

The Collects at Sunday Mass: An Examination of the Revisions of Vatican II¹

Introduction

The collect, called the “opening prayer” in our present English missal, is the first proper Mass prayer. The Latin text is always just a single sentence. Because of its brevity, it is easy to discount the collect’s importance. But the collect is the true proper prayer of the day and, as such, it is uniquely expressive of the liturgical day. On Sundays and days with the rank of feast or higher the collect is also prayed at all the Hours of the Liturgy of the Hours save Compline so that a person who goes to Mass and prays the Hours on a given Sunday or solemnity prays the same collect six times. The collects for Sunday and Holy Days, that is the days of obligation,² are especially important for they are the only collects which the majority of the faithful hear year after year.

The set of Sunday and Holy Day collects in the Vatican II missal is not the same as the set found in the 1962 missal, but scholars have not yet devoted much attention to exploring the extent and character of the differences.³

The task is enormously complex because of the multiplicity of texts involved, and the present essay is only a modest beginning. By using quantitative analysis as a tool, this article first establishes the extent to which the 1970 missal includes the Sunday and Holy Day collects of the 1962 missal, incorporates collects drawn from other Mass books,⁴ and introduces collects that are new. The quantitative analysis finds that the corpus of Sunday and Holy Day collects in the 1970 missal is significantly different from that of the 1962 missal without, however, replicating in any subsection the contents of the corresponding subsection of another Mass book. The post-Vatican II editors made changes to the ancient collects and composed new ones. For this reason, the essay also examines editorial practices at work in the selection and revision of ancient orations and in the confection of new collects. The significance of the material changes in the collects increases greatly if it signals substantive changes in the theological or spiritual import of the resulting corpus of collects. For this reason, our quantitative analysis is followed by a comparative examination of the four Advent Sunday collects⁵ of the respective missals in order to ascertain whether the two sets express the same truths of faith and accent the same aspects of Christian existence, and if they do not, to identify the key differences. This second level of inquiry finds that when the Church prays the 1970 Advent collects she assumes a

markedly different posture before God and seeks very different things from him compared to her posture and petitions in praying the 1962 set. Because the Advent Sunday collects comprise the smallest single subset of Sunday or Holy Day collects, it would be a serious error to draw conclusions about the whole corpus of Sunday and Holy Day collects in the 1970 missal on the basis of these findings. Nevertheless, the extent both of the material changes in the full set of collects and of the substantial changes in the Advent Sunday collects raises the question of whether the new corpus of collects expresses a significantly different understanding of relations between the Lord and his Church, and whether, in consequence, it forms the faithful who pray by means of it differently from the way in which its predecessor formed previous generations. Needless to say, this question deserves serious scholarly attention. Unless we know how our present liturgical texts are like and unlike those used by earlier generations, and how we may be different on their account, our understanding of our liturgy and its history, and possibly of our own graced lives in Christ, will be deficient. The present study is based on the Latin texts of the typical editions of the respective missals. Unless otherwise noted, everything said of the *Missale Romanum* (1970), the first typical edition of the Vatican II missal, is also true of the second and third typical editions - *Missale Romanum* (1975) and *Missale Romanum* (2002), respectively. Because some of the facts presented in this essay suggest editorial practices that some may find disturbing, it is important to say at the outset that the object of this study is not to raise questions about the legitimacy of the Vatican II missal or in any way to undermine its authority. Rather, the goal is to identify, as we are able, the unique features of the new missal and so gradually come to understand its place in the Western liturgical tradition. Lastly, unless otherwise indicated, the translations are my own.

References

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2. The six traditional Holy Days of Obligation in the dioceses of the United States are the Nativity of the Lord, the Solemnity of Mary Holy Mother of God (formerly, the Circumcision of the Lord), the Ascension of the Lord, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, All Saints, and the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary.
3. A noteworthy exception is Lorenzo Bianchi, “A Survey of the Theology, History, Terminology, and Syntax in the Prayers of the Roman Missal,” in *Theological and Historical Aspects of the Roman Missal*, The Proceedings of the Fifth International Colloquium on Historical, Theological, and Canonical Studies on the Roman Catholic Liturgy (Kingston and Surbiton: Centre International d’Études Liturgiques, 2000), 127-64 which is briefly discussed below.
4. The revisers mined ancient liturgical codices.
5. That is, those of the first season of the liturgical year.