

Inside the front cover of your hymnals you will find your new words for the mass. With the bulletin last weekend you received a copy of my booklet explaining what is happening and why. We start using these on the First Sunday of Advent, just two weeks away. The changes have already begun in countries such as South Africa, New Zealand, England and Australia. As you can imagine, some Catholics are happy and some are not. Most are saying it is harder on the priests than it is on the people because we have new translations for all the prayers we've been using the past 40 years. I've been watching the revisions up close the past few years, and I believe in the quality of the work and the integrity of the people who labored over it. Still, the words sound different, people have to consult sheets, and the priests are struggling not just to read the prayers, but actually to pray them. In my travels I've celebrated mass a few times with people making the new responses, and I admit that it has not been easy for me, even though I thought I knew the revised words rather well.

Last year I heard a speaker say that one of the things we will lose in the revised translation is competence. I think he's correct. We don't think about it very much, but when we celebrate the eucharist, we all bring a certain competence with us. We know what words to say when, and we pray with them very well. The repetitious nature of our prayers, the very thing that makes young people find mass so boring, is what becomes the very backbone of prayer for an older generation of people who get more out of the words the more they say them. The actions of the mass are staying exactly the same – there's no change in the processions, the vestments, the hymns, or the routines of the servers and ministers. But the words will be different, and the changes will be just enough to throw people off, as if we have lost all our skill.

Psalm 128 praises people who use their skill. The first verse the cantor sang today goes, "you shall eat the fruit of your handiwork." We use this psalm today because of Jesus' parable about the talents, where he encourages us to use the gifts God entrusts to us; and because of the first reading that praises a wife who uses her skills to provide for her family and to give to the poor. When we use our skills well, we reap the fruit of our own handiwork, and we give God praise.

The new translation has been causing some people to feel that they have lost the skills they spent so long developing. If in the weeks ahead you sense that the mass doesn't click the way it usually does, you will not be alone. But it should go more smoothly in time, the more familiar we become with the new rhythms and vocabulary. If you know anyone who has not been to church in a while, please invite them back to try out our new prayers with us.

Any time we go through a period of change, we rely on the skills we have developed. In the case of Catholics, we have built a foundation on personal prayer, the communal celebration of the mass, and our membership in a Church that prays the same mass all over the world and from one generation to the next. If we remember where we fit in the great scope of history and the very personal gifts that God has given each one of us, we should be able to step into our revised celebrations with trust and belief.