

RETURN TO THE NEW ROMAN MISSAL THE LITURGY OF THE WORD – PART II

As I observed in the previous article in this series (two weeks ago), the most significant changes to be found in the Liturgy of the Word in the *New Roman Missal* were in the *Profession of Faith*. I covered several of those and said that there were three more to consider, but there are really five that can benefit from some “unpacking” as one of my college professors would have put it. Four of the textual changes we’ve been hearing and proclaiming for the past five years have important theological and/or scriptural implications; the fifth reflects both good theology and poetic imagery.

It can help us to appreciate these changes if we consider why the *Profession of Faith*, the *Nicene Creed*, was composed in the first place. It was the work of one of the greatest Councils of the Church during a time in church history when heresies were rampant, especially ones concerning the true nature of Jesus and his relationship to the Father. Those who composed this Creed wanted to be sure that the language they used expressed as clearly and precisely as possible the most basic beliefs of the Christian community. That precision and clarity were essential in ensuring that the faith was passed on without error or ambiguity to future generations – to us!

One of those “precise” words comes early on in the Creed and was perceived as the most troublesome in the entire new translation. Where we previously proclaimed that Jesus is *one in Being* with the Father, we were now asked to appropriate the tongue-twisting *consubstantial with the Father* – a mouthful of a word if ever there was one. But the choice of this rare word relates to those early heresies I alluded to above. Whereas *Being* could be considered a bit vague or existential, *consubstantial*, as weird as it sounds on 21st century tongues, conveys the message that Jesus and the Father are the same through and through – they share the same **substance**, not merely the same existence. *Consubstantial* is indeed an unusual word, but it conveys a truly unique truth of faith about a unique person in our lives – Jesus, the Lord.

The next change involved a word with which we’re more familiar, though one we’re not accustomed to using all that often. Where we had been saying that *by the power of the Holy Spirit* Jesus was *born of the Virgin Mary*, we now profess that Jesus *by the Holy Spirit* was *incarnate of the Virgin Mary*. Both the old and the new conclude with the words *and became man*. The reasons for this change were both scriptural and theological. In the great prologue of St. John’s Gospel, we find the famous and profound statement that *the Word became flesh – incarnation!* Christmas is not really Jesus’ birthday (since he was born sometime in the spring and certainly not on December 25) but rather our celebration of the Incarnation – the infinite God taking on our finite flesh – a much bigger event than a birthday!

But the theological point of this is even more important. Where the previous language implied that Jesus, *by the (power of) the Holy Spirit* became man only when he was actually *born of the Virgin Mary, incarnate* affirms that the Spirit was at work from the first moment of Jesus' conception; he became one of us in that miracle announced to Mary by the angel Gabriel which we find in Luke's Gospel: *The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.* This proclamation of the Incarnation is so central to our faith that, even before the *New Roman Missal* was introduced, the Church had asked all of us to make a *profound bow* when we professed that truth.

A few other minor changes in wording in the *Profession of Faith* merit a quick look. In the second to last sentence of the Creed, we used to *acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins*, but now we *confess one baptism*.... In this context, *confess* has nothing to do with sin or sorrow but instead reflects ancient formulas of Christian initiation. *Confess* is also a much stronger word. I can *acknowledge* that the sky is blue; but is that the best I can do when it comes to expressing my faith in the sacrament that first unites us with the Triune God and with one another?

Finally, in the last sentence of the Creed, we encountered a change that combines beautiful imagery with great theology. We had been saying that *we look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.* In light of what we now say, it seems as if we had been treating the resurrection and eternal life as if they were lost car keys! But this wonderful "new" translation is filled with the joy and hope we should feel as people baptized into the dying and rising of Jesus Christ: *I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.* I certainly do. Amen.

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