

# How can the words of the Mass be changed?

**D**ear **Father Kerper**: I heard that many words of the Mass are being changed. How can the Church change things that have always been there?

Your understandable concern about upcoming changes in public prayer touches upon two issues that seem to take us in opposite directions: the need for clear, stable, and uniform language in worship; and the fluid nature of all human language, including Latin and biblical Greek. How do we balance stability with flexibility?

For Catholics of the Latin Rite, this question has enormous importance. Just about all the prayers we recite or hear together at Mass are translations of Latin texts, which alone are universal and “official.” Likewise, all the biblical readings we hear are translations of the Hebrew or Greek texts, which alone are inspired.

These Latin prayer texts, most of which are very old indeed, unify Catholics by binding together past, present, and future generations, all of whom draw from an ancient and fairly stable source of common prayer, though translated into numerous modern languages. The Latin provides the stability; the modern languages offer flexibility.

Perhaps a specific example will help us here: the way we address God in the opening prayer of Mass. In the official Latin edition of the Sacramentary, the book of Mass

prayers, almost every opening prayer begins with “Deus,” the Latin word for God. In old Latin-English missals, “Deus” was always translated as God. But in the late 1960s, after the Church authorized Mass in other languages, the group charged with creating an official English version of the Mass generally translated “Deus” as “Father.” Was this incorrect?

Those who desire a precise literal translation of Latin to English would insist that the translation is clearly wrong. However, translation

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is not a mechanical process of replacing one word with its exact equivalent from another language. For one thing, many words have no precise equivalents. Moreover, good translation seeks to render complete ideas, not just words. This translation method is called “dynamic equivalence.”

In the case of “Deus,” we see the tension between translating ideas and words. Those who opted to



render “Deus” as “Father” wanted to convey God’s personal and loving nature, which reflects the specifically Christian understanding of God. Is it a correct translation of the Latin? Definitely not. Is it wrong? No. Considering the totality of the prayer and its use in Catholic worship, “Father” is a reasonable way to translate “Deus.”

Now, let’s consider the fluidity of language. About 10 years after “Father” became the accepted translation of “Deus,” the insights of Christian feminism began to influence the liturgy. Some asserted that masculine language about God



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# Saint Bernard of Clairvaux

**BORN:** 1090, France

**DIED:** August 20, 1153, France

**FEAST DAY:** August 20

**PATRON SAINT OF**  
Cistercians, Burgundy (France),  
beekeepers, candle makers,

**PATRON OF** St. Bernard Parish in  
Keene. This statue of St. Bernard  
is located at St. Bernard Parish in  
Keene.



somehow contributed to the inequality of women. Hence, some people — men and women — called for gender neutral language about God. They proposed replacing the masculine “Father” with the neuter “God.” Some objected to this, claiming that it violated long-established liturgical tradition. However, the Latin always favored “Deus” and rarely used “Father.” In a strange reversal, the “reformers” unwittingly advanced a traditionalist position.

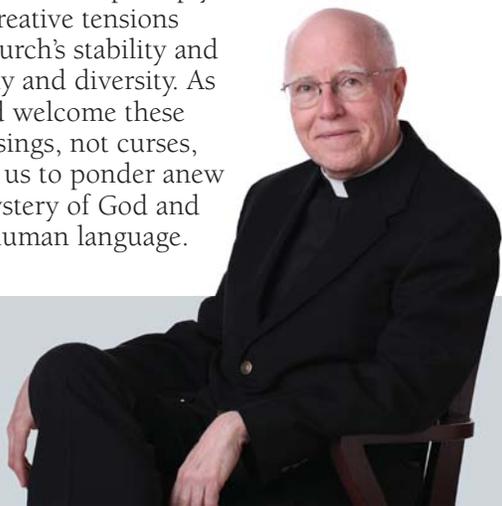
Which, then, should it be? “Father” or “God?” If someone wants a literal translation of the Latin or a gender-neutral term, “God” is preferred. If someone wants to express the loving and personal qualities of God, whom Jesus addressed as “Abba/Father,” then “Father” is favored. Neither word cancels out the other.

Of course, when we worship together, we need a common form of prayer. Can you imagine the confusion if every worshipper addressed God with a different title or name? To foster necessary unity in public prayer, the Church periodically determines uniform texts for Mass. In recent years, the Church has gradually shifted toward a more literal translation of the Latin, probably because the so-called “dynamic equivalence” approach produced translations which tend to become obsolete after a few decades. The changes coming about within the year ahead reflect this shift toward a more literal translation. (See pages 12-13 and visit [www.catholicnh.org/romanmissal](http://www.catholicnh.org/romanmissal).)

Recognizing the diversity of linguistic styles and usages, the Church has wisely authorized great variety within the liturgy. Though most of the prayers at Mass are official translations of the Latin and therefore sound very formal to our ears, other prayers can be extemporaneous or even written by the celebrant or members of the local community. For example, the prayers of intercession are not provided by the Church and can take many forms.

All this, of course, reminds us that the Church remains stable in the essentials because it is grounded in Christ, who is “the same yesterday, today, and forever.” But the Church also forever moves forward, adapting itself to new situations and unfolding human concerns.

Our endless efforts to establish the language of public prayer and worship simply arise from the creative tensions between the Church’s stability and movement, unity and diversity. As such, we should welcome these tensions as blessings, not curses, for they require us to ponder anew the ineffable mystery of God and the wonder of human language.



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■ Born to a family of Burgundy nobility, Bernard was the third of seven children. His parents took great pains with his education because before his birth, a devout man predicted a great destiny for him. From the start, Bernard was singled out for his success in his studies, a love of poetry, and for a great natural piety. His ambition was to excel in literature so that he could devote himself to Sacred Scriptures. He had a special devotion to the Blessed Virgin and would later write several works about her. He is credited with establishing the idea of Mary as intercessor.

When he was 19, Bernard’s mother died and he went to the monastery of Cîteaux, seeking admission into the Cistercian order there. Three years later, the Abbot of Cîteaux sent Bernard, along with a group of other monks, to found a new house in the Vallée d’Absinthe (Valley of Bitterness) which Bernard renamed the Claire Vallée, or Clairvaux (Valley of Light) and from this point on, he was known as Bernard of Clairvaux.

It was Bernard’s intention to retire from the world and live a life of solitude and prayer, but so many men came to join and be under his direction, including his father and his five brothers, that it soon became overcrowded. Bernard sent out small groups of monks to found additional monasteries. In all, they founded 163 monasteries in different parts of Europe.

Bernard’s writing and thoughtful speeches earned him a great deal of respect. He became one of the most recognized figures of the twelfth century and was given the honorary title of Doctor of the Church. At the Council of Troyes in 1128 he outlined the Rule of the Knights Templar, which became the ideal of French nobility. He was offered several bishoprics, but refused them all.

Bernard died on August 20, 1153. He was canonized on January 18, 1174, by Alexander III and is the first Cistercian monk placed on the calendar of saints.