



THE PREFACE OF THE ROMAN MASS

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As a neophyte to Catholic tradition in the early 1990's, I was struck by the beauty of that part of the Traditional Latin Mass called the "Preface." The chant that accompanies it, sung by the celebrant alone, is not only stirring and commanding of the congregation's attention, but it is also remarkably anticipatory, appropriately betokening that ineffably Great Thing that is soon to happen. If done right, the chant of the Preface perfectly introduces the angelic hymn of Trinitarian adoration, the *Sanctus*, which, whether it be sung in one of the Gregorian tones or according to one of any number of polyphonic settings, beautifully commences the Canon of the Mass. In a feature unique to the classical Roman Rite, once the grand strains of the *Trisagion* die down, the Canon then proceeds in total silence that is only interrupted by the peel of the bells at the double consecration.

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Here, the beauty of the rite showcases the sublime truth and supernal goodness of what is actually

taking place in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

Only a few years ago, when I expressed my love of this particular chant to a visiting priest from London, he told me that I was not alone in my love of the Preface Tone. No less a musician than Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart considered it great music. In its entry on Ecclesiastical Music, the old Catholic Encyclopedia makes reference to this opinion of the great Austrian composer:

Mozart's statement, "that he would gladly exchange all his music for the fame of having composed the Gregorian Preface," sounds almost hyperbolic.

Hyperbolic or no, the appreciation it expresses from a musical genius is no doubt real.

In the earliest centuries of the Roman Rite, the text of the Preface was longer and was included as part of the Canon of the Mass. Along with the Trisagion ("thrice holy") that we Latins call the Sanctus, it is found in all the rites of the Church. Our Eastern Christian brethren — whether of the Alexandrine, Antiochian, Byzantine, Armenian, etc., Rites, — still have what we call the Prefatio and Sanctus as part of their Anaphora, which is the "Eucharistic Prayer" that corresponds to our Canon. For them it still contains, as it did for us Occidentals in the earliest centuries, a lengthy litany of divine favors throughout salvation history for which we must be grateful.

It is, in fact, the very gratitude expressed in the Preface (Gratias agamus Domino Deo nostro: "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God," and later: vere dignum et justum est... gratias agere: "it is right and just... to give thanks") that attaches the word Eucharist (Thanksgiving) to the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass as one of its earliest and most universal appellations. The Mass is, par excellence, the Great Act of Thanksgiving, and it is the Preface that gives words to this reality.

Aside from the shortening of the text over time—mostly before the Leonine Sacramentary came into use—the Preface went through another important series of changes. Unlike its Eastern counterparts, the Roman Preface was a changeable part of the Mass. In the Leonine Sacramentary, which was in use from the fourth to the seventh centuries, there were 267 Prefaces. That changed in the later Gelasian Sacramentary to 54. The Gregorian Sacramentary had only 10, but then added another hundred in an appendix. At the time Adrian Fortesque wrote the entry, "Preface," for the *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1911), there were eleven Prefaces in use:

The Roman Missal now contains eleven Prefaces. Ten are in the Gregorian Sacramentary, one (of the Blessed Virgin) was added under Urban II (1088-99). The pope himself is reported to have composed this Preface and to have sung it first at the Synod of Guastalla in 1094.

But that needs to be updated! The 1952 *Saint Andrew's Daily Missal* that I use regularly, has fifteen prefaces, which corresponds exactly to the contents of an old 1935 *Altar Missal* we have in our sacristy. They are:

- Christmas
- Epiphany
- Lent
- The Holy Cross (for Passiontide and Feasts of the Holy Cross)
- Easter
- Ascension
- The Sacred Heart
- Christ the King
- The Holy Ghost
- The Holy Trinity
- The Blessed Virgin Mary
- Saint Joseph
- The Apostles
- Common Preface
- Preface for the Dead

A 1962 *Altar Missal* we possess has one added preface listed with these others, the Preface for the Chrism Mass, which I assume is owing to the Bugnini "reform" of Holy Week. In addition, this same Missal, published by the FSSP, lists four "particular Prefaces" that are used in certain dioceses: for Advent, the Blessed Sacrament (Corpus Christi and votive Masses), the Saints (All Saints and titular patrons of churches), and, lastly, the Dedication of a Church.

What is proper to the different Prefaces are brief, compact liturgical texts that are very useful for mental prayer.

There are two ceremonies in addition to the Holy Mass that employ the Gregorian "preface tone" so

beloved of Mozart and yours truly. One is the ordination rite, and the other is the traditional *Praeconium Paschale* (Easter Proclamation) chanted by the deacon on Holy Saturday, known more commonly by its first word as "the Exsultet" (you can listen to it on [YouTube](#); the melody of the preface tone comes in around the 3:15 mark of the video). The ancient Preface tone was applied to these rites later, by way of imitation of its use in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

What follows is a passage from Dom Guéranger's masterful *Explanation of the Holy Mass*; it is the pious and learned Abbot's sublime commentary on the Common Preface (all orthography, punctuation, capitalization, etc., as in the original English translation by Dom Laurence Shepard, O.S.B.).

ALTHOUGH the Priest has been making his petitions [of the Secret] in a low voice, yet he terminates this his Prayer aloud, exclaiming: *Per omnia saecula saeculorum*; to which the Faithful respond *Amen*, that is to say, we ask also, for what thou hast been asking. In fact, the Priest never says anything in the Holy Sacrifice without the assent of the Faithful, who, as we have already noticed, participate in the Priesthood. They have not heard what the Priest has been saying, nevertheless they join therein and approve heartily of all, by answering their Amen, yea, our Prayer is one with thine! The dialogue here begun between Priest and people is maintained for a while, at length leaving the final word to the Priest alone, who gives thanks solemnly, in the name of all there assembled.

The Priest then salutes the people, but this time without turning to them, saying: *Dominus vobiscum*, the Lord be with you: lo! now is the most solemn moment of Prayer! And the Faithful respond: *Et cum Spiritu tuo*, may He be with thy Spirit, may He aid thee, lo! we are one with thee! — Then the Priest says: *Sursum Corda*! lift up your hearts! The Priest requires that their hearts be detached from earthly thoughts, so that they may be directed on God alone; for the Prayer he is about to make is that of

Thanksgiving. Admire how well placed is this Prayer here, for the Priest is on the point of accomplishing the Sacrifice of the Body and Blood of Our Lord, and this Sacrifice is verily for us the Instrument of Thanksgiving; it is the Means whereby we are enabled to render back to God that which we owe Him. So Holy Mother Church, delighting with intensest relish in this magnificent Prayer, would fain arouse her faithful children with this cry: *Sursum Corda*! in order that they too may appreciate, as she does, this great Act of Thanksgiving, whereby she offers unto God a Something that is Great and worthy of Him. And now the Faithful hasten to express their reassurances to the Priest: *Habemus ad Dominum*! we have

our hearts raised up unto the Lord! Then, replies the Priest, if indeed it is so, let us all unitedly give thanks unto the Lord: *Gratias agamus Domino Deo nostro*. And the Faithful at once add: *Dignum et justum est*. Thus do they unite themselves wholly with the Thanksgiving of the Preface which the Priest is about to speak. — This dialogue is as old as the Church herself, and there is every reason to believe that the Apostles themselves arranged it, because it is to be found in the most ancient Churches and in all Liturgies. As far as possible, the Faithful should make an effort never to be seated on any account during these acclamations. Now does the Priest take up the speech himself and continues thus alone: *Vere dignum et justum est, aequum et salutare, nos tibi semper et ubique, gratias agere: Domine Sancte, Pater omnipotens, aeterne Deus, per Christum Dominum nostrum*. So it is truly just to give Thee thanks, O Almighty God, *tibi* to Thee, Thyself, *semper et ubique*, always and everywhere, and to render Thee this our Thanks, through Jesus Christ, Our Lord. Yes, indeed, it is through Jesus Christ that our Thanksgiving must be made, for were we to do so in our own name, there would be the Infinite between God and ourselves, and so our Thanksgiving could never reach unto Him; whereas, made through Jesus Christ, it goes straight up, and penetrates even right to the very centre of the Divinity. But, not only must we, human creatures, go to the Father through Our Lord, but the very Angels even, have no access except through Him. Harken once more to the Priest: *Per quem Majestatem tuam laudant Angeli*; by Whom, (i.e., Jesus Christ), the Angels praise Thy Majesty: for, since the Incarnation, they adore the Godhead, through Jesus Christ, Our Lord, the Sovereign High-Priest. *Adorant Dominationes*, the Dominations adore through Jesus Christ; tremunt Potestates, the Powers too, those beauteous Angels, make their celestial thrillings heard, and in awe, tremble before the Face of Jesus Christ: *Coeli*, the Heavens, that is to say, Angels of still higher order; *Coelorumque Virtutes*, and the Heavenly Virtues also, Angels yet more exalted; *ac beata Seraphim*, and the Blessed Seraphim, who by their pure love come nighest unto God, — *socia exultatione concelebrant*, all these stupendous Choirs blended together in one harmonious transport conceive, through Jesus Christ, the Majesty Divine. The Prefaces thus terminate by mentioning the Angels, in order to lead the Church Militant to sing the Hymn of the Church Triumphant. *Cum quibus et nostras voces ut dimitti jubeas deprecamur, supplici confessione dicentes*; yea, fain are we to join anon our feeble voice to that mighty angelic strain, and we crave leave to begin even now whilst here below, and sinners still, the great: *Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus, Dominus Deus Sabaoth*.

Thus all Prefaces are formed on the one great idea of Giving Thanks to God, *gratias agere*; and of making this Thanksgiving through Jesus Christ, because it is by Him Alone that we can come nigh unto God, yea, approach in union with the Angels too, with whom we join in the celestial chorus of their Trisagion.

Besides this the Common Preface, Holy Church offers us others wherein we invite the Heavenly Spirits

to celebrate with us, in one joint Act of Thanksgiving, the principal Mysteries of the Man-God, whether at Christmas or in Lent, or at Passion-tide, or at Easter, or, again, at Ascension or Pentecost. Nor does she fail to remember Her by whom Salvation came to this our earth, the Glorious Virgin Mary; as also the holy Apostles by whom Redemption was preached to the entire world.

The Preface is intoned on the very same melody used by the ancient Greeks when celebrating some hero in their feasts, and there declaiming his mighty deeds in song.

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[Featured](#): *The Mass of Saint Gregory*, by the Spanish Painter; painted ca. 1490–1500.
