

Inclusive Language in the Liturgy: Historical Perspectives

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Introduction

The Roman Catholic liturgy has employed inclusive language for the last 1500 years or so, though this is not widely recognized.

By inclusive language I mean language that includes women and does not exclude them; that recognizes women and does not conceal them; that names women correctly and does not disguise them; that facilitates the participation of women in the liturgy.

Such inclusivity may be achieved in various ways. In liturgies that specifically have to do with women (for example the consecrations of virgins, widows, abbesses and queens), explicitly *feminine language* has always been used to address and refer to the women concerned. In liturgies that involve individual women and men (for example, marriage, Christian initiation, anointing of the sick), women and men have almost always been addressed or referred to individually, using masculine or feminine grammatical forms, as appropriate.

Two kinds of language have been used, however, in liturgies that involve groups of women and men together (for example, the eucharist or mass). One approach named both women and men; this is called *gender-balanced language*. The other approach used grammatically masculine language ("his," "brothers"); this is called *generic masculine language*.

Finally, there is *gender-neutral language*, for example "you" or "them" in English. This is relatively common in English, which in general is ungendered. It cannot easily be used, however, in gendered languages such as Latin, French, Spanish or German (though German does have the gender-neutral term, *Mensch*).

For present purposes, the history of the liturgy may be divided into three epochs, setting aside the earliest centuries: the medieval period, from roughly 500 to the Reformation; the Tridentine period, from the *Missale Romanum* of 1570 to Vatican Council II; and the modern period, from the *Missale Romanum* of 1970 to the present. The medieval period was characterized by considerable variation among liturgical books; they not only grew and developed over this lengthy period, they also varied appreciably from place to place. Later, there was much greater uniformity. Until 1970, Latin was the primary language of the church's liturgy. In the medieval period, however, vernacular languages also had considerable importance, for example in the general intercessions, preaching, and parts of the liturgies of marriage, anointing and penance.

As explicitly feminine language has always been used for individual women and groups of women by themselves, and as gender-neutral language is rarely used except in English, the historical question really concerns the relative use of generic masculine and gender-balanced language. Furthermore, there is no question but that generic masculine language has been used a great deal. Here, therefore, I would like to show that *gender-balanced language* has been used throughout the history of the liturgy, both in Latin and in vernacular languages. It is this kind of language that we today generally speak of as inclusive language.¹

1. Only representative references are given here. For related studies, see J. Frank Henderson, "Inclusive Language in Latin Liturgical Texts," in *National Bulletin on Liturgy*, vol. 25, no. 129 (Summer 1992) pp. 110-112; and J. Frank Henderson, "ICEL and Inclusive Language," in Peter C. Finn and James M. Schellman, eds., *Shaping English Liturgy: Studies in Honor of Archbishop Denis Hurley*. (Prepared by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy.) Washington DC: Pastoral Press, 1990, pp. 257-278.

As an example, consider the Roman Canon (our present eucharistic prayer I). It is a particularly ancient and central liturgical text, dating in part from the time of St. Ambrose (fourth century). The part of this prayer called the commemoration of the living uses the gender-balanced expression, *Memento, Domine, famulorum famularumque tuarum* (literally, "Be mindful, O Lord, of your male servants and your female servants"; older translations spoke of "servants" and "handmaids"). A similar expression is also true of the commemoration of the dead: *Memento etiam, Domine, famulorum famularumque tuarum*. The commemoration of the living has probably been a part of the Roman Canon since the time of Pope Innocent I (early fifth century). The commemoration of the dead is more recent, dating (in different manuscripts) between the ninth and eleventh centuries.² These texts remain in the version of the Roman Canon included in the *Missale Romanum* of 1970. A form of the generic masculine term *famulos* (literally, "male servants") is used once in a different section of the Roman Canon. From the perspective of its use of "male servants" and "female servants" to refer to members of the worshiping assembly, then, the Roman Canon seems predominantly inclusive.

2. See Joseph A. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Developments*, 2 vol. New York: Benziger Brothers, 1955; reprint Westminster MD: Christian Classics,

1986. Vol. 2, pp. 159-169 on “The Memento of the Living,” and Vol. 2, pp. 237-248, on “The Memento of the Dead.”

Latin Liturgical Prayers

A text of the eucharistic liturgy that is often mentioned in discussions of inclusive language is the invitation, *Orate fratres* – “Pray, brothers.” This is of course addressed to the entire assembly, not just its male members. Before the ninth century, the presider addressed this invitation to his fellow priests and it was therefore appropriate to use only masculine language. Later, however, it was addressed to the entire assembly, and it was then commonly expressed in gender-balanced language, “Pray, brothers and sisters.” This explicit reference to women as well as men is found in many manuscripts from medieval England, France, The Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, Hungary and Italy. “Brother” alone remained the rule in monasteries of men, and after the eleventh century this became the predominant usage in Italy as well.³ It may be added that the earliest translation of the mass into German used *Schwestern* (“sisters”) here, based on a Latin version that read, *Orate, fratres et sorores*.⁴ Using inclusive language for this invitation was therefore the predominant medieval tradition, at least north of the Alps.

3. See Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, vol. 2, pp. 82-90.

4. See Franz Rudolf Reichert, ed., *Die älteste Deutsche Gesamtauslegung der Messe (erstaugsahn ca 1480)*. Munster Westfallia: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1967, p. 107.

Three other liturgical invitations that used gender-balanced language may also be mentioned. Thus general intercessions of the Sunday mass in medieval England were sometimes addressed to “each man and each women” present.⁵ Furthermore, one liturgical book addressed those receiving ashes on Ash Wednesday in this way (in Latin): “Remember, son (daughter), that you are ashes...”⁶ Finally, liturgical readings from the epistles of the New Testament were customarily prefaced by the address “brothers” (though this obviously is not in the biblical text itself). Around 1240, however, Dominican nuns in France changed this address to “sisters” – at least on some occasions.⁷

5. Thomas Frederick Simmons, ed., *The Lay Folks Mass Book*. London: N. Trubner, 1879, pp. 70, 72, 74, 76, 80.

6. Victor-M. Leroquais, *Les Sacramentaires et les Missels: Manuscrits des Bibliothèques Publiques de France*. Paris, 1924. Vol. 3, p. 214, no. 791. (Missel de Carcassone, 1472).

7. Raymond Creytens, “Les constitutions primitives des soeurs dominicaines du Montargis (1250),” in *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum*, vol. 17 (1947) pp. 41-84 [here 68, note 1].

As shown above in speaking of the Roman Canon, Latin liturgical prayers frequently refer to human persons (members of the assembly or of the church, living and dead) as God's "servants". More correctly, they are considered to be servant members of God's household. Thus the major sacramentaries of the middle ages (Gelasian,⁸ Gregorian,⁹ Gellone¹⁰ and their descendants) frequently used gender-balanced constructions such as *famulos et famulas tuarum*¹¹ and *famulorum famularumque tuarum*;¹² these books used the generic masculine construction, *famulos*, even more often, however. Both usages passed into the *Missale Romanum* of 1570 and thence down to our own era.

8. Leo Cunibert Mohlberg, Leo Eizenhofer and Petrus Siffrin, eds., *Liber Sacramentorum Romanae Aeclesiae Ordinis Anni Circuli*. Roma: Herder, 1960. The manuscript of this book was copied ca. 750, but its contents are dated to between 628 and 715. See Cyrille Vogel, *Medieval Liturgy: An Introduction to the Sources*. Revised and translated by William G. Storey and Neils Krogh Rasmussen. Washington DC: Pastoral Press, 1986, pp. 65.69.

9. Jean Deschusses, ed., *Le Sacramentaire Gregorien: Ses principales formes d'apres les plus anciens manuscrits*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. Fribourg Suisse: Editions Universitaires Fribourg, 1979. The several parts of this sacramentary are dated to between the late 7th and early 9th century. See Vogel, *Medieval Liturgy*, pp. 80, 86.

10. A. Dumas, ed., *Liber Sacramentorum Gellonensis*. Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 159. Turnholt: Brepols, 1981. The manuscript is dated to 780-800, while the contents are from ca 760-770. See Vogel, *Medieval Liturgy*, pp. 70, 76.

11. Examples of the use of *famulos et famulas*: Gelasian, prayers number 196, 1696, 1699; Gregorian 1300, 1303, 1448; Gellone 1855, 1859, 1956a, 1958.

12. Examples of the use of *famulorum famularumque*: Gelasian 195, 1666, 1697, 1698; Gregorian 1145, 1301, 1302, 1449, 1433, 1435; Gellone 1856, 1956b, 3062.

Members of the church, living and dead, were also sometimes referred to as "sisters and brothers" of those celebrating the liturgy. Prayers that refer to *fratribus et sororibus nostris* are included in the Rheinau sacramentary, the *Missale Gothicum*, the sacramentaries of Fulda and of Monza, and the Bobbio missal.¹³

13. Only information for the Reinau sacramentary is given here. Anton Hanggi and Alfons Schonherr, *Sacramentarium Rhenaugiensie: Handschrift Rh 30 der Zentralbibliothek Zurich*. Freiburg Schweiz: Universitatsverlag Freiburg, 1970, nos. 1316, 1317; 1319, 1325. This book is dated to ca. 800. See Vogel, *Medieval Liturgy*, p 72.

The General Intercessions

The general intercessions of the medieval Sunday mass referred to the living in a wide variety of ways. Those from England might pray for “all men and women of religion” (that is, members of religious orders), for the “good men and women” who gave tithes, were parish and civic benefactors, or pilgrims, and for the “brothers and sisters” in parish guilds and confraternities.¹⁴

14. See Simmons, *The Lay Folks Mass Book*, pp. 61-80 plus 315-346.

General intercessions from France might pray for male and female pilgrims, for example, by writing out both forms of gendered nouns (*pelerins et pelerines*); this doubling might also be done for merchants, workers, benefactors, the sick, and for townspeople.¹⁵ In Germany, both forms of gendered nouns might be written out to pray for workers (*arbeiter und arbeiterin*), mortal sinners, servants and benefactors.¹⁶

15. J. B. Molin, “L’Oratio communis fidelium au moyen age en occident du Xe au Xve siecle” in *Miscellanea Liturgica in Onore di sua Eminenza Il Cardinale Giacomo Lercaro*. Roma: Desclee, 1967, pp. 313-457.

16. Werner Muller-Geib, *Das Allgemeine Gebet der sonn- und feiertaglichen Pfarmsesse im deutschen Sprachgebiet: Von der Karolingischen Reform bis zu den Reformversuchen der Aufkarungszeit*. Munsteraner Theologische Abhandlungen 14. Altenberge: Oros Verlag, 1992.

General intercessions from France¹⁷ and Spain¹⁸ sometimes took the form, “Let us pray for those who....” . “Those” was a gendered pronoun and was sometimes printed in both masculine and feminine forms (e.g., *ceulz et celles*). This type of construction was sometimes also done in Latin liturgical prayers.¹⁹

17. See Molin, “L’Oratio communis.”

18. Adalberto M. Franquese, “El Ritual Tarraconense,” in *Liturgica* [Monsterrat] vol. 2 (1958) pp. 249-298 [here 283].

19. The gender-balanced pronouns *illorum et illarum* are found, for example, in Gregorian 1445 and 1446.

Medieval general intercessions for the dead often prayed for the souls of “fathers and mothers,” “brothers and sisters,” “godfathers and godmothers,” and sometimes “uncles and aunts” as well.

In addition to these gender-balanced constructions, medieval general intercessions also

named individual women and groups of women by themselves. Thus they prayed for the queen of the country, pregnant women, married women in general, widows, nuns, anchoresses, abbesses and prioresses. Women benefactors and foundresses were often named among the dead.

Women were included in medieval liturgical prayers in other ways as well. For example, some texts prayed for what are called all “the orders of the church.” These named the many ranks of clergy, but also virgins and widows, and finally the entire people of God. Such a prayer, dating from the seventh century or earlier, was among the solemn prayers on Good Friday right up to 1970.²⁰

20. See Gelasian 404; Gregorian 342; Gellone 650.

Naming Biblical Women and Women Saints

Another way to include women in liturgical prayers was through the naming of biblical women and women saints. These references might have to do with women alone, as in the naming of Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel in the nuptial blessing²¹ and Esther and Judith in prayers for queens. Susanna, however, is included in prayers for dying men as well as dying women.²² Women saints were included in the Roman Canon²³ and in litanies of the saints that were used in liturgies of baptism and anointing of the sick.²⁴

21. See Gelasian 1452; Gregorian 838; Gellone 2636.

22. See Gellone 2893; Rheinau 1330; and L. Gougard, “Etude sur les ‘Ordines Commendationis Animae’”, in *Ephemerides Liturgicae*, vol. 49 (1953) pp 3-27.

23. See Gelasian 1253; Gregorian 14; Gellone 1943.

24. Collections of litanies of the saints may be found in Maurice Coens, “Anciennes Litanies des Saints,” in *Recueil de ’études Bollandiennes*. Subsidia Hagiographia 37. Bruxelles: Societe des Bollandistes, 1963; and Michael Lapidge, ed., *Anglo-Saxon Litanies of the Saints*. London: Henry Bradshaw Society, vol. 106, 1961.

Other Sacramental Celebrations

The exorcisms for catechumens that were celebrated during Lent included three prayers for women alone as well as three for men – and of course many prayers for both. The prayers for women were in no way negative toward women.²⁵

25. See Gelasian 293, 295, 297; Gregorian 1073, 1076, 1078; Gellone 404, 406, 408.

Prayers for visiting and anointing the sick that were supposed to be individualized for women and men were sometimes written using generic masculine language; it was left to the

priest to change masculine grammatical forms to feminine forms if the sick person was a women. It appears that some priests were not comfortable doing this as they read the prayers, and so they wrote the feminine forms in the space above the line ahead of time. Thus “am” is written in above the “um’s” of *famulum tuum* in some manuscripts of the Sarum Missal, and *hanc* and *quam* are written in above the masculine forms *hunc* and *quem*.²⁶

26. See J. Wickham Legg, *The Sarum Missal, Edited from Three Early Manuscripts*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1916; reprint 1969

Why the Gradual Disappearance of Gender-Balanced Language

It is clear that gender-balanced language has been used in Latin and vernacular liturgical prayers since the fifth century, though it was used less frequently than generic masculine language. One unanswerable question is why our ancestors in the faith sometimes used one construction instead of the other. A question to which at least a partial answer can be given is why inclusive language seems to have been used less frequently as the centuries passed. It is clear that there was a substantial decrease in the use of gender-balanced language during the Tridentine period (1570-1970) compared to the medieval era. One reason is that the vernacular general intercessions were deleted from the liturgy at that time, and they were a significant occasion for the use of inclusive language. A second reason is that liturgical texts from Italy were used as models for the Tridentine liturgical books, and these had never used as much inclusive language as those from farther north.

I hope that this brief review will help put our contemporary discussion of inclusive language on a firmer historical foundation.