

May We Change the Prayers or Responses of the Mass, so as to avoid using Male Pronouns for God?

Question: Is it acceptable to alter the words of the Mass (either the people's responses or the prayers of the priest) with regard to the male pronouns used for God so that phrases like "his name" and "his Church" become "God's name" and "God's Church"?

Answer: No. One of the marks of the Church is that it is catholic or *universal*. Neither the priest, nor the local community, nor any individual may change the responses of the prayers of the Mass. The Mass is our central act of worship in the Church and our reciting the same responses together is a sign of the unity of the Church. When people introduce different responses at Mass from those of the universal Church, it sows discord into a liturgy that is meant to foster unity in Christ through *Holy Communion*. In addition, the prayers of the Mass have been carefully chosen by those in the Church who have the authority and obligation to preserve and regulate the celebration of the Sacraments. To disregard these prayers means that we also disregard the pastoral authority of the Church to govern the celebration of the Sacraments. To alter the responses of the Mass in this manner is, therefore, a *liturgical abuse*. The *prayer* of the Church reflects the *faith* of the Church. Unauthorized changes have the potential to alter the authentic expression of faith conveyed by these prayers.

Discussion of the Issue

Let us examine this question further from two different angles: 1) Why is it important that we keep the words of the Mass exactly as they are given? 2) Why such a change to the words of Mass might be problematic for an authentic expression of Catholic faith.

1) Why is it important that we keep the words exactly as they are given?

A) **The Unity of One Voice:** St. Paul the Apostle prayed that

"... the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

We cannot be of *one voice* when there are different people giving different responses in the liturgy. The Mass is supposed to be the very source and summit of our unified prayer to God. Instead, when individuals or groups decide to alter these responses on their own, it promotes a lack of harmony and a disunity of response that becomes a kind of *anti-sign* of unity. Scripture admonishes us to "call on the name of the LORD and serve him with *one accord*" (Zeph. 3:9). This is the example of the early Church who, "with *one accord* devoted themselves to prayer" (Acts 1:14). Again, St. Paul asks us to complete his joy "by being of the *same mind*, having the same love, being *in full accord* and of *one mind*" (Phil 2: 2). Jesus prayed to the Father that we might be one just as he is one with the Father (see John 17: 21-23). This is one of the main purposes of the Liturgy – to make us one. Those who sow discord in the Church by creating divisive factions are condemned by St. Paul as being guilty of serious sin. He places this in the same category as the "works of the flesh" that prevent us from inheriting the Kingdom of God (Gal. 5: 19-21).

B) **What has the Church said about this?** In 2004, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments issued an Instruction entitled, *Redemptionis Sacramentum: On certain matters to be observed or to be avoided regarding the Most Holy Eucharist*. The purpose of this letter was to correct a number of liturgical abuses that have crept into the celebration of liturgy in the Church. In paragraphs 58 & 59, this Instruction explains the following:

"All of Christ's faithful likewise have the right to a celebration of the Eucharist that has been so carefully prepared in all its parts that the word of God is properly and efficaciously proclaimed and explained in it; that the faculty for selecting the liturgical texts and rites is carried out with care according to the norms;

and that their faith is duly safeguarded and nourished by the words that are sung in the celebration of the Liturgy.

The reprobated practice by which Priests, Deacons or the faithful here and there alter or vary at will the texts of the Sacred Liturgy that they are charged to pronounce, must cease. For in doing thus, they render the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy unstable, and not infrequently distort the authentic meaning of the Liturgy.”

The message is clear. The faithful have a right to the celebration of the liturgy according to the universal norms of the Church. Any altering of the given texts must cease for it has the potential to distort the “the authentic meaning of the Liturgy.” The members of the Church are called to humbly and lovingly submit to the liturgical discipline of the Church for she is our mother and our teacher. She is also the custodian and guardian of the Sacraments.

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal, issued in 2002, affirms in paragraph 24 that even the priest “must remember that he is the servant of the sacred Liturgy and that he himself is not permitted, on his own initiative, to add, to remove, or to change anything in the celebration of Mass.” This text quotes the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, from Vatican II, which states the following in paragraphs 22 & 23:

“1. Regulation of the sacred liturgy depends solely on the authority of the Church, that is, on the Apostolic See and, as laws may determine, on the bishop.

2. In virtue of power conceded by the law, the regulation of the liturgy within certain defined limits belongs also to various kinds of competent territorial bodies of bishops legitimately established.

3. Therefore no other person, even if he be a priest, may add, remove, or change anything in the liturgy on his own authority.

That sound tradition may be retained, and yet the way remain open to legitimate progress, careful investigation is always to be made into each part of the liturgy which is to be revised. This investigation should be theological, historical, and pastoral. Also the general laws governing the structure and meaning of the liturgy must be studied in conjunction with the experience derived from recent liturgical reforms and from the indults conceded to various places. Finally, there must be no innovations unless the good of the Church genuinely and certainly requires them; and care must be taken that any new forms adopted should in some way grow organically from forms already existing.

As far as possible, notable differences between the rites used in adjacent regions must be carefully avoided.”

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC, 1123 – 1125) gives further explanation:

“The purpose of the sacraments is to sanctify men, to build up the Body of Christ and, finally, to give worship to God. Because they are signs **they also instruct**. They not only presuppose faith, but by words and objects they also nourish, strengthen, and express it. That is why they are called '**sacraments of faith**.'”

The Church's faith precedes the faith of the believer who is invited to adhere to it. When the Church celebrates the sacraments, she **confesses the faith received from the apostles** - whence the ancient saying: *lex orandi, lex credendi* (or: *legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*, according to Prosper of Aquitaine [5th cent.]). The law of prayer is the law of faith: **the Church believes as she prays**. Liturgy is a constitutive element of the holy and living Tradition.

For this reason, no sacramental rite may be modified or manipulated at the will of the minister or the community. Even the supreme authority in the Church may not change the liturgy arbitrarily, but only in the obedience of faith and with religious respect for the mystery of the liturgy.”

2) Why changes to the words of Mass might be problematic for an authentic expression of Catholic faith.

A) We believe the Church is One: As has already been mentioned, the fact that we all respond with the same words in the prayers of the Mass expresses our faith in being one with the rest of the Church. To insist on using words different from the rest of the Church expresses that we believe we are not in unity with the rest of the Church. The way we pray (following the common disciplines of the Church regarding the Mass) is an expression of faith in the unity of the Church. By deliberately changing our responses we are promoting disunity.

B) We believe that the Church has the rightful pastoral authority to govern in this area: Refusal to accept the prayers of the Mass as they are, is a refusal to accept the pastoral authority of the Church with regard to her sacramental disciplines. This reflects that we may not accept that the Church has the right to govern the celebration of her Sacraments. At the very least this means that we do not believe we are bound by the laws and disciplines of the Church. This is problematic as it calls into question whether the Church has been given the rightful authority as the steward of the Sacraments to regulate how they are celebrated. This also denies our need to honor and obey the pastoral authority of the Church and, as such, is a violation of the Fourth Commandment. Parents and those with pastoral authority in the Church (i.e. the Pope and Bishops in union with the Pope) have the right to make rules in their own household. The family is one kind of household and the Church is another. Even though these household rules may be changeable, they should still be respected as long as they do not lead us away from God.

C) We believe in a *personal* God rather than an impersonal divine force. While we may use the impersonal pronoun “it” for non-persons, for *persons* we use personal pronouns with gender. In many languages, gender is assigned even to objects (e.g. she’s a beautiful ship). To always avoid using a personal pronoun for God is simply awkward. The use of personal pronouns for God naturally affirms that we are speaking about a real person that we can relate to in a personal relationship. We use personal pronouns for persons.

D) The prayer of the Mass is directed to God the *Father*: The whole prayer of the Mass is directed to God the *Father*. Specifically, the prayers of the new translation of the Mass before the Prayer over the Gifts (the “Orate Fratres”) are as follows:

Priest: Pray brethren (or “brothers and sisters”), that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the almighty **Father**.

People: May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands for the praise and glory of **his** name, for our good, and the good of all **his** holy Church.

The word “his” in this prayer refers directly to God the Father. Jesus himself taught us to pray to God as our “Father.” The revelation that God is our *Father* is an article of faith that we profess in the creed: “I believe in God, the *Father* almighty...” While it is certainly not a problem to refer to God the Father as simply, “God,” it *is* problematic if we insist on *only* using the word “God” to refer to the Father, so as to avoid using male pronouns. To make an issue of not using the male pronoun for God the Father is inappropriate as it presents a gender neutral image of God who has clearly been revealed to us as *Father* by Jesus. Insisting on a gender neutral reference to God our Father (or even to Jesus) expresses confusion on a matter of Divine Revelation.

Speaking of how we address God as *Father* in the prayer that Jesus gave us, the Catechism (2779) states:

Before we make our own this first exclamation of the Lord's Prayer, we must humbly cleanse our hearts of certain false images drawn "from this world." *Humility* makes us recognize that "no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him," that is, "to little children." The *purification* of our hearts has to do with paternal or maternal images, stemming from our personal and cultural history, and influencing our relationship with God. God our Father transcends the categories of the created world. **To impose our own ideas in this area "upon**

him" would be to fabricate idols to adore or pull down. To pray to the Father is to enter into his mystery as he is and as the Son has revealed him to us.

E) But, one might object, God does not have sex, so how can we speak of God as being “male?” Yes, God the Father is not a *human* and does not have human *sex*. However, this doesn't mean that we should not use terms of the male *gender* to refer to him. *Gender* and *sex* are not the same. We refer to the Church in the female *gender* even though the Church is not of the human female *sex*. Divine Revelation is expressed to us in language that is intrinsically linked to gender because this reveals to us something of God in his *relationship* to mankind. Jesus is the *Bridegroom* who lays down his life for the Church, his *Bride*. This relationship cannot be communicated with gender neutral language. God is our *Father* and the Church is our *mother*. To remove any expression of gender from our expression of faith would be to change the content and the meaning of our faith.

The Catechism explains what it means for us to call God “Father:”

By calling God "Father," the language of faith indicates two main things: that God is the first origin of everything and transcendent authority; and that he is at the same time goodness and loving care for all his children. God's parental tenderness can also be expressed by the image of motherhood, which emphasizes God's immanence, the intimacy between Creator and creature. The language of faith thus draws on the human experience of parents, who are in a way the first representatives of God for man. But this experience also tells us that human parents are fallible and can disfigure the face of fatherhood and motherhood. We ought therefore to recall that God transcends the human distinction between the sexes. He is neither man nor woman: he is God. He also transcends human fatherhood and motherhood, although he is their origin and standard: no one is father as God is Father. (CCC, 239)

Conclusion

If anyone does not feel that they can proclaim the responses of the Mass as they are given to us by the Church, they should remain silent. To do otherwise would be to sow discord in a liturgy that by its nature is ordered toward the unity of the Church.

If one is unwilling to accept the pastoral discipline of the Church with regard to the celebration of the Mass, which is the source and summit of our faith, one should examine if they are contributing to the unity or disunity or the Church – it's harmony, or discord. The act of receiving Holy Communion should reflect that we in full communion with the entire Body of Christ, which includes the pastoral office of his Church.

Further, if one is truly unable to profess the faith of the Church, as it is expressed through the prayers of the Mass, then one may no longer be in *full communion* with the faith of the Church and should examine whether they should continue to receive Holy Communion. “Sharing in the Church's faith” is a condition for “full participation in the Sacrament of the Eucharist.”¹

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Happy Are Those Who Are Called to His Supper:” *On Preparing to Receive Christ Worthily in the Eucharist* (2006).