

The 3 public places where people probably say the most prayers are churches, hospitals, and restaurants. When people pray at hospitals they are very focused; those who pray in public at restaurants are usually very sincere in their faith.

Jesus complains today about religious people who are insincere. Some scribes wore special clothing, shopped for attention at the market, sat conspicuously in synagogues, and took places of honor at banquets. He hated all that showing off. It drew attention away from God and onto the people who were supposed to direct you to God in the first place.

Churchgoers are aware of the same dangers – especially Catholics, because a lot of our prayer relies on externals. The ministers wear special clothes and take assigned seats; people greet their friends. We stand, sit and kneel at prescribed times. We have special bows and genuflections. We recite words according to predetermined formulas. The routine helps us pray. But a stranger could walk in here and see all the appearances of prayer, but still wonder, is it sincere? Do people really mean what they say and do here? Or are they just going through the motions?

This is a great challenge for Catholics. Sometimes our prayer gets too comfortable. We rely on the routine to pull us through. Still, you cannot tell just by looking at others whether or not they are praying deeply. Some people may not appear to be at prayer, but they are. You just can't judge by appearances. In the end, it is more important to pray than to give the appearance of prayer. If our whole lives are in contact with God's presence in public and in private, our prayer will be sincere.

At the Catholic mass, we have been saying our prayers in English for the past 40 years, and the shift from Latin to English has helped a lot of people pray more sincerely than they did before. For the past few years, the English translation we've been using has been undergoing a revision. The project will probably be done sometime next year, though it may be two years before we start using the new translation. When the change happens, mass is going to sound different. It will look the same – there will be no changes in our appearance when we pray. The words are being redone.

I've had a small part in this project, providing some secretarial work for a committee. So I recently prepared a set of 8 pamphlets to help people understand what is coming and why. We're making those available to you. We'll put one in the bulletin each week from now till the end of the year. The changes are still a little ways off, but when they happen I don't want anyone saying, "Why didn't you tell us?"

The new translation should help us be sincere in our prayer. But we can work on sincerity even now. When we gather together at church, let us concentrate on the words we say and the songs we sing. Let us not rely on appearances or on routines, but focus our minds and hearts on the presence of the God who gathers us here to pray.