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'The mystery of faith'

By Msgr. Richard Antall *

Perhaps one of the most noticeable changes in the new English translation of the Latin Rite has to do with the acclamation that responds to the consecration. Before talking about the changes, it is worth our while to think about this part of the Mass.

First of all, what is happening? The insertion of an “anamnesis” (literally a “remembering”) of the people was a change brought in at the Second Vatican Council. It was a liturgical borrowing from one of the Oriental Rites.

The words are addressed by the people to Jesus. That should make us pay close attention, since in the Eucharist we almost always address the Father and not the Son. The Mass is the prayer of the Body of Christ in the world to the Father through Jesus Christ His Son and in the Holy Spirit.

Why do we stop after the consecration to speak to Jesus? I suppose it is obvious. He is now present on the altar. We pause to greet him by means of the acclamation. This is not something most of us have been used to hearing. It makes for a very personal note, however, and actually emphasizes the importance of the consecration. The presence of the Lord on the altar provokes a response.

A priest once commented on this. He said that when the consecration was completed he felt happy because he was no longer the center of attention. Christ was present and so now the priest could cede him his place. I must admit that I had never thought about this until I read it in a book. It made me realize that the acclamation is part of a personal conversation with the Lord.

That is why it is natural that the acclamation that was perhaps the most popular in use has been eliminated: “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.” Supposedly one of the bishops lamented, “But it is the only one everyone knows!”

The reason it has been changed is obvious, however. The three phrases (in the soon-to-be-former acclamation) are declarations, not prayers. They are in the third person, not the second. The Latin originals are like an exclamation that speaks directly to the Lord Jesus. Two of them say, “Domine” (“Lord”) and one speaks to the “Salvator mundi” (“Savior of the world”).

The dialog of the priest and people after the consecration is something that expresses the essence of the Eucharist. The priest announces, “The mystery of faith” because the consecration has made a tremendous change in the celebration. This mystery is not like something out of Agatha Christie, a puzzle to be solved, but a reality that we accept in faith because we cannot possibly comprehend it just by reason.

The novels popularly called “mysteries” are built around some key information that will make everything clear but is withheld from the reader. Religious mysteries, on the contrary, require the assent of the intellect and will, not more clues.

In the new translation, which will be in use from the first Sunday of Advent, the response of the people will have three options, instead of the four that are presently used. The new translations are as follows:

“We proclaim your Death, O Lord, and profess your Resurrection, until you come again.”

“When we eat this Bread and Drink this Cup, we proclaim your

Death, O Lord, until you come again.”

“Save us, Savior of the world, for by your Cross and Resurrection you have set us free.”

These can be unpacked theologically and merit our meditation. Each one is spoken to Jesus and recapitulates the deep mystery of our redemption by means of our Savior’s cross and resurrection.

This is what the old acclamation declared, that Christ died for us, that he rose again and that we await his return in glory. Since the resurrection was the definitive proof of Christ’s divinity, the acclamations implicitly speak about the mystery of the Incarnation.

They also show that our memorial is not just about events from the past. Swiss priest Pascal Desthieux illustrated this by a particularly appropriate comparison.

When a husband and wife celebrate their anniversary, this is not just about the past. The fact that they are celebrating the date has to do with their ongoing relationship. Although anything is possible in the absurd and anarchic way people live nowadays, it is not likely that a couple not committed to each other would memorialize the day they were joined together if it did not have a meaning in the present. The two of them remember the past but the event they celebrate has ramifications in the present and for the future.

In a similar way, the community of faith remembers the most important events in human history, the sacrificial death of Jesus the Christ not just to look toward the past. The present action — the memorial — is about our relationship with Christ now. It refers back to the past, speaking about the death and resurrection of Jesus. Nevertheless, there is a clear reference to the future in all three acclamations.

I would hazard the guess that many people have not really thought much about the acclamation in terms of theological meaning. The mystery of faith, the priest says. What could be more important than that? The meditation of the memorial acclamations will give us new insights into the mystery of the Eucharist, which is at the heart of our faith.

The three acclamations are equivalent but at the same time complementary. Perhaps that is why it would best to alternate them with congregations, because there are particular aspects to them that are valuable. The first offers a panorama of salvation history. It mentions proclaiming the past, specifically, the Death of the Lord. Then it speaks of “professing,” which refers to the present. Finally it speaks of the future: “until you come again.” This makes explicit what the other two acclamations contain implicitly.

The second acclamation speaks directly of the Eucharist, eating the bread and drinking the cup. This is practically a citation of 1 Corinthians 11:26: “Every time, then, you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes.” Past, present and future are found as elements but the acclamation has the unique advantage of being scriptural and referring to the Eucharistic banquet in a concrete way.

The beginning of the third acclamation, “Save us, Savior of the world,” has poetic assonance and in fact the prayer can actually stand alone, independent of the Eucharistic canon. The passion of Christ is more explicitly referred to by the reference to the cross. It also contains the theological idea of “freedom” which is actually a metaphor for redemption. I find this third option the most beautiful.

The change of the English translation has again provided us with an occasion to meditate a very important aspect of the Mass. The memorial acclamation gives the assembly voice in the middle of the

Eucharistic prayer.

All the trouble we can take about making the meaning of this participation more clearly theological is certainly a priority for the Church. The Pope has stated on several occasions his hope that liturgical renewal will be the harbinger of spiritual renewal for the whole Church.

The new translation is only part of the work of liturgical renewal, but at the same time is a key element in it.

** Msgr. Antall, a missionary priest from Cleveland, served for nearly a decade as moderator of the curia for the Archdiocese of San Salvador.*

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