



Publié sur *La Vie des Classiques* (<https://96.ip-213-32-20.eu>)

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NORWICH CATHEDRAL AND THE LATIN ORIGINS OF MODERN ENGLISH LITURGIES

I passed the weekend in the English city of Norwich. On the Sunday I attended the sung eucharist at Norwich Cathedral with a friend. I confess that I have never attended a Sunday morning service at a cathedral in my life, so it was a new experience.



Norwich Cathedral

The interior was very bare. The stonework had been stripped of any plaster that it might have had in medieval times. In some arches there was obvious whitewash. I couldn't help feeling that this was rather a pity. The building would look better with a bit more colour.

It was also cold inside. The temperature outside was sweltering, and had been so for two days. But the great mass of medieval stone had not warmed up as yet. These buildings can never have been anything else.

The huge building was mostly empty. The service took place in the nave, west of the huge stone rood screen which completely hid the altar from the nave. The congregation was mostly elderly and no greater than an ordinary parish church. Looking at them, it was obvious that they could not possibly afford to maintain this vast building. They did make quite an effort to be welcoming to visitors. Indeed my friend and I were collared and asked to help carry up the elements to the clergy during the eucharist, which was a surprise.

The choir was a visiting choir named [Amici Coro](#), who were superb. They were supported by equally or even more excellent organ playing. I confess that I do like excellence in music, so long as it is not empty and cynical.

The service book was a local creation, with the cathedral on the cover. Initially I couldn't follow it at all! This was because the service only used the material printed on the right-hand pages. The material on the left hand pages, in a font and design identical to that

opposite, was merely for information. It's quite hard to understand why anybody would do such a thing, but then the regulars all know. Churches are often bad at this sort of thing.

But some of the material printed opposite did catch my eye. It consisted of Latin versions of the material that we were saying.

Now I'm still working on the fifth-century *Life* of St George, and in one chapter there are quotations which are in fact from ancient liturgical material. Some of these actually appeared in the Norwich cathedral service book. For instance one section read:

Qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.

Qui tollis peccata mundi, suscipe deprecationem nostram.

Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris, miserere nobis.

I.e.

Who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.

Who takes away the sins of the world, receive our prayer.

Who sits at the right hand of the Father, have mercy on us

The "qui tollis" caught my eye, having seen similar constructions in the *Life*. The nominative "qui", "who", followed by the 2nd person singular "tollis", "you take away", made me rub my eyes. Rendering as "you who take away", "you take away" or "who takes away" - none of them a very exact translation on the face of it.

It made me realise that there is a tradition here, of words pronounced in western churches for nearly two millennia, about which most people, including myself, are utterly ignorant. It isn't even obvious to me where to start to find out.

I came to Christ in an Anglican church using a modern English liturgy. I remember once attending a Roman Catholic service in my college days and being surprised to find much the same words being used. But I have never heard anyone discuss what they were.

Is there a simple, brief introduction to such matters available? Designed for the layman?

Suggestions would be most welcome in the comments.

My thanks to the people and clergy of Norwich cathedral for the welcome that we received, as complete and obscure strangers. We were invited to the coffee afterwards, and everyone was most friendly.
