

Liturgy will be more formal, theologically deeper

By Jerry Filteau\*

When a new English translation of the Mass is introduced in the United States – at the start of Advent in late 2011 – the style of worship will be more formal. But it will also be deeper theologically and more evocative emotionally and intellectually.

The Vatican's intention was not so much to make the liturgy more formal as to make the English version conform more closely to the original Latin, says Father Paul Turner, a Missouri priest who is former head of the North American Academy of Liturgy and frequently writes and lectures on liturgical questions.

“I think what's intentional is getting to a closer interpretation of the Latin” from which all modern liturgy translations in the Roman Catholic Church emanate, Father Turner says.

He said the result may sound more formal than in the past 40 years because the new translation rules inevitably lead in that direction.

The original translation of the Roman Missal into English was carried out under 1969 Vatican rules that stressed simplicity, modernity and other factors that would make the language of the liturgy more comprehensible and participatory.

Newer rules, set out by the Vatican in 2002, emphasize greater fidelity to the original Latin.

Msgr. John H. Burton, vicar general of the Diocese of Camden, N.J., and board chairman of the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Coordinators, says there was concern “that the language has been too laid back” and failed to convey the rich liturgical heritage of the Roman rite.

The new translation shows an effort “to heighten the language a bit” and capture “the transcendence as well as the imminence of God,” he says.

Father Andrew R. Wadsworth, executive director of the International Commission on English in the Liturgy, says a more formal language in the new translation “is clearly identifiable as one of its characteristics.” The commission translates Latin liturgy texts into English for the world's English-speaking bishops' conferences.

He says the vocabulary of the Mass prayers “is necessarily rich as it reflects the various mysteries of salvation, conveying concepts which do not always occur in everyday conversation. To radically simplify the language is often to dilute the concept.”

An excerpt from Eucharistic Prayer I illustrates the difference in style.

The version currently in use reads: “Look with favor on these offerings. Accept them as once you accepted the gifts of your servant Abel, the sacrifice of Abraham, our father in faith, and the bread and wine offered by your priest Melchizedek.

“Almighty God, we pray that your Angel may take this sacrifice to your altar in heaven. As we receive from this altar the sacred Body and Blood of your Son, let us be filled with every grace and blessing.”

The new translation says: “Be pleased to look upon these offerings with serene and kindly countenance, and to accept them, as you were pleased to accept the gifts of your servant Abel the just, the sacrifice of Abraham, our father in faith, and the offering of your high priest Melchizedek, a holy sacrifice, a spotless victim.

“In humble prayer we ask you, almighty God: command that these gifts be borne by the hands of your holy Angel to your altar on high in the sight of your divine majesty, so that all of us who through this participation at the altar receive the most holy Body and Blood of your Son may be filled with every grace and heavenly blessing.”

In working to reflect features of the original Latin texts more clearly, the translators sought to develop “a translation which is clearly sacral in character and yet not archaic in style,” Father Wadsworth says.

Father Turner says that one of the principles the first translators used was “compression,” eliminating repetitive phrasing. “That lent a vigor to the first translation, but it did eliminate some of the style and content of the original prayers.”

He acknowledges criticisms of some of the long, complex sentences in the new translation, especially in the collects, the prayers at the beginning of Mass.

“It’s a logical fear that people will raise, but I think they’ll be pleasantly surprised at how easy it is to understand.” He says the collects follow a pattern, with many of the same components repeated from one day to the next. If you look at just one collect in the new translation, “it sounds complicated,” he says. “But when you hear that style Sunday after Sunday, I think your ears open up to the style,” and it becomes familiar.

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