what some priest decides, indulging his own preferences.

Keep in mind, then, that the private recasting of ritual introduced by an individual priest insults the dignity of the believer and lays the way open to individual and idiosyncratic forms in celebrations that are in fact the property of the whole Church.¹⁴

Pope Paul VI admitted, in a 1976 letter to Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, that there were problems with implementing the liturgical reform—illegitimate experiments and improper interpretations and applications of texts—but he denied that these could be blamed on the Council or on the process of reform. Rather, he said, these “wicked practices” are “the contradiction of the Council because they lack fidelity to it.”¹⁵ And he affirmed his own conclusions about the reformed liturgy:

The contemporary reform of the liturgy has drawn its purposes and its guiding principles from the Council and the historical sources on liturgy. The work of reform has had the effect of feeding the faithful more fully on the Word of God. As the faithful share more intensely in the liturgy, the office of the priest, acting *in persona Christi*, remains intact. We have sanctioned
the reform with our own authority and directed its obligatory use by all who call themselves Catholics.\textsuperscript{16}

The work of catechesis remains unfinished; there are still priests and communities who think that their own variations on the liturgy of the Latin Church are somehow more “pastoral” or “in the spirit of the Council” than the revised rites. Such practices and attitudes, as Pope Paul VI said, “are the contradiction of the Council.” The introduction of a new translation of the Missale Romanum of Pope Paul VI and the Second Vatican Council gives us a new opportunity for catechesis and a new chance to review and reform our own attitudes toward the Church’s worship. We need bring to our preaching and our participation in liturgy the “zeal and patience” that is “imbued with the spirit and power of the liturgy” and fidelity to the rites that the Second Vatican Council called for (SC, 19, 14, 22).

Notes

1. A CD of Father Turner’s audio and PowerPoint presentation may be ordered at Order Form.
2. See, e.g., the 1974 “Declaration” of Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre: Declaration.
5. DOL 176:1175, 383.
7. Sacred Congregation of Rites, instruction Eucharisticum mysterium (May 25, 1967); DOL 179:1241, 402.
8. DOL 179:1244, 403.
9. See DOL 31:412, 118.
10. See DOL 198:1345, 453. Music for the reformed rites was drawn from authentic sources for chant in the Roman, Ambrosian, and Mozarabic rites. Other music had to be newly composed, e.g., for those parts of the Mass now proclaimed aloud that had not been sung before (or, at least, not for several hundred years) and for new texts added to the Mass. See Bugnini, 119–122, 885–914.
11. To review a series of such questions and their responses as they appeared in Notitiae, see DOL pages 449–452, note R1.
15. Pope Paul VI, epistle Cum te to Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre (October 11, 1976); DOL 61:564, 183.
16. DOL 61:569, 186.