

# Worshiping in “Continuous and Unbroken Tradition”

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When the Sacred Congregation for Rites introduced a new *Roman Missal* in 1969, it explained that this new book served as a witness to “the Church’s continuous and unbroken tradition” of Eucharistic worship, “irrespective of the introduction of certain new features” (see *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* [2002], 1). In commenting on the work that went into preparing the new book, Pope Paul VI observed: “No one should think . . . that this revision of the Roman Missal has come out of nowhere.” Rather, he said, it was built on the work of four centuries of liturgical studies that included not only the liturgies of the apostolic tradition and the Latin (Roman) Church but also studies of worship in the Eastern Churches. The revision of the Mass rite and texts also drew on the liturgical renewal begun by Pope Pius XII and on the desire of the Second Vatican Council for a liturgy that would provide a richer source for catechesis and witness in the world (Paul VI, apostolic constitution *Missale Romanum* [April 3, 1969]).

As we prepare for a new translation of the missal revised after the Council and approved by Pope Paul VI and reaffirmed by subsequent popes, we need to understand how what we sing and do at Mass is rooted in a rich but complex history, one filled with examples of how worshiping communities responded to changes in the culture and in the Church and of how some churches borrowed good things from the rituals of other churches in order to enrich the celebration of Mass. Understanding our history also shows us how to correct some past misunderstandings and to “bring forward proposals and measures of a pastoral nature that could not have even been foreseen” in earlier centuries (*General Instruction*, 10).

Why do we need such an understanding of what we sing and do? Because of who we are: the community of the baptized—the Church—that reveals the presence of Christ when we gather to pray and sing in an act “wherein God is perfectly glorified and [people] are sanctified” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* [SC], 7). In the Eucharist, we need to be clear that all the faithful are “offering the Immaculate Victim, not only through the hands of the priest, but also with him, [and] they should learn also to offer themselves through Christ the Mediator” (SC, 48). If we’re going to do our job, then we

need to come to the liturgy “with proper dispositions,” with our minds “attuned” to our voices, and we should be prepared to “cooperate with divine grace lest [we] receive it in vain” (SC, 11).

So we need to know how the Introductory Rites offer us an extended ritual threshold to the whole celebration of Mass that draws us from our various interests and concerns to become the Body of Christ, ready to receive the living Word of God as testament, challenge, and revelation and then to join in offering the perfect sacrifice of Christ so that we can, in turn, become the world’s transformation, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

We need to use the words, actions, and song of the Liturgy of the Word to be nourished spiritually on the belief of Israel and of the early Church as a living reality, one that we respond to with faith and prayer, one that draws us into the very work of Christ, continuing his redemptive act and announcing the Father’s love in the power of the Spirit.

We need to prepare ourselves, as our gifts are being prepared, to participate in the Eucharist, letting the actions, words, and songs draw our attention to the altar, making the transition to a deeper understanding of what it means to be the Body of Christ and what it means to fulfill the Lord’s command to do this action in his memory.

In the Eucharistic Prayer, uniting ourselves to Christ’s own sacrifice by uniting ourselves in song and spirit with the action and words of the prayer, we give praise and offer thanks, remembering the mighty deeds of God and Christ’s self-offering, and pray for the transforming power of the Spirit that will unite our daily lives to Christ so that, nourished by the Body and Blood of Christ, we will go into the world to pour ourselves out as Jesus did.

In the Communion Rites, we prepare the consecrated elements to be shared by all believers, and we prepare ourselves to receive the divine presence. But we also affirm that Eucharistic Communion is more than sharing in the sacrament at this moment: It is an invitation to the heavenly banquet, where there is no further need for sacramental signs, for we will share in full union with God in Christ, through the power of the Spirit.

But in the meantime, there is work to be done, so Mass ends with a dismissal that sends us forth, covered with God’s blessing, to be Christ’s transforming presence in the world, doing good works while praising and blessing God. And so we sing: “Thanks be to God!”