

Parish Practice: Shock of the New

When the forthcoming revised texts for the Order of Mass were promulgated in 2008, I thought I knew which parts were going to be the most difficult for people to handle. However, I've learned that the best way to find out what people think is not to sit at my desk and guess, but to ask them. So I did.

One day I invited the people who attend daily mass to stay afterwards on two separate mornings the following week. I suggested that we take an hour or so to review the new texts for the mass. The group readily accepted the invitation. I asked the parish secretary to make copies of the revised texts for us, using the website <http://www.usccb.org/romanmissal/peoplesparts.pdf>. I also prepared a copy of the priest's parts from <http://www.usccb.org/romanmissal/priestsparts.pdf>.

On the first morning, when mass was over, the worshipers and I adjourned to the narthex of our church and sat in a circle. I passed out copies of the revised people's parts and invited those gathered to try them out with me. I used no vestments. We did not change postures. We just read the words from the Order of Mass, each reciting our lines in a kind of reader's theatre. We made no attempt to include the readings and prayers that change from day to day.

I led the group through all the opening rites, and then I paused for comments and conversation. We did the same for the rest of the Liturgy of the Word through the Creed. We read through the preparation of the gifts, and then the communion and closing rites. On the second morning, I read aloud all four of the main eucharistic prayers to gather the community's reactions to what each person was hearing.

The results were both predictable and surprising. The group had some specific concerns, such as the meaning of the word "consubstantial" and the absence of the acclamation "Christ has died." They had some pastoral concerns – how they would know what to say, and how the priests were going to like learning all these new prayers. They also had some theological questions – why the word "merit" appears in Eucharistic Prayer II, and why at the Last Supper Jesus said he would die "for many." They asked about the rubrics – whether or not to strike the breast during the Confiteor. They struggled to make sense of the rules governing capital letters and periods. They caught some scriptural allusions they never knew before, such as the connection between the words before communion and the cure of the centurion's servant ("Lord, I am not worthy").

On the whole, they thought they would be able to handle this. Some of them were old enough to remember earlier English versions of some of the texts, and many of the revisions resembled what they had learned decades ago. They knew that changing again would be hard, but they had been through change before and survived. They believed they could do it again. "It'll be easier on the younger generation," they said.

Really? So I asked them. I arranged a similar session with Catholic teenagers through the help of a local religion teacher. They were happy to have a break from their regular class, but once I passed out the copies of the revised texts, and they saw the changes that were coming, I could tell it was not going to be as easy on them as the older generation thought.

One of the kids said, "I wish this had happened 15 years ago so I wouldn't have to go through this change." They thought the Gloria was too long. They giggled at the word "consubstantial". They thought the word "man" was offensive. They thought "I confess one baptism" sounded like baptism was a sin. They preferred the Apostles' Creed. They resented the revised Confiteor that tried to make them feel guiltier than they were before. The expression "And with your spirit" sounded weird to them. Upon reading the revised Sanctus, one thought "Lord God of hosts" referred to the real presence of Christ in the communion wafers.

One student realized that they were perhaps overreacting, and reminded the others how much is staying the same: the readings, the songs, the actions – even the statues and the appearance of the church building.

These exercises helped me in many ways. They let me test out my theory about how the texts were going to be received. The sessions verified some of my presuppositions, they identified key areas for catechesis, and they relieved me that the transition might go more smoothly than I had thought. These conversations also let me test how I would give catechesis on the revised missal texts. In a small setting I learned in a hurry if my explanations were helpful or just not good enough.

I tried to make myself the learner in these situations. I wanted to know what people in the pew would be experiencing. I was more interested in their reactions than in my explanations.

Of course, one cannot catechize on the missal texts merely by asking people, "What do you think?" One needs to have explanations ready to go. But this helped me make a first step toward more comprehensive catechesis by learning what questions were going to lie ahead.

Having arranged these focus groups, I felt I knew better where the pitfalls were. The faithful – old and young – challenged me to open their eyes to the value of the revised

translation. They also helped me determine which aspects of the revisions were first going to need the most attention for my local community.

In recent months, I've done more. I included short articles about the translation in the parish bulletin. I've made announcements at mass calling attention to them. I've said I wanted to share information now so the revision won't catch people off guard when it is implemented.

Once the actual date for starting the new translation is known, I plan to preach on the texts and make catechetical announcements. As musical settings for the revised Order of Mass become available, our community can spend a few minutes before mass to start learning these before we need to use them.

In short, my plan is to keep letting people know about the changes that are coming. But the most valuable action I took to teach them was to teach me. I tested the texts outside of mass.

One of the youths asked, "Just how often do these things change?" Not that often. It's been 40 years. "Maybe this will help us pay attention better." Indeed.

To do:

- Study the revised texts of the mass yourself.
- Make some copies and invite a group of people to try them out.
- Listen to what people are saying.

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