The mass finds its voice

by Carol Zaleski in the August 9, 2011 issue

I first encountered the mass in midair. At least, that's how it felt. I was lying on my stomach on the living room carpet in a Manhattan apartment 13 stories above ground, listening to my parents' recording of Bach's Mass in B Minor. I had never attended a religious service of any kind, but with the help of liner notes that included the ordinary of the mass in Latin and a literal English translation, I was able to follow along. For several years the "Qui tollis peccata mundi" haunted my consciousness; in college it became an instrument of my conversion. Later on I learned that Bach had adapted a melody from Cantata 46 ("Schauet doch und sehet" / "Behold and see") to serve the Latin text common to Lutheran and Catholic worship. It was an inspired act of translation, wedding a universal language of Christian worship to a musical vernacular.

The second time I heard the mass I was stretched out on the same carpet listening to my parents' 1963 Philips monaural recording of *Missa Luba,* an exuberant setting of the mass sung by a Congolese (Luba) boys' choir. A Belgian Franciscan had found a way to unite the call-and-response improvisational singing of the Luba people with the universality of the Latin words. Once again, I could follow along thanks to a faithful English translation. Those liner notes became my missal and catechism.

Much has changed since then—in the year *Missa Luba* was published, the Roman Catholic bishops at the Second Vatican Council approved the Constitution on the

Sacred Liturgy, calling for a revision of the liturgical books in the light of biblical and apostolic sources, with the aim of deepening awareness of the Eucharist as the central mystery of Christian life. With regard to music, "pride of place" was reserved for Latin Gregorian chant, with generous scope for polyphony. The document also sanctioned vernacular translation of the Roman missal, on the understanding that the Latin original would provide the norm, the measure and the ballast for the translators' art.

The third time I heard the mass it was in Spanish, in a small Mexican church. It was and is a vernacular liturgy wonderfully transparent to the Latin original. So too, I have discovered, are the French, the German, the Polish and the Maltese. Among a vast company of successful vernacular liturgies, the English-language mass stands out for its divergence, in the name of "dynamic equivalence," from the Latin original. Thankfully, a fresh and improved translation of the third revised edition of the Roman missal, already in use in Australia, New Zealand and southern Africa, will gradually be placed in service in the U.S., Ireland and the U.K. beginning in September, to be fully deployed by the first Sunday of Advent.

If reception of this new translation is as generous as it should be, the period of adjustment will be a chance to rediscover the shape of the liturgy and the essentials of Christian belief and hope. The biblical concreteness of the liturgy and its humbling, exultant, awe-inspiring notes, muted in the old translation, are about to be restored. Thus, for example, when the celebrant echoes the angelic and Pauline greeting, "The Lord be with you," the congregation responds, "and with your spirit," a more vivid and theologically interesting translation of *et cum spiritu tuo* than the functional "and also with you." In the Gloria, "We praise you, we bless you, we adore you, we glorify you, we give you thanks for your great glory," replaces the tepid abridgment to "we worship you, we give you thanks, we praise you for your glory," so that the summons to adoration may come across as clearly as in the biblically based original. Threefold petitions and rhythmic repetitions, once stripped from the English in the interest of simplicity, evoke a sense of mystery that surpasses prosaic speech.

The Credo duly begins "I believe," spoken in unison to convey at once the individual and corporate character of faith. In the account of creation, "all things visible and invisible" maps the material and spiritual cosmos more adequately than "all that is seen and unseen." Speaking of Christ as "consubstantial with the Father" and "incarnate of the Virgin Mary" plumbs the divine-human nature more deeply than

the abstract "one in Being with the Father" and "born of the Virgin Mary." In "Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts" the angels return, having been exiled for no fault of their own from the English Sanctus. Just before communion, the centurion's voice rings out again: "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof"—living words that transport the worshiper into the gospel environment. Best of all, we get to reclaim the beautiful and dignified word *soul* from the dustbin to which a passing fad in theological anthropology had consigned it; "only say the word and my soul shall be healed" universalizes the centurion's petition and intensifies the communicant's prayer.

Change can be unsettling, but in this case the change is right and just. The postconciliar Catholic mass has found its English voice. The best response I can imagine is a Hebrew word that survives intact in all tongues, the final word of the New Testament—*Amen.*