

THE MISSIOLOGY OF THE CONCLUDING RITES

by

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Missiology of the Concluding Rites of the Mass of the Roman Rite

At first glance it would be easy to think that the Concluding Rites of the Mass of the Roman Rite were only perfunctory and devoid of any theological meaning. The Concluding Rites consist of only three required parts: the Liturgical Greeting, an optional opportunity for announcements, a blessing (in either short or longer forms), and the words of dismissal. Contrary to popular expectations or practice, there is no concluding or recessional song prescribed.

The brevity of the rites notwithstanding a few comments can be made to show the purpose of these rites and their congruence with the rites that have preceded. This rite begins with the invariable liturgical Greeting “The Lord be with you.” Simple, in itself, this greeting signals that something important is about to happen. It occurs only four times in the Eucharistic Liturgy: at the very beginning, at the gospel, and at the Eucharistic Prayer. J. Jungmann, S.J. simply notes, “it serves to focus our attention.”¹

If the concluding rites served only as an ending signal, there would be no real need for the “Lord be with you” signal. The concluding Rites do more than that: they tie together what has gone before with a purposeful going forth.

The prayer which immediately precedes the concluding rites often has a summary tone, praying that what we have done in the midst of celebrating these holy Mysteries might be brought to its full completion in the Heavenly realm.

At the Great Paschal Vigil, for example, we pray: “Lord, you have nourished us with your Easter sacraments. Fill us with the Spirit, and make us one in peace and love. We ask this through Christ our Lord.” And on the Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary time: “Lord, help us with your kindness. Make us strong through the Eucharist. May we put into action the saving mystery we celebrate. We ask this in the Name of Jesus the Lord.” The same thing happens in the Seasons. On the Second Sunday of Advent we pray: “Father, you give us food from heaven. Teach us to live by your wisdom and to love the things of heaven by our sharing in this mystery. Grant this through Christ our Lord.”

The prayers of the liturgy make it abundantly clear that the Liturgy and life are entwined. What we do in the Liturgy nourishes and strengthens us for holy living. Over and over the prayers after communion ask that the holy Mysteries we have celebrated would sustain us along life’s journey.

By means of the sacramental celebration, the Christian community has intentionally touched into the Paschal Mystery. By means of readings, prayers, chants, gestures and

1. J.A. Jungmann, S.J. *The Mass of the Roman Rite, Volume I*, (Translated by Frances A. Brunner) New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1950, page 362.

actions the community remembered, acknowledged and sacramentally experienced the saving power of Christ. Now this community goes forth. It does not go forth, though, apart from Christ. The leaving of the sacred assembly does not mean separation from Christ. Rather, the Assembly goes forth knowing its truest identity, as the Body of Christ, a bit better. The Assembly goes forth ready to embrace the struggles and challenges, the dyings and risings that occur within the complexities of daily life. They go forth now all the more prepared to follow the way of Christ as it continues to wend its way through time and space, in the dark valleys and bright green meadows.

The Liturgy provides a pride of place opportunity to remember the saving reality of Christ and to renew the commitment which unites us in Christ. The going forth moves the Assembly into that place where they forge the Paschal Mystery in the midst of their own lives by the ways that they deal with human realities and problems in the spirit of Christ, who truly enlivens them. Daily life often provides the opportunity both to live out discipleship and to welcome others into the light of life by the loving and generous ways we deal with the all too often tragic moments that occur in our broken world.

After the transition into the concluding rites with the signal phrase *Dominus vobiscum*, time is provided for announcements. This is entirely appropriate. At this time the gathered community can be reminded of those tasks and activities for which they are responsible as well as projects by which they reach out to others in the Name of Christ. Catechumens and Candidates depart the Assembly after the Liturgy of the Word. During their Scripture Breaking session, catechists help them both to break open the meaning of the Word for their lives and to find ways to put the Word into action. So, too, with the Assembly who celebrate the entire Eucharist. They are reminded that Word and Sacrament send them forth as disciples who make a difference for our world.

Announcements are followed by a blessing given in the simple or solemn form. The Solemn form of the blessing gives better verbal expression to the reality of the connections between the Paschal Mystery celebrated and acknowledged within the liturgy and the Paschal Mystery in which the Assembly participates in their daily lives. The Blessings are intercessory prayers by the presider on behalf of the people.

Some samples of the Blessing texts illustrate the Paschal Mystery connection, though we might hope for fuller connections by adaptations made by the presiders. The following translations come from the proposed new English translation of the Roman Sacramentary. One of the clearest paschal mystery connections can be found in the blessing on the feast of a Saint: “May Christ the Lord, who revealed in the saints the power of the paschal mystery, make you faithful in witnessing to his risen and glorious life.” In the third form for Ordinary time, the presider prays: “May God nourish you always with the teachings of faith and make you steadfast in works of love.” And “May God direct your steps along right paths and show you the way of charity and peace.”

Also included among the Solemn Blessings are “Prayers over the People”, given in the traditional collect form. Number 28 says: “Confirm, O God, the work you have wrought

in us, and preserve in the hearts of your faithful the gifts of the Holy Spirit, that they may never be ashamed to confess before the world Christ crucified, but may carry out his commandments with unfailing love.” Here, for example, the reality of the sacrifice of Christ, just celebrated, connects with the ways the faithful might also experience suffering in the living out of Christian values and service.

Finally, the Mass of the Roman Rite ends with a ritual dismissal versicle and response. The very dismissal phrase, “Ite, missa est.”, has been understood as being more than a simple acknowledgement that the Service is over and that what has been done in the liturgical acts needs to be extended in daily life by putting the Gospel and life of Jesus into action.² *Ite, missa est* is one of those cryptic phrases that begs for a translation done, not literally, but using dynamic equivalence. Gerard Sloyan speaks to this same issue, with regard to Biblical translations when he says “...the art of translation begins *after* one has discovered what the words might mean in one’s own tongue....all renderings from one tongue to another are approximations.”³ In our day and age, where many people need help appropriating the symbols and language of the liturgy, it only makes sense to allow the translation of this key phrase to speak more clearly (and boldly) of the mission that the assembly is emerging to do. In a similar vein, this proclamation might also benefit from a permission to expand the phraseology with other words, based on the Scripture of the day, after the example of other *Invitations* which may be expanded “in these or similar words.”⁴

The Roman Rite thus ends. No song is prescribed despite a wide-spread continuance of a concluding song, a carry over from the days when four hymns were added to the Latin Mass before the reforms of Vatican II, as a way of beginning active participation at times when it would not “interrupt” the Mass. Perhaps, now it is time to let go of that experiment and allow the ritual to function “as is.” Some argue that having a final hymn gives a sense of closure to the celebration. And perhaps they have an insight: the Mass does not have closure. Rather, the Mass opens us into life. We go forth together from the celebration of the Paschal Mystery to the living of the Mystery in our daily lives.

²James T. Bretzke, *Consecrated Phrases: A Latin Theological Dictionary: Latin Expressions Commonly Found in Theological Writings*. Electronic edition. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000, c 1998. *Ite Missa Est*; Go the Mass is (ended). Final words of the presider uttered at the conclusion of the Latin Eucharist, to which the congregation responds *Deo gratias* (q.v. “Thanks be to God). *Missa* seems to have been a late Latin word for *missio* (mission) and thus in this phrase refers to the “mission” to live and preach the gospel, which is given to the community at the conclusion of the eucharistic celebration. In time *missa* came to refer to the entire rite of the eucharistic celebration, that is, the “Mass.”

³ Gerard Sloyan, “Some Thoughts on Bible Translations,” *Worship* 75 (2001) 235.

⁴ For more ideas about expanding this dismissal versicle, see Susan S. Jorgenson, “The Dismissal Rite: A Blessing for Action,” *Modern Liturgy* 19:21 and Michael E. Moynahan, “The Concluding Rite,” *Liturgical Ministry* 7 (Fall 1998) 175-181.