

# “Glory to God in the Highest!”



D. Todd Williamson

The Introductory Rites serve the wonderful purpose of gathering individual Christians as one body and one voice offering the great prayer of praise and thanksgiving that is the Eucharist. This happens throughout the Introductory Rites: the Entrance Chant joins our voices as one; the Sign of the Cross and the greeting help us to enter into the ritual of the Mass; and the Penitential Act reminds us how much we are in need of God’s great love and mercy—both as individuals and as a community of faith. Then, as the liturgy continues to form us into one body, the whole liturgical assembly raises its voice in the great hymn of praise that is the Gloria.

The Gloria, an ancient hymn dating to the early centuries of the Church, is prayed every Sunday outside of Advent and Lent, and on solemnities and feasts of the Lord. The texts of this hymn is collection of images and phrases from Scripture and Tradition. It begins with the words of the angels who sung their praise at the birth of Christ. The previous translation began “Glory to God in the highest, / and peace to his people on earth.” In the English translation of the third edition of *The Roman Missal*, these words are much closer to those of the angels as recorded in Luke 2:14: “Glory to God in the highest / and on earth peace to people of good will.”

From there the hymn launches into a beautifully poetic doxology that was added to the Latin very early in our history. We will sing, “We praise you, / we bless you, / we adore you, / we glorify you, / we give you thanks for your great glory.” This is a literal translation of the Latin text, *Laudámus te, / benedícimus te, / adorámus te, / glorificámus te, / grátias ágimus tibi propter magnam glóriam tuam . . .* and a good example of the poetic rhythm the revised English translation seeks to capture from the original Latin text. These phrases are a wonderful building of praise. So much is the praise that we seek to offer God that it cannot be contained in only one attempt—not only do we “praise” the Lord, but we also *bless* the Lord! Not only do we “bless,” but we also “adore” him! Not only do we *adore*,

but we also “*glorify*” him . . . and so the hymn goes (emphasis added)! These phrases then lead to a crescendo of titles for God: “Lord God, heavenly King, / O God, almighty Father.”

The next stanza will also sound somewhat different than the previous translation. In our adoration of Christ, we first acclaim Christ’s identity through various titles: “Lord Jesus Christ, Only Begotten Son, / Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father.” The hymn then uses a pattern of repetition found in the Latin text, as we acclaim what Christ has done for us: “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.” These phrases are similar to a litany, as we entreat the Lord to have mercy and to receive the prayer of praise we offer him.

The final stanza of the Gloria remains the same as the previous translation: “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.”

Notice, in these last two stanzas, how the hymn uses multiple phrases from Scripture: In the Gospel according to John, Saint John the Baptist refers to Christ as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29, NRSV); and this evangelist declares in the book of Revelation that Christ “alone [is] holy” (Revelation 15:4, NRSV); and the psalmist asserts that “you alone, / whose name is the LORD, / are the Most High over all the earth” (Psalm 83:18, NRSV). The hymn gathers all of these titles, images, and phrases to vocalize the praise and glory we offer to God!

With this, the liturgical assembly is now ready to continue its prayer of praise and thanksgiving with the Collect, or Opening Prayer; But not without first having raised, with one voice, the great song that the angels themselves sang. Using the words of Scripture and Tradition our voices are joined to those from across the ages in the first moments of the liturgy, as we call out, “Glory to God in the highest!”