

Adjusting To A New Style

Paul Turner

One year after the implementation of the new English translation of the mass, Catholics will be settled back into a routine. They will know the responses by heart. They will be singing new memorial acclamations. They will know how to pronounce “consubstantial”.

Together with their priest, the people will have adjusted to the new style. They may be singing more dialogues back and forth. The prayers will sound humbler than before.

People will also realize how many things did not change. The repertoire of hymns will basically be the same. The lectionary will go untouched. The music, vestments, and decorations will all still observe the cycle of seasons. Families will still bring up the gifts. The altar society will still be looking for new members. Some may be comparing the anticipated catastrophe of the new translation with the Y2K bug.

There are two reasons why we are getting the new translation. One pertains to the contents of the book; the other to the rules of translation. The book in question is the one we have called the Sacramentary. It is an English translation of the second edition of the post-Vatican II *Missale Romanum*. The *Missale* is now in its third edition. It includes additional saints’ days on the calendar, an expanded body of orations, a clarification of rubrics for Holy Week, and a more thoughtful layout affecting the location of certain mass texts and the appearance of each page, such as improvements to sense lines.

The Latin original of the third edition is a simple upgrade. It’s non-controversial. It should actually be desirable in a culture that craves the latest software.

The controversy over the missal lies with the second reason it is coming: the new rules of translation. Those rules – requiring a closer adherence to the Latin – will make everything sound different, including the title of the book, which will now be called the Roman Missal. The revised translation will bring a wider vocabulary, more complex sentences, and a loftier style.

Catholics will probably notice two other features: a humbler tone and new references to the bible. These come from vocabulary already in the original Latin texts. The first translation omitted many of the words referring to the contrite attitude of our prayer. And in seeking a style that favored the flow of English, it apparently overlooked some of the missal’s biblical foundations.

The most challenging part of the missal will be making the transition – first because we pray comfortably with the words we have, and second because the new translation has come to symbolize divided viewpoints of worship.

The first challenge is a practical one. We are comfortable with the prayers we have. Many people no longer need printed aids to recite the Glory to God and the Creed. Many priests do not refer to the Sacramentary for the ordinary dialogues and prayers. We will experience a sense of loss: loss of the words we have come to expect, and loss of a competency in the flow of our prayer. At first our new texts may feel more like reading than praying. We can expect the liturgy to run roughshod for a while. That is a practical matter.

However, accompanying the translation is an ecclesial matter. Many Catholics are suspicious about the reasons for the change. They know that the celebration of the pre-Vatican II liturgy has received new freedoms, and they wonder if this translation floats along in that unexpected stream. They see papal and diocesan liturgies adopting a more formal style in ceremony and vestments, and they wonder if this is coming to their parish. They have heard that ecumenical participation, a characteristic of the original translation, has been denied to the revised. They worry that this signals a further breach in the underachieved vision of Christian unity.

Many Catholics also feel left out of the loop when it comes to decision-making. They did not request this translation. They were not consulted about its content or timetable. They know the Church is not a democracy, but the Church does promote charity, especially with people affected by decisions we make. Many women feel marginalized by this and other decisions within the Catholic Church.

Others believe that the Church should focus on different matters needing attention: justice for immigrants, the dignity of human life, eliminating world hunger, or uncovering more reasons for the clergy sex abuse scandal and its coverup.

Consequently, the missal has been snared in larger ecclesial issues about leadership, consultation, renewal, and retrenchment. During the transition, any given Catholic may therefore be struggling with twin issues: adjusting to the new words, and wondering what the change means.

In the interests of disclosure, I need to tell you that I do some work for the International Commission on English in the Liturgy. I've watched good people try to revise the texts of the mass keeping their eyes on the Vatican's new rules and their ears on the people of God. When I first saw the texts, I fretted over how they would work in a parish like mine. But after several meetings, I saw the prayers improve, and I found that my ears were adjusting to the style.

That is why I remain optimistic about the revised translation. It will demand an adjustment to the attitude and listening skills we bring to worship. But I believe we can do this, and that the merits of the work will gradually come to light.

The case for the revised translation has many good points. The third edition of the missal has more content than the second edition. The translations are bringing us closer to the historic words of our ancestors and to Pope Paul VI's Consilium, charged with implementing the vision of the Second Vatican Council. Much – though not all – of the gender-exclusive language is disappearing. The elevated style and biblical allusions will enhance the possibilities for preaching and catechizing on the mass. There really is considerable merit to the work.

To welcome it, though, many Catholics will have to distinguish it from other aspects of Church life: the slow speed of change, the foibles of leadership, and the distrust that comes with heavy-handed authority.

This does not mean that the ecclesial issues will evaporate. We still need to address all the questions about leadership and participation in decision-making. But these questions will remain with or without a revised translation.

If a year after implementation we feel at home at mass again, the eucharist will still be the most powerful place that we can experience the Church, the People of God, and the Body of Christ in action. It is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed and the source from which its power flows (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 10). The sharing of meal and sacrifice will continue to model who we are called to be: a Church of Christians who love one another, speak with a prophetic voice, yield some of our preferences for the sake of the common good, and celebrate our differences, in hope of discovering that diversity of opinions need not distract us from unity of belief.

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