

“*Pro Multis*”: For “Many” or for “All”?

ISSUE: In the English translation of the Mass, the Latin words “*pro vobis et pro multis*” (literally, “for you and for many”) in the Eucharistic Prayer are translated “for you and for all.” Is this an accurate translation? Further, does this translation imply that all will necessarily be saved, a proposition that the Church has always rejected?

Lastly, aside from the translation issue, is the precise language “for many” part of the formula of consecration instituted by Christ and, therefore, a necessary part of the Eucharistic Prayer?

RESPONSE: “For all” is a legitimate translation of “*pro multis*,” and points to the profound truth that through the unique sacrifice of Christ, the “one mediator between God and men” (1 Tim. 2:5), salvation “is offered to all” (Catechism, nos. 618, 1368).

The appearance of the words “for many” is not necessary for the validity of a Eucharistic Prayer.

DISCUSSION: In the current English translation, the actual words of the consecration of the wine are as follows:

Take this, all of you, and drink from it: This is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven. Do this in memory of me.

No error is being advanced by these words. Did not Christ, in fact, shed His blood for all men according to constant Church teaching? There are a number of scriptural texts that plainly provide that Our Lord died for all men. For example:

For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive (1 Cor. 15:22);

And He died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for Him who for their sake died and was raised (2 Cor. 5:15);

He is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world (1 Jn. 2:2); and

For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all (1 Tim. 2:5-6).

Moreover, the contrary proposition, that Christ did *not* die or shed His blood for all men was formally condemned by Pope Innocent X in 1653.

Therefore, no error is advanced by the use of the words “for all” in the consecratory formula; Christ’s blood was shed “for all.” Nevertheless, as the Council of Trent defined, “even though ‘Christ died for all’ (2 Cor. 5:15), still not all receive the benefit of His death, but only those to whom the merit of His passion is imparted” (*Decree on Justification*, ch. 3).

Catholic theology has always distinguished between the “objective redemption” of all men by Christ on the cross and the “subjective redemption,” whereby the grace merited by Christ on the Cross actually proves fruitful only in the case of those who cooperate with His grace and achieve salvation. This process is known as *justification*:

Justification has been *merited for us by the Passion of Christ* who offered Himself on the cross as a living victim, holy and pleasing to God, and whose blood has become the instrument of atonement for the sins of all men. Justification is conferred in Baptism, the sacrament of faith. It conforms us to the righteousness of God, who makes us inwardly just by the power of his mercy. Its purpose is the glory of God and of Christ, and the gift of eternal life (Catechism, no. 1992).

In summary, then, though Christ indeed died “for all,” it is up to each individual to accept the grace of justification through Baptism and then follow Christ through a life of charity.

Most Catholics are aware that the Church teaches that not all men are necessarily saved. The inclusion of the words “for all” in the consecratory formula no more implies the error that all men will necessarily be saved than the previous consecratory formula “for you and for many”—still found in the Latin text of the Mass—necessarily implies the opposite error that Christ did not give Himself for the redemption of all. The consecratory formula of the Mass is not the place where the Church’s full doctrine is, or could possibly be, expressed. The Church’s full teaching on this or any other matter is not required to be recited in order to effect the change (“transubstantiation”) of the wine into the Precious Blood of Christ.

At first glance, the official Latin “*pro multis*” would seem to require “for many.” However, in addition to the fact that the translation “for all” is compatible with Christian doctrine, there is also a linguistic rationale for it. In examining the fifth chapter of St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans, for example, we find the following:

For if many died through one man’s trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many (Rom. 5:15).

It is necessary, however, to read the first half of this scriptural passage more carefully. St. Paul says that “many died through one man’s trespass.” Now, unless “many” here can actually be translated as “all men,” this phrase from St. Paul would actually constitute a formal denial of the Church’s dogma, defined by the Council of Trent, that the original sin of Adam and its consequences were in fact transmitted to all men rather than just to “many”!

But an inspired—and therefore inerrant—letter of St. Paul would be the last place where we would expect to find denials of defined Catholic dogma. Indeed the Council of Trent used a passage from Rom. 5 in its definition on original sin! (*Decree on Original Sin*, no. 2).

Thus the phrase “for many” must be susceptible to more than one interpretation. And in Rom. 5:12-13, St. Paul, introducing his discussion of the effects of Adam’s sin, actually employs the phrase “all men” as a *synonym* for “many,” which, as noted earlier, he uses a few verses later in Rom. 5:15. So even the inspired Apostle to the Gentiles himself demonstrates that it is possible to use the two phrases interchangeably.

Now to the second part of the question: Is it true that the formula for consecration, fixed for all time by Christ, included “for many,” and that therefore all consecrations *without* “for many,” or with some different formula, would be invalid?

First, it is important to recognize that the liturgy is made up of unchangeable elements that were divinely instituted and of which the Church is the guardian, and also elements that the Church has the power—and at times the duty—to change for the good of the faithful (cf. Catechism, nos. 1205-06; Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 21). When it comes to the elements that can be changed, the words of St. Thomas Aquinas, himself a worthy advocate of the necessity of “for many,” are instructive: “We must abide rather by the Pope’s judgment than by the opinion of any of the theologians, however well-versed he may be in divine Scripture.”

To cite examples, we may begin with one of the very earliest consecrations for which we have evidence. We refer to one described by St. Paul the Apostle:

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes (1 Cor. 11:23-26).

We should note that St. Paul reports having received the formula of consecration he uses “from the Lord” Himself. And yet this formula does not include the phrase “for many.” Could we say, therefore, that St. Paul’s Masses were invalid? Paul’s disciple, St. Luke, similarly reports

the institution of the Holy Eucharist by Christ (Lk. 22:14-20), and, again, the use of the phrase “for many” is nowhere to be found. Instead, as with St. Paul quoted above, only the phrase “for you” is used. Should we therefore argue from this that the merits of Christ’s sacrifice could be applied only to those with whom Christ was talking at the moment, namely to the Apostles themselves? No, once again, our Faith remains the same regardless of some Church-approved variations.

It is true that the phrase “for many” does occur in the account of the institution of the Holy Eucharist, which we find in the Gospels according to Sts. Matthew and Mark (Mt. 26:28; Mk. 14:24). But the fact that Sts. Paul and Luke do not include it clearly implies that it was never an **essential** part of the formula for consecration fixed by Our Lord Himself. Moreover, although the accounts in Matthew and Mark do include “for many,” they do not include the word “chalice,” which has equally been held to be part of the “fixed form.”

Church history presents other clear examples of Masses where none of the phrases “for many,” “for you,” or “for all men” were used. For example, the Mass of St. Hippolytus—which is called “the oldest known text of the Roman Mass” and dates from the early part of the third century— does not have the words “for many.”

Further, it is significant that the Church has recognized and continues to recognize liturgies in which the formula for the consecration of the wine does not include “for many.” It is for the Church to decide the form of the consecration; and what she sanctions in the way of various liturgical or sacramental practices shows that her approved forms can also vary. We should constantly remember that “the Church” is not limited to the Roman Rite. A certain flexibility and variation in the words of consecration in the Mass have always been present in the Church’s liturgies, a fact we can discern by examining the consecratory formulas of the Eastern liturgies.

For example in the Byzantine Greek liturgy, right after the priest says, “Drink of this, all of you, this is My Blood of the New Testament, which is shed for you and for many, for the remission of sins,” the words of Our Lord, “Do this in memory of me” (Lk. 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:23), do not appear. The absence of those words represents still another variation in the consecratory formula which some have held to be “unchangeable.” According to Dom Leclerq, in fact, there have been no fewer than 89 variations in the formulas for consecration in the history of the Church! (*Dictionnaire d’Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie*, Col. 730-750). And among all these variations there are a number where not only the phrase “for many” but other words of the “Tridentine” form of the consecration are not to be found.

To determine whether any rite of the Mass is valid with respect to the form of consecration employed—and in whatever language—one really only need examine whether the words “This is my body” and “This is my blood” are present. If they are present, then consecration according to that rite would be valid, but ultimately subject to the authority of the Church. Therefore, the revised rite promulgated by Pope Paul VI clearly contains the essential forms for valid consecration, whether in Latin or in the vernacular.

(The preceding is condensed from The Pope, the Council and the Mass, written by James Likoudis, president emeritus of CUF, and Kenneth Whitehead.)

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