

# Historical Development of the Eucharistic Prayers

## The languages of the liturgy

The Apostles probably all spoke **Aramaic**, the common language of Galilean Jews. They also would have spoken **Hebrew**, the language of the Old Testament. The Mass was first celebrated by the Apostles among the Jewish community in Jerusalem, where Hebrew would have been the common language. Hence, the liturgical rites were originally celebrated in these closely related Semitic languages.

The Church quickly spread to Gentile areas, where Greek was the dominant language. Within a century, **Greek** had become the common language of the liturgy.

From the mid-third century through the fifth century, the Western Church gradually transitioned into **Latin**, while the Eastern Church continued to use Greek. That remained the case right up until the Eastern and Western parts of the Church formally separated in 1054. When Eastern Rite Catholics returned to communion with Rome, they did so under the condition that they did not need to adopt the Latin rites used in the West.

Since Vatican II, liturgical rites are celebrated in **all languages**, but the Latin text remains the official version from which translations are made.

## Early forms of the Eucharistic Prayer

It appears that there were no officially sanctioned Eucharistic Prayers during the first century and at least the first half of the second century. The earliest description we have of the Mass comes from Justin Martyr's *First Apology*, written about 155-157 A.D. In it, he describes the celebrant as giving thanks over the bread and wine "as he is able," suggesting that the Eucharistic Prayer was still being ad-libbed at that time.

Between the third and fifth centuries, a diversity of rites were developed throughout the Christian world, including at least six in the West and six in the East. The prayers were substantially the same, but with variations in wording and in the order of the various parts of the prayer.

Pope Gregory the Great (590-604) instituted several liturgical reforms, including the commissioning of a new Eucharistic Prayer. This "**Roman Canon**" was then mandated for use throughout the Western (or Latin) Church. It remained the only authorized Eucharistic Prayer for the Latin Church until Vatican II (1962-1965).

## Eucharistic Prayers in the first Post-Vatican II Missal

The liturgical reforms mandated by the Second Vatican Council sought to restore early forms of the liturgy that had been lost over time. In addition to stripping away many elements of the Mass that had been added or distorted in later centuries, the liturgical scholars also brought back some early forms of the Eucharistic Prayer, which had been suppressed by Pope Gregory. The first Roman Missal published after Vatican II (1969) contained not only the Roman Canon, now renamed as "Eucharistic Prayer I," but also three "new" Eucharistic Prayers based on sources more ancient than the Roman Canon. The four approved texts were as follows:

- EP I (the Roman Canon) – Composed in Latin, around the year 600. Since it lacks a preface, it can be used on any occasion. It is especially appropriate for solemn feast days, because it includes brief inserts for many such celebrations.
- EP II – Virtually identical to the earliest recorded version of the Eucharistic Prayer, which appeared in *The Apostolic Tradition*, by St. Hippolytus of Rome, in about the year 215. Originally written in Greek. It has a preface which is not tied thematically to the rest of the prayer. Any other preface may be substituted, making EP II suitable for any Mass.
- EP III – Composed after Vatican II, but based on two fourth-century European rites, the Gallican (France) and Mozarabic (Spain and Portugal). It lacks a preface, so it can be used anytime.
- EP IV – Composed after Vatican II, but attributed primarily to St. Basil the Great in the fourth century. The only EP that derives from Eastern sources. It has its own preface, which is integral to the prayer. Hence, it cannot be used at any Mass that has a proper preface.

### **Eucharistic Prayers for Reconciliation**

In 1975, Pope Paul VI convoked a Holy Year for Reconciliation. Two new Eucharistic Prayers with a theme of reconciliation were composed (in Latin) for the occasion. They were granted experimental use throughout the Church in 1977, with translations into various languages. Eventually, both prayers were included with the four earlier Eucharistic Prayers in the Roman Missal.

Both Eucharistic Prayers for Reconciliation have their own proper prefaces, which are integral to the prayers. They can be used at any Mass where the readings or the liturgical celebration of the day highlights the theme of reconciliation. During Lent, which has a proper preface for each day, either of the Eucharistic Prayers for Reconciliation may be used in its entirety, or the Lenten preface of the day may be substituted.

### **Eucharistic Prayer for Use in Masses for Various Needs**

In 1974, a Synod of Bishops in Switzerland produced a new Eucharistic Prayer, written in Italian, with four variations on different themes:

- V1 – “The Church on the Path of Unity”
- V2 – “God Guides His Church along the Way of Salvation”
- V3 – “Jesus, the Way to the Father”
- V4 – “Jesus, Who Went About Doing Good”

The Swiss Bishops asked the Vatican to approve all four variations of the prayer for use in their country, in the original Italian and in French and German translations. All four were approved for use in Switzerland.

Use of the prayer quickly spread. By 1987, it had been translated into 12 languages (but not Latin!) and was being used in 28 countries. Finally, in 1991, the Vatican prepared an official Latin text of the prayer, to be included in subsequent Roman Missals.

### **Eucharist Prayers for Masses with Children**

By 1973, The Congregation for Divine Worship was receiving numerous requests and suggested texts for masses with children. In 1974, they prepared three interactive Eucharistic Prayers for Masses with Children, to be used on a trial basis until 1977. Permission was later extended indefinitely. Although they do not appear in the latest edition of the Roman Missal, all three prayers are still approved for use and available in a companion volume.