Glory to God in the Highest
by Father Bryan Babick, SL.L.

One of the most ancient parts of the Mass is the hymn we sing near the beginning. The Gloria, as it is commonly called, is a hymn of praise that traces its origins to at least the third century and perhaps even to the first, in part because it is composed entirely of Biblical quotations.

The Gloria is known as the “hymnus angelicus,” or, “angelic hymn,” because its first words are what the angels sang in Luke 2:14 at the birth of Christ. The revised translation will sound more like the Gospel of Luke in declaring, “Glory to God in the highest and, on earth, peace to people of good will.”

It is appropriate that we pray these words as we begin Mass since it is because of Christ’s birth that we gather to celebrate His Memory. In fact, one early Christian mystic noted that by the birth of Christ, an event praised by the angels in their declaration that opens this hymn, angels and mankind separated by original sin are reunited through praying the Gloria.

The hymn is meant to be a five part praise of the three Persons of the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. First is the Lucan angelic quotation, which we have already seen.

The second section is one during which God is praised. The revised translation will have us pray, “We praise You, we bless You, we adore You, we glorify You, we give You thanks for Your great glory, Lord God, heavenly King, O God, almighty Father.”

The revision more clearly places the movement in a vertical direction. We praise, bless, adore, glorify and give thanks for the great glory of the heavenly, almighty, kingly God and Father. Note how there are five verbs of human action followed by the one-greater quantity of six attributes for God. Jesus, God’s Son, suffered five wounds in His humanity. His divinity surpassed those in the Resurrection. This human-divine interplay is a paraphrase of Psalm 145 in which king David says “I will praise You, my God and king; I will bless Your Name forever.”

The next part of the hymn is the longest because it praises Jesus, the reason for our exultation. The new text will say, “Lord Jesus Christ, Only Begotten
Son, Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father, You take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us; You take away the sins of the world, receive our prayer; You are seated at the right hand of the Father, have mercy on us. For You alone are the Holy One, You alone are the Lord, You alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ.”

“Only Begotten Son” is a reference to Hebrews 1:5, which sees Jesus as the fulfillment of Psalm 110 about the then forthcoming Messiah. “Lamb of God,” and, “You take away the sins of the world,” are references to the declaration of John that Baptist about Jesus in John 1:29. “At the right hand of the Father,” refers to Mark 16:19, which describes where He went after Jesus Ascended into heaven.

“You alone are holy,” is what Saint John hears the heavenly court singing to the Lamb as recorded in Revelation 15:4. “You alone are the Most High,” repeats the fear expressed by and Jesus’ power over the demons of the possessed man in Luke 8:28. Note how we have moved from Old Testament references in the part about God to New Testament citations about Christ in this section. It is in the New Testament that the obscure characteristics about God are made tangible in Jesus Christ.

The fourth part of the Gloria is very brief and is left unchanged – “with the Holy Spirit, in the glory of God the Father” – lifted from the conclusion of Saint Paul’s Christological hymn in Philippians 2:11. Very little is said about the Holy Spirit here because It is the continuation of the gift of Jesus, which He promised would come to us after He ascended into heaven. In fact the words “with the Holy Spirit” were once accompanied by a sign of the Cross to highlight just this connection.

The last part is the shortest – “Amen” – but by no means incidental. This is the part where we agree with everything that has been said about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. We conclude by saying, “Amen,” or, “it is true.” How appropriate we finish with this affirmation since the Book of Revelation, last of the Books in the Bible, ends with Jesus saying, “Yes! I am coming soon. Amen!”

Indeed Jesus does come to us during the Mass – in His Word and in the Eucharist. The revised Gloria is not radically different from the current version, but its references to the Scriptures, which account for its antiquity, will be much clearer.