



What is the meaning behind the Glory Be prayer?

Dear Father Kerper: At the end of each decade of the rosary we say, “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.” In the old Latin Mass it seemed to be said constantly. And I have always been puzzled by the statement, “world without end.” Isn’t the world sure to end? Please fill me in about this prayer.

Thanks so much for asking about this little prayer, which Catholics say so often, usually without thinking deeply about its meaning. Because its simplicity conceals its richness, we need to examine its history and reflect on its theological meaning.

The prayer you mention is commonly called the *Gloria Patri*, an abbreviation of the first part of its Latin text, “*Gloria Patri et Filio et Spiritui Sancto*” (“Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit”). Within the realm of technical liturgical studies, the prayer is known as the “Little Doxology.” (The Great Doxology is the “*Gloria in excelsis Deo*,” the Christmas song of the angels noted in Luke 2:14.) The word “doxology” provides the key to the prayer’s meaning.

“*Doxa*” is the Greek word for “glory,” which refers to the brilliant and radiant beauty of God. Because God is spiritual and hence invisible, God’s “glory” expresses the elements of God’s self-manifestation, which humans can sense and grasp. We see this, for example, in the story of God’s “visible” self-manifestation to Moses. In Exodus, the inspired writer recalls that Moses saw God’s “glory” pass by in the form of “God’s back,” not directly (cf. Exodus 33:18-23). Moses has a powerful experience of God’s beauty and presence – God’s glory – but he does not “see” God directly as we can see other people.

When we pray the *Gloria Patri* we actually call upon ourselves and others to “give glory to God.” But how can we give to God that which He already possesses? By deliberately turning our gaze outward toward His glory. This requires us to turn away from ourselves and the created world, thereby gazing momentarily on the glory of God, who is our origin and destiny. By doing this, we see the fullness of reality. Otherwise we lose our awareness of God and see only a tiny piece of reality devoid of God.

Because the Church recognized the human tendency to avoid “giving glory” to God, she encouraged the frequent repetition of the *Gloria Patri* as a constant reminder to turn outward and upward toward God. We see this as early as the

fourth century when the Church began to append the *Gloria Patri* to every psalm sung or recited. As the rosary became ever more popular, the practice of ending each psalm with the *Gloria Patri* was transferred to the end of each decade.

The “Little Doxology” also powerfully reinforces belief in the Trinity. Whereas the “Great Doxology” is addressed simply to God, the “Little Doxology” directs “Glory” to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the more ancient version used in Antioch, the prayer directed “Glory” to the Father, through the Son in the Holy Spirit. The form we currently use was preferred over the older Syrian version because it follows the baptismal formula found in Saint Matthew’s Gospel (cf. Matthew 18:19) and it more clearly expresses the equality of the Persons of the Trinity.

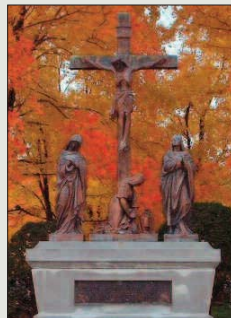
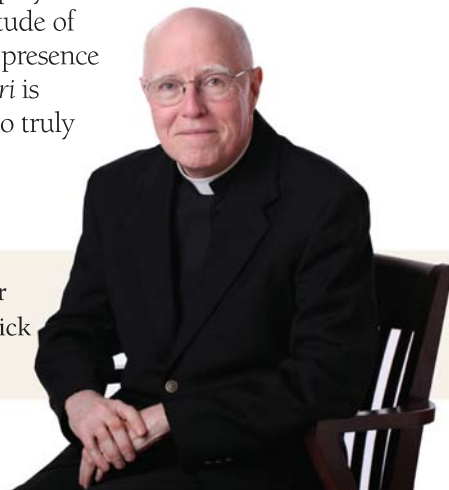
You also asked about the curious phrase “world without end.” This appears in the second part of the *Gloria Patri*: “as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever, world without end. Amen.” This line was peculiar to the Latin-speaking Church, though by the sixth century it had become universal. The Church added this line to stress the eternal existence and unchanging nature of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Some had asserted that the Son had not always existed, thereby denying the eternity of the Trinity.

As to “world without end,” this does not assert the permanence of earth. Not at all! Instead, we have here a good example of a “traditional translation” which is confusing, indeed misleading.

The Latin words are: “*sicut erat in principio, et nunc, et semper, et in saecula saecularum.*” The words “*saecula saecularum*” literally mean “time of times,” which should be translated as “forever and ever.” The problem, of course, is that “*saeculum*” has a wide range of meanings, including the average human life span, breed, generation, and world. In the late 1960s, the Church corrected the older translations in light of enhanced knowledge of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. The official translation is now: “Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever.” Of course, the older translation continues to be used in private prayer, but never in the Church’s public worship.

I love the *Gloria Patri*, especially in its Latin form, because it turns us quickly to the Mystery of God, who is Father, Son, and Spirit; and its recitation, whether in private or public, allows us to share in the prayer uttered by the vast multitude of saints who pray in God’s presence even now. The *Gloria Patri* is indeed very small but also truly grand. ■

■ **Father Michael Kerper** is the pastor of Saint Patrick Parish in Nashua, NH.

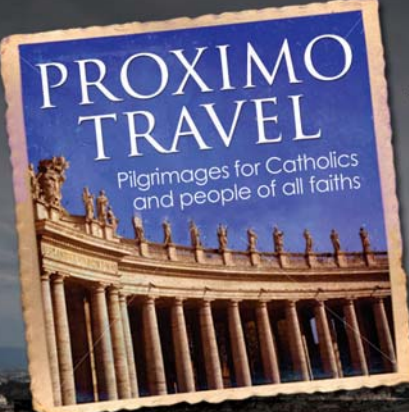


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