

The Popes Who Changed the Mass

Two Parts of the Liturgy

Catechism: In the liturgy, above all that of the sacraments, there is an *immutable part*, a part that is *divinely instituted* and of which the Church is the guardian (Latin *custos*), and parts that can be changed, which the Church has the power and on occasion also the duty to adapt... (CCC 1205, quoting St. John Paul II)

Pope Pius XII: The Pope Can Add, Approve, and Modify the Liturgy (20th Century)

Pope Pius XII: *The Sovereign Pontiff alone enjoys the right to recognize and establish any practice touching the worship of God, to introduce and approve new rites, as also to modify those he judges to require modification.* (Pius XII, Encyclical Letter on the Sacred Liturgy, *Meditator Dei* [Nov 20, 1947], no. 58)¹

Ancient Popes

Roman Traditions about the Early Popes

1. St. Peter (1st Century): “*the first to lay down that mass be celebrated...*, using only the Lord’s prayer and hallowing with the holy cross.”²
2. Pope St. Alexander (2nd Century): “*inserted the institution narrative* [“On the day before he was to suffer, he took bread...”] into what the priest says when he celebrates Mass.”³
3. Pope St. Sixtus I (2nd Century): “decreed that... *the people sing*—with the priest beginning—the “*Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus Dominus Deus Sabaoth,*” [“Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Hosts”]”⁴
4. Pope St. Telesphorus: Adds the *Gloria* (2nd Century): *Telesphorus, born in Greece... decreed... that Mass be celebrated at night on the day of the Lord’s birth* [25th December] ... also that *the hymn of the angels*, namely, the “*Gloria in excelsis Deo,*” [“Glory to God in the Highest”] is to be sung before the sacrifice. He was crowned with martyrdom.⁵
5. Pope St. Innocent I: Moves the Sign of Peace (5th century): It is clear that in all Italy, Gaul, Spain, Africa, Sicily and the islands scattered among these countries... *they should follow the tradition of the Roman church from which they surely have their origin... As to*

¹ Available at www.vatican.va.

² *Liber Pontificalis* 1.6. In Raymond Davies, *The Book of Pontiffs*, (*Liber Pontificalis*) (rev. 3rd ed.; Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 2.

³ *Liber Pontificalis* 7.1-2. In Lawrence J. Johnson, ed., *Worship in the Early Church: An Anthology of Historical Sources* (4 volumes; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2009), 4:54.

⁴ *Liber Pontificalis* 8.1, 2. In Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, 4:54.

⁵ *Liber Pontificalis* 9.1-2. In Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, 4:54. The last line is from Davis, *The Book of the Pontiffs*, 4.

the peace, you say that some among you announce it to the people before the celebration of the mysteries [=the Eucharistic prayer] or that the priests share it among themselves. *Yet the peace must be given after all the things concerning which I ought not to speak. It is, in fact, clear that by it the people consent to all that has taken place in the mysteries and to what is celebrated in the Church*; it shows that the peace concludes these things. (Innocent I, *Letter 25.1*; To Decentius, Bishop of Gubbio [Mar 19, 416 AD]).⁶

6. Pope St. Celestine: Adds the Responsorial Psalms (5th century): Celestine... [decreed] that *before the sacrifice the 150 psalms of David should be performed antiphonally by everyone...*⁷

7. Pope St. Leo the Great: Adds “A Holy Sacrifice” to the Canon (5th Century): He decreed that in the performance of the sacrifice should be said, “a holy sacrifice” etc.⁸

8. Pope St. Gelasius: Arranged the Roman Canon (5th Century): William Durandus: Tradition tells us that Gelasius, the fifty-first pope since Blessed Peter, *was the first to arrange the Canon*. However, the whole Secret [i.e., the Canon] was not composed at the same time by a single author... (Durandus, *Rationale of the Divine Offices*, 4.35.12)⁹

Medieval Popes

Pope St. Gregory the Great: Major Reforms of the Mass (6th Century)

1. The Kyrie: altered the “Lord, Have Mercy” (Greek *Kyrie Eleison*)

2. The Our Father: moved the “Our Father” (Latin *Pater Noster*)

3. Roman Canon (EP I): added “order our days in your peace, and command that we be delivered from eternal damnation...”¹⁰

4. Gregorian Chant: “Tradition has it that... blessed Gregory... had chant taught substantially in the form which is still today regarded as the most suitable.”¹¹

Pope St. Gregory the Great: A person coming here from Sicily has told me that some friends of his, whether Greek or Latin speakers I know not, as if moved by zeal for the holy Roman Church, *were complaining about my arrangements, saying, “How does he manage to restrain the church of Constantinople, if he follows its customs in every way?”* When I asked him: “Which of its customs do we follow?” He replied: “Because you have had... that the ‘Kyrie eleison’ should be said, and that the Lord’s Prayer be said directly

⁶ In Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, 3:100.

⁷ *Liber Pontificalis* 45.1. In Davis, *The Book of Pontiffs*, 33.

⁸ *Liber Pontificalis* 47.8. In Davis, *The Book of Pontiffs*, 37.

⁹ In Guillaume Durandus, *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum: Volume Three. A Modern Translation of Book Four* (translated by Janet Gentles; n.l.: Paschal Light, 2019), 241.

¹⁰ *Liber Pontificalis* 66.3-4. In Davis, *The Book of Pontiffs*, 60 (adapted).

¹¹ Walfred Strabo, *Libellus de Exordiis*, ch. 23 (pp. 135, 139).

after the canon.’ I replied to him that we had followed no other church in any of these matters... How, then, have we followed the customs of the Greeks? For we have either *renewed our ancient customs* or *have established new and useful ones*... And yet, if this or another church has some good feature, I myself am prepared to imitate even my inferiors in what is good....¹²

Other Medieval Popes Who Changed the Mass

1. St. Sergius I (7th Century): “the clergy and people should sing “Lamb of God (Latin *Agnus Dei*), who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.”¹³
2. St. Gregory III (8th Century): added to the Canon “*Whose Feast is celebrated* in the whole world today in the sight of your Majesty...”¹⁴
3. Pope Leo (9th Century): It is allowed... to sing it in teaching, and to teach it in singing. *But it is not allowed to insert it illicitly, whether in writing or in singing, in places where it is prohibited... For we do not sing it [in Rome]...* (Smaragdus’ Letter to Leo III [810 AD])¹⁵
4. Benedict VIII (11th Century): “The lord emperor [Henry II]... *persuaded the apostolic lord Benedict [VIII] to sing it at the public mass*”.¹⁶
5. Innocent III (13th Century): Adds “I confess to almighty God” (Latin *Confiteor*) and “Lord, I am not worthy” (Latin *Domine non sum Dignus*)...”¹⁷

Modern Popes

The Council of Trent (1570): Omission of Offertory and Communion Under Chalice

¹² Gregory the Great, *Letters* 9.26 (October 598 AD). In John R. C. Martyn, *The Letters of Gregory the Great* (3 vols.; Medieval Sources in Translation 40; Toronto, Ont.: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2004), 2:561-563.

¹³ *Liber Pontificalis* 86.14. In *The Book of Pontiffs (Liber Pontificalis): The Ancient Biographies of the First Ninety Roman Bishops to AD 715* (trans. Raymond Davis; Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 84.

¹⁴ Strabo, *Libellus de Exordiis*, ch. 23 (p. 145).

¹⁵ Richard Haugh, *Photius and the Carolingians: The Trinitarian Controversy* (Belmont, Mass.: Nordland, 1975), 83.

¹⁶ Berno of Reichenau, *De quibusdam rebus ad missae officium spectantibus* 2. Cf. J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 142:1060-61. See Michael Witzak, “History of the Latin Text and Rite,” in *Commentary on the Order of the Mass of The Roman Missal* (ed. Edward Foley; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2011), 168.

¹⁷ Cf. Stephen J. P. Van Dijk and Joan Hazelden Walker, *The Ordinal of the Papal Court From Innocent III to Boniface VIII and Related Documents* (Fribourg: Fribourg University Press, 1975), 498, 521.

1. Pope Alexander VI; Missal of John Burchard (Early 16th Century): contained a description of an offertory procession of “*those who wish to offer...*” (*Ordo Missae Ioannis Burckardi*, Fol. xxii [p. 149])¹⁸
2. Council of Trent (Late 16th Century): Although *from the beginning of the Christian religion the use of both species was not infrequent*, nevertheless, as that custom very widely changed over the course of time, *our holy Mother Church, knowing her authority in the administration of the sacraments* and led by just and serious reasons, approved this custom of receiving communion under one of the two species and decreed this to be *the rule, which is not to be condemned or changed at will without the authority of the Church herself*. (Council of Trent, Session 21, Doctrine and Canons on Communion [July 16, 1562]).¹⁹

Modern Popes

1. St. John XXIII: added “Blessed Joseph her Spouse” to the Roman Canon.²⁰
2. Pope Francis: adds “Blessed Joseph her Spouse” to EPs II, III, and IV.²¹

Second Vatican Council: Calls for the Rite of Mass to be Revised (1963)

Vatican II: *The rite of the Mass is to be revised* in such a way that the intrinsic nature and purpose of its several parts, as well as the connection between them, may be more clearly manifested, and that devout and active participation by the faithful may be more easily achieved. For this purpose *the rites are to be simplified, due care being taken to preserve their substance. Parts which with the passage of time came to be duplicated, or were added with little advantage, are to be omitted. Other parts which suffered loss through accidents of history are to be restored to the vigor they had in the days of the holy Fathers*, as may seem useful or necessary. (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* no. 22, 50).²²

Conclusion

Council of Trent: Authority of the Church (16th Century)

Council of Trent: <The holy council> declares that, *in the administration of the sacraments—provided their substance is preserved—there has always been in the Church*

¹⁸ Cf. J. Wickham Legg, *Tracts on the Mass* (London: 1904), 149. On Burchard’s *Ordo Missae* and its approval by Pope Alexander VI in 1501, see Anthony J. Chadwick, “The Roman Missal of the Council of Trent,” in *T&T Clark Companion to the Liturgy* (ed. Alcuin Reed; London: T&T Clark, 2016), 109, 115-

¹⁹ Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations*, no. 1728.

²⁰ SCW, Decree on Inserting the Name of St. Joseph into the Canon of the Mass (13 November, 1962).

²¹ Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Decree on the Name of St Joseph in the Eucharistic Prayers II, III, and IV (May 1, 2013).

²² In Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents* (new rev. ed.; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2014), 9-10, 17.

that power to determine or modify what she has judged more expedient for the benefit of those receiving the sacraments or for the reverence due to the sacraments themselves—according to the diversity of circumstances, times, and places. This, moreover, is what the apostle [Paul] seems to have indicated rather clearly when he said: “This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor 4:1). (Council of Trent, Session 21 [July 16, 1562]).²³

Second Vatican Council: The Revision of the Rite of Mass (1963)

Vatican II: 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... *Therefore no other person, not even a priest, may add, remove, or change anything in the liturgy on his own authority....*²⁴

St. Paul VI on the Changes Made to the Order of Mass (Nov 19, 1969)

St. Paul VI: How could such a change take place? The answer is that it is due to the express will of the recent ecumenical Council. The Council had this to say: “The Order of Mass is to be revised...” *But be very sure of one point: nothing of the substance of the traditional Mass has been altered...* The Mass in its new order is and will remain the Mass it always has been... (General Audience, November 19, 1969)²⁵

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. How is the Mass different from the Bible in the way in which it can be changed?

2. What are some of the most striking changes made by the Popes? What is the significance of the Popes being able to change the Mass?

3. Can a priest change the liturgy if he sees fit?

²³ Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations*, no. 1728.

²⁴ In Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents* (new rev. ed.; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2014), 9-10, 17.

²⁵ In *Documents of the Liturgy* no. 211 (pp. 538-39).

For Further Reading

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