

## Glory to God (Gloria)

When it comes to the Introductory Rites of the Mass, one of the aspects of the Roman Missal that is variable, in other words, sometimes we'll say it at Mass and other times we won't, is the Gloria, or in Latin, the *Gloria in excelsis Deo*, the Glory to God. This famous hymn in the Roman Missal #8 says that when it is prescribed, which means sometimes it isn't, it can either be sung or said. And I know you know the words of the Gloria, but I want to read them again to you emphasizing the scriptural echoes, asking ourselves, when do we say this? Why do we say it? Where is it from in the Bible? Where is it from in Tradition? And what's its deeper mystical meaning?

*Glory to God in the highest (Latin Gloria in excelsis Deo), and on earth peace to people of good will.*

We praise you, we bless you, we adore you, we glorify you, we give you thanks for your great glory,

Lord God, heavenly King,

O God, almighty Father.

Lord Jesus Christ, Only Begotten Son,

Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father,

you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us;

you take away the sins of the world, receive our prayer;

you are seated at the right hand of the Father, have mercy on us. For you alone are the Holy One, you alone are the Lord,

you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit, in the glory of God the Father. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

Now, I could do a whole video, just kind of working through all of the language and scriptural illusions and theology of this beautiful ancient Christian hymn. I'm not going to do that today. I just want to highlight and focus on the scriptural roots of the opening line of the Gloria, because it'll help us answer the question, where is this from in the Bible? And we'll look at where is it from in tradition and what

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<sup>1</sup> Roman Missal, *The Order of Mass*, no. 8.

mystery does it reveal about this part of the Mass. And also, why do we say it sometimes and not other times and Mass?

All right, so let's start with the scripture. The scriptural roots of the Gloria are actually pretty explicit and pretty easy to uncover if you're familiar with the account of the nativity in the Gospel of Luke. So if you turn to Luke 2:8-14, it's the account of the angels announcing the birth of Christ to the shepherds in the field. And this passage from Luke's Gospel is particularly famous because it made its way into *A Charlie Brown Christmas* special, which is known and loved throughout the land and certainly in my home as well. So I can't read this passage without thinking of Linus making this recitation, but try anyway and read it again. It's familiar, but just ask yourself, how does this relate to the Introductory Rites of the Roman Missal, of the Roman Mass? Here's what it says in scripture:

And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. *And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear.* And the angel said to them, “Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”

And here's the key point:

*And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased.”* (Latin *gloria in altissimis Deo et in terra pax in hominibus bonae voluntatis*) (Luke 2:8-14)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Or you can also see that translated, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to people of good will.” This last line of the Gloria gets translated in different ways because the early Greek manuscripts are ambiguous. It can either be translated “good will towards men” or “peace to people of good will.” You can translate it either way. However you decide to translate the end of the line, the beginning of that line, eventually it's translated into Latin as *Gloria in altissimis Deo*, or *Gloria in excelsis Deo*: Glory to God in the highest, meaning the highest of the heavens. So, when we sing the hymn of the Gloria, the opening line:

*Glory to God in the highest (Latin Gloria in excelsis Deo), and on earth peace to people of good will.*

It is actually from the Latin tradition. That translation is from the Latin Vulgate. In fact, I remember one time a lady wrote me a letter. She was upset that it wasn't good will toward men, as in the kind of traditional King James Version, that we were saying in the Mass. And I laughed a little, I chuckled a little, because the Latin there for “and on earth peace”, *in terra pax in hominibus bonae voluntatis*, “of good will.” That's actually the Latin tradition of translating the Greek text. So in some cases we Catholics can get more affected by Protestant English translations, like the King James, because we're unfamiliar with the Latin Vulgate and the Latin translations. So “peace to men of good will” or “peace to people of good will” is the Latin tradition of translating. So when it comes over in to the Latin Mass and into the Roman Rite of the Mass, we are using the language of the Latin Vulgate from the Gospel of Luke 2 in the account of the Nativity of Christ.

So what does that tell us? Well, it tells us that when we sing the Gloria, after we've completed the Penitential Rite, now, having asked God to have mercy on us and forgive us for our sins, we break out in joy, in song of praise to God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for the gift of the Incarnation, for the mystery of the Christ who has come as the Son of David and as a Savior. So in order to express that joy at the Incarnation, it's fitting that we take the song of the angelic host, the song of the heavenly angels that was proclaimed to the shepherds at the Nativity of Christ, and we make that song our own, so that we too sing with the multitude of the heavenly host, and we praise God and say: “Gloria in excelsis Deo...Glory to God in the

highest, and on earth peace (*pax*) to people of good will.” And then the rest of the hymn follows.

But it's that opening line that really gives us the key to the scriptural roots of this part of the Mass. And this is important, because what it shows us is that in the Mass, we're not only entering into the mystery of Calvary (Sign of the Cross), entering into the mystery of the Trinity (with the “In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”), entering into the mystery of the Temple and the Tabernacle (with the words and actions of the tax collector and the prodigal son and the blind man), but we are like the shepherds who sing together with the angels, who hear the song of the angels praising God in the mystery of the Incarnation. Because it's not just the mystery of Calvary that is made present at every single Mass, it is also the mystery of Christmas. It's the mystery of the God who comes down from heaven and takes on human flesh in order to be with us, to be God with us, Emmanuel, our Savior, our Messiah, the Word made flesh.

And that's going to happen in a sacramental way, in the liturgy of the Eucharist at the moment of the consecration. So it's an important point to highlight, that every single Mass is, in a sense, not just the mystery of Calvary, but the mystery of Christmas. So I think sometimes that can be a little overshadowed. And it's the Gloria that helps remind us of the link between the Mass and the mystery of the Incarnation. Now, with that said, that's just a little brief introduction of the biblical roots of the Gloria. That's the Gloria in Scripture.

What about tradition? Was the Gloria always part of the Mass or was it added later? And again, in contrast to certain parts of the Mass, like the Sign of the Cross, which tradition will trace all the way back to the time of the Apostles and the time of Peter, the Gloria, according to the Roman tradition, is something that's added a little bit later to the Roman liturgy,. And it's going to play a role of being in certain liturgies, but not in every liturgy of the Roman Church. It will only said during certain seasons, not every season or every Mass in the Roman Church. So it will be a little different than other parts of the Mass, like the Sign of the Cross or the Kyrie Eleison, that will be part of the Mass every time the Mass is celebrated.

So, with regard to the Gloria, there's an interesting story. From what we can tell, the Gloria arises as a hymn that was sung by Christians in the Greek speaking East. So we have early Greek versions of the Gloria. In fact, one of them is in the ancient, one of the most ancient copies of the Greek New Testament we have called Codex Alexandrinus. So it is almost as a kind of an appendix, the hymn is there in this manuscript that has, you know, copies of the Gospels in Greek, and New Testament texts. So it is clearly a sacred text in Greek. But according to the Roman tradition, I've mentioned this book elsewhere, but there's a book called the *Liber Pontificalis*, the *Book of Pontiffs*. So according to this *Book of the Pontiffs* and according to the Roman traditions collected in it about the early pontiffs, Pope Telesphorus actually added the Gloria to the Roman liturgy in the 2nd century AD. Here's the quote from the *Book of Pontiffs*. It says this:

*Telesphorus, born in Greece... decreed... that Mass be celebrated at night on the day of the Lord's birth [25<sup>th</sup> December]... also that the hymn of the angels, namely, the "Gloria in excelsis Deo," is to be sung before the sacrifice. He was crowned with martyrdom.*<sup>3</sup>

Wow. Okay, so note this, this is really fascinating. A couple of things interesting here. First, several of the early popes are not Romans, they're actually Greeks. They're from the East and they would have spoken Greek. So for example, St. Paul and St. Peter, the two founders of the Church, although Peter may have likely spoken Aramaic, a case can be made that he and the other Apostles, especially from Galilee, which had such heavy Gentile influence, could also speak Greek. And we know Paul spoke and wrote in Greek. So two of the early founders of the Roman Church, came from the East and spoke Greek. So we see here that certain popes, like Telesphorus, were actually born in Greece. So he's a Greek speaking early Pope. First point.

Secondly, this is interesting. Telesphorus evidently had a devotion to the mystery of Christmas, because it was he who decreed that the Mass would be celebrated at night on the day of the traditional birth of Jesus, which in the Roman West was the

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<sup>3</sup> *Liber Pontificalis* 9.1-2. In Lawrence J. Johnson, ed., *Worship in the Early Church: An Anthology of Historical Sources* (4 vols.; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2009), 4:54. The last line is from Davis, *The Book of the Pontiffs*, 4.

25th of December. This is very early on, you'll see the birth of Jesus linked with December 25th. There is some debate about that. Some Christians will celebrate it on January 6, which will later get tied to the Epiphany, but there's early evidence for linking it with December 25th, and apparently, according to this ancient tradition in the *Book of Pontiffs*, Telesphorus was regarded as having instituted what we call today Midnight Mass, the idea of celebrating the Mass of the Nativity at night. So really interesting to highlight that tradition about St. Telesphorus because it would actually explain why he would add the Gloria to the Mass. Notice he says before the sacrifice. That's part of the first half of the liturgy of the Mass.

And finally, it's interesting that it says he was crowned with martyrdom. So he was a holy Pope, he was a Saint, and like many of the early popes, gave his life for the sake of the faith. For me, personally, I've always loved the Feast of the Nativity. I've always loved the Feast of Christmas. In fact, one of the earliest theological debates I ever got in was with my big brother about whether the Easter or Christmas was the more important holiday. And he was arguing that Easter was the more important holiday and I was arguing that Christmas was. And my argument was that we get more presents at Christmas than we do at Easter. So I thought this was kind of like definitive proof that Christmas is the more significant holiday, but he actually was not convinced. But in either case, in any case. it is true that Christmas is a foundational feast, and since ancient times have been a very central feast in the Roman Church. And I think it's fascinating that the same Pope, according to tradition, who is regarded as having instituted the Midnight Mass, is the Pope who also is regarded by the tradition as adding the Gloria to the liturgy. Why? Because with the Gloria does is take the words of the angels from the Nativity and place them on the lips of the faithful at the Mass to remind us of the mystery of the Nativity and of the Incarnation. In other words, whenever the Gloria is sung in the liturgy, it kind of turns each Mass into a little celebration of Christmas. It's like a little foretaste of the great Feast of the Nativity of Christ.

Now it's not only Pope St. Telesphorus, there's another Pope who eventually is attributed, according to tradition, with having made the Gloria a regular part of the liturgy. So apparently, early on it was only said occasionally on certain days, like obviously the Feast of Nativity, but according to the *Book of Pontiffs* and the Roman tradition, Pope St. Symmachus in the 5th century was actually the one who

decreed that it would be celebrated, that the Gloria would be sung, I should say, every Sunday or on a birthday of the martyrs. So for example, the *Book of Pontiffs* says this from the tradition:

Symmachus [498-514], born in Sardica [...] decreed that on every Lord's Day or birthday of the martyrs the *Gloria in excelsis* hymn be sung<sup>4</sup>

So here we have a pope, according to tradition, making the Gloria a regular part of the Sunday liturgy in the church of Rome. Now, eventually, you're going to see that the Gloria will be sung only at certain Sunday Masses and not every Sunday Mass. So, for example, by the 9th century AD, Amalar of Metz, who I've mentioned before, is an early medieval witness to the Roman liturgy, tells us about when the Gloria was sung and when it was not. So here's one more quote from the tradition about the mission of the Gloria during Advent and Lent. So by the 9th century, we're going to see it's going to be omitted from those seasons. This is what Amalar says:

I observed the omission of the *Gloria in excelsis Deo* in the days of the Lord's Advent...

So pause there. In other words, in the season of preparation for the Feast of the Nativity, already by the 9th century they are omitting the Gloria from Sunday Mass. Well, why would we do this? Listen to what he says:

When the Gloria in excelsis Deo... is omitted for a time, it is taken up much more avidly when it is restored, and it shines more brightly in the spirits of the devout, when it is recovered from the rust. *Like a new song, the Gloria in excelsis Deo is restored on the night of the Lord's Nativity, that we may remember all the more that this very song was first celebrated with the hymns of the angels at that time.*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Liber Pontificalis 53.1. In Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, 4:58.

<sup>5</sup> Amalar, *On the Liturgy*, 3.40. In Amalar of Metz, *On the Liturgy*, 2:247.

So, wow, isn't that beautiful. So we still do this to this day. When we get to the Advent season, during the Sundays of Advent, we stop saying the Gloria, which we would have been saying on Sundays in Ordinary Time, and we wait. We hold off until midnight Mass of the Nativity at Christmas and then we sing it again. We take it up again. And what Amalar says is that custom, which goes all the way back to the middle ages, of holding off and not saying the Gloria during Advent, but saying it at Christmas time, obviously reflects both the fact that Advent is more of a penitential season of expectancy and then Christmas more of a season of joy. But he also says that there's a very practical implication to this, namely that...practical effect, I should say, is that when we withhold something, we're going to sing it with more joy when it's restored to us in the liturgy on the night of Christmas.

And I have to confess that when I was reading that, I was just really moved because I've had that experience over and over again at Midnight Mass during the season of the nativity, even to this day. So that when I go to Mass during Advent or during Lent, which is another time, it's not a joyful season, we'll stop saying the Gloria during Lent...when I go during the Advent season and then it's restored again, whether at Christmas or at Easter, right? Or, you know, during the Triduum, I do feel an experience of joy at something which was, in a sense, kind of taken away, is now being restored to me. And it's a very powerful, concrete, audible experience of the joy that the Mass should bring to us. Both the joy of the Nativity at Christmas, and then the joy of the resurrection of Christ during the Easter season. So that custom of saying the Gloria on some Sundays and not saying it on others, or not saying it for every Mass, is an ancient one that goes back to the Middle Ages. You'll see it also later, for what it's worth, in St. Thomas Aquinas in his treatise on the Mass in the Summa Theologica, he'll also talk about how you don't say the Gloria for Masses for the dead, because they're a Solemn Mass, they have a solemn tone to them where we're mourning as well as interceding for the dead. And you can see why it would be the case that if you don't say it for Masses for the dead, it would be fitting also not to say it during the Lenten season when we're preparing ourselves to remember the death of Christ on Good Friday?

All right, so those are just a few background points on the Gloria. I love this part of the Mass, I would highlight here that, although the Gloria can be said, obviously in its origins it originated as a hymn that would be sung, and it's especially fitting that



it be sung by the faithful in order to join the choir of angels celebrating the Nativity. Alright, so we've already seen some mystagogical elements of the Mass, but at least I have to end with at least one quote from my friend William Durandus, in his *Rationale of the Divine Offices*, his 13th century explanation of the Mass. This is what he has to say about the Gloria and the Incarnation, the point I was making earlier:

The *Gloria in excelsis Deo*... was heard being sung by the angels, as one reads in the Gospel of St. Luke [Luke 2:14]. This hymn of angels bears witness to the nativity of Christ, in relation to time... *The priest, at first, sings it alone... The choir, which responds with singing, represents the multitude of which the Gospel speaks, 'suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest...' [Luke 2:13-14]... A God-man is born, because peace is restored between God and man... So we sing this hymn, because men worship on earth He who the angels worship in heaven.*<sup>6</sup>

I love here that what Durandus is doing is saying that even the way the Gloria was sung in the Middle Ages reflects the mystery. So the priest will intone it, but when the choir comes in, they're like the heavenly host of angels joining together in praise and triumph to God. So that when we as the people sing the Gloria, along with the choir and with the priests, we all become part of this great symphony of praise to the God who became man and became a little baby in Bethlehem.

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<sup>6</sup> Durandus, *Rationale of the Divine Offices*, 3.4.1, 2, 3, 5. In Durandus, *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum*, 79-82.