

Welcoming the

English Translation of the

Roman Missal
THIRD EDITION

Part 8: “For You And For Many?”

The most controversial change in the new English translation of the Roman Missal is the retranslation of the “Words of Institution,” the words Jesus spoke at the Last Supper. The controversy occurs in the translation of the second stanza of these words when Jesus gives the disciples the command to “take and drink.” The new translation reads, “Take, this all of you and drink from it, for this is the *chalice* of my blood, the blood of the new and eternal covenant, which will be *poured* out for you and *for many* for the forgiveness of sins.” The word “cup” has been retranslated to “chalice” as it better describes the ritual action: we use a chalice not a cup at this moment in the liturgy (the Latin text uses the word “calix” which does indeed translate to chalice). The word “shed” has been retranslated to “poured” in order to describe both what occurred to Jesus’ blood during his passion and what occurs at the liturgy (while Jesus’ blood was shed during his passion, one cannot “shed” a chalice; Jesus’ blood is poured out of a chalice during liturgy). The controversy occurs at the retranslation of “for all” to “for many.” Does this mean that the Church is changing her theology that Jesus shed his blood to save all? If Jesus died to save many, who are these many and who are not? Make no doubt about it, the Church is not changing her theology: Jesus died to save all humanity (this is made clear in scripture and in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*).

It is believed that Jesus probably did use the words “for many” (the Aramaic equivalents) at the Last Supper. Throughout his life, Jesus often referenced the Hebrew scriptures confirming that he was the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament. It is believed that when using the words “for many,” Jesus was alluding to Isaiah’s prophecy of the suffering servant where we hear the voice of God saying, “The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors” (Isaiah 53:11-12). By using the word “many” precisely at this moment in his life, Jesus was most likely identifying himself as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy.

Many translation problems need to be addressed when translating “for many” from an ancient language, like Latin or Aramaic, to English. In English, the word “many” can be either expansive or restrictive. It can mean some but not all or it can mean the multitudes, used to impress the reader or listener with the great number it represents. In ancient languages, including Aramaic (the language Jesus spoke), it is almost always used as an expansive term to impress the reader or listener. There were probably some disciples at the Last Supper who thought they were more privileged than others and Jesus made it clear to them that his blood would be shed for them and for many, meaning the multitudes. The Latin text is “pro multis” which can be translated as “for many” or “for the many” because Latin, similar to other ancient languages, does not use connecting articles (the word “the” does not exist in Latin and other ancient languages). When translating the Missal, the Church did not add “the” to “for many” in order to keep the English translation more authentic to the Latin words.

In the end though, the phrase “for many” does not so much represent who is saved, but rather who does the saving: Jesus, the suffering servant, the Son of God who came to save us all.

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