



The history of liturgical books

part 1

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We reverently carry in the Book of Gospels in the opening procession of Mass. The server brings the *Sacramentary* to the priest so that he might recite the opening prayer. The reader approaches the ambo and reads from the *Lectionary*. But what is the history of these sacred books and why are they so important to how we worship?

Our liturgical texts bear witness to an “unbroken tradition” (GIRM 6) of how the church has worshipped for 2,000 years. The third edition of the *Roman Missal*, that we will use beginning in November 2011, is the latest step in this tradition.

In the early church, worship was conducted by improvisation, with the presider “giving thanks to the best of his ability” (Justin Martyr, c. 160). Rituals and texts were influenced by Jewish synagogue practices. This was an oral culture, and only gradually did presiders start to write things down, often on scrolls made of animal skins, then in a “codex” (similar to a book as we now know it). These small liturgical books, *libelli*, were often only a few pages long and

Yes and no. The basics of the Mass remain constant: Christ took bread, blessed it, broke it and shared it with his followers. We participate in these same actions each week. But, as we see from the adjoining article, the details surrounding these basics have changed over time, including the name of the book used by the priest to lead us at Mass.

In March 2011, the Vatican approved a new *Missal* – announced by Pope John Paul II in 2000 – that which we will actually start using next year, on Nov. 27, 2011, the First Sunday of Advent. Our beliefs and understanding of the prayers we pray at Mass have not changed, but some of the words we speak and sing will.

Our diocese already has begun to prepare. In April, the clergy of the Diocese of Erie received the first of a series of packages regarding the *Missal*. They were asked to begin by praying the Eucharistic Prayer in the new translation. This fall, the clergy were invited to attend an introduction to the

contained prayers for one or more celebrations. The earliest standardized eucharistic prayers seem to date from the third century.

By the fourth century, as worship became more formalized and with growing concern for orthodoxy, there was a trend toward standardization of the prayers and readings that would be used at various rituals and on various days of the year. Yet, there was still a variety of expressions in multiple liturgical centers, from Rome to Jerusalem, from Antioch to Egypt.

In the next few centuries, more extensive books appeared, such as the *Leonine Sacramentary* – a rather disorganized collection of *libelli* that appeared at the end of the sixth century and was erroneously attributed to Pope Leo I (440-461). The *Old Gelasian Sacramentary* (seventh-eighth century) had three sections organized according to the liturgical year. Roman in origin, it was later enlarged by Frankish practitioners. The *Gregorian Sacramentary* (late eighth century) was a book intended for the exclusive use of the pope and eventually developed into three different

products. In 785, Pope Hadrian gave one of these to Charlemagne (d. 814), who extended its use throughout his empire. Extensive additions gradually were made for local use.

Other liturgical books, too, were developing in the first nine centuries. Where once a Bible had simply been marked with marginal notes, it became a more practical matter to organize the readings into epistle books or Gospel books. As early as the fifth century, Lectionaries organized selected passages according to the liturgical year.

Early church *ordos* contained rubrics or instructions for how the Mass, sacramental rites and other ceremonies were to be performed. A series of famous *Roman Ordines* became the norm for papal, episcopal, monastic and parochial practices. All these orders now provide fascinating glimpses into how early worshippers celebrated initiation, ordinations, Masses, funerals and even coronations.

By the end of the first millennium, the church was using full missals, with everything one would need for Mass –

Is the Mass going to change?

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new *Missal*. Beginning in January, pastors are asked to work with their parish leadership groups and enlist their help in preparing the assembly. A suggested step-by-step schedule to assist parishes in this process was circulated to priests at their workshops.

The hope for the *Missal* is that we will not just change words, but seek to develop a deeper level of communal prayer. Between now and then, however, we have some adjustments to make. While the major changes rest with the presider, the people's prayers and responses will change too, specifically the Glory to God, the Creed and the Holy, Holy to name a few.

Change is challenging. Yet, our baptism calls us to change daily to become more like Christ. May the new *Roman Missal* be an opportunity for us to grow in the spirit of our baptism.

chant texts from the *Antiphony*, readings from the epistle book and the Gospel book, prayers from *Sacramentaries* and instructions from the *ordines*. (cf. *From Age to Age* by Edward Foley, The Liturgical Press, 2008)

Partly in reaction to the Reformation, the Council of Trent (1548-1563) called for uniformity in the liturgical books, using Latin, the language of scholarship. Soon after, the church received a breviary (1568), the *Missal of Pius V* (1570) and the *Roman Ritual* (1614). Using the recently-invented printing press (c. 1440), the church decreed that all dioceses and religious communities whose liturgical traditions were less than 200 years old would use these books. Though they underwent some changes in the next 400 years, they remained relatively unchanged until the Second Vatican Council (1961-1965).

In our next installment, we'll trace the history of our liturgical books since the council. In the meantime, listen carefully to the beautiful texts of our Mass and appreciate that as you pray, you are echoing the prayers of Christians long before us. ☪