NEW TRANSLATION IS A PLUS FOR CATHOLICS

By James Breig

Microsoft Vista and "New Coke" have proven that not every change is for the better. Furthermore, when change comes to important elements of life, it is often resisted with the cry of "we never did it that way before."
However, experts who are enthusiastic about the changes to the Roman Missal – the book that contains the prayers for the Mass – think the alterations are improvements that will lead to a deeper spiritual experience.
"Because a new edition of the Latin Roman Missal was issued in 2002, it is necessary for all the countries of the world to translate this missal into the vernacular," says Msgr. Anthony Sherman, executive director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat of Divine Worship, in explaining why the changes are being made.

But translation is not something easy to accomplish, concedes Msgr. Kevin Irwin, dean of the School of Theology and Religious Studies at The Catholic University of America in Washington. "We all bring our own prejudices and ideas to translation," he says. "It is hoped that the new texts will be more accurate so that our faith and our statements of faith are reliable."

Msgr. Irwin says changes to the Roman Missal are rare. "The previous Roman Missal (in Latin) was published in 1570, with minor adjustments [being made] in editions through 1962," he says. "After the Second Vatican Council, the new [Roman Missal] was published in 1970, followed by a 1975 edition with minor adjustments and then the third edition in 2002 with additional prayers for new saints' feasts etc."

Father Paul Turner of the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph in Missouri elaborated on the latter point, saying that the missal "includes additional saints' days that are now on the calendar, as well as some Masses for other circumstances. In addition, the rubrics in Holy Week have many small emendations."

What makes the translation of the 2002 edition of the Roman Missal different is that this translation is carried out under the latest Vatican guidelines for translating the Mass into vernacular languages. This new guideline, *Liturgiam Authenticam*, published in 2001, urges a stronger adherence to Latin wording and structure than earlier directives.

The results have led to some concern, voiced even by bishops, that the new English translations of the missal are not user-friendly. In the words of one critic, the language "tends to be elitist and remote from everyday speech and frequently not understandable. The vast majority of God's people in the assembly are not familiar with words 'ineffable,' 'consubstantial' and 'inviolate.'"

Msgr. Sherman counters that “in the United States today, people are almost daily learning new vocabulary, and sometimes it is quite technical. The words in our liturgical prayers can afford celebrants the opportunity to reflect on the broader context of those words and so lead the faithful in a deeper understanding of the beliefs being explained.”

He grants that “the new translation is not perfect because, in a certain sense, no translation can be perfect. The differences of opinion on the translation will be wide. At some future date, the Holy See may substitute a different prayer for what we now have. On the other hand, some have already expressed the opinion that this translation sometimes captures with a greater eloquence the content of the particular prayers.”

Msgr. Irwin says that the Church uses technical words in its vocabulary sometimes because those words capture concepts of the faith that would not be easy to understand without using a lot of other words. “For example, since the 13th century, we have used the term ‘transubstantiation’ to describe the change that occurs in the bread and wine at Mass. Before the change, it is bread and wine. After the change, it looks like, smells like and tastes like bread and wine, but now it is something totally different.”

In Father Turner’s view, vocabulary is not a major problem. “People will readily understand the texts,” he says. “The reason the missal includes such words is that the vocabulary in the Latin originals is so broad. Latin uses a variety of synonyms for words like ‘sacrifice,’ ‘love,’ ‘mercy’ and ‘wonderful.’ In order to represent that diversity and to provide variety among the prayers in English, a broad vocabulary is being used in the translation.”

In recognition of the disturbance change can bring, he adds that bishops' conferences around the world have repeatedly stressed that these translations should not be used without prior and significant explanation. “One of the things we did not do 40 years ago, when the liturgy was first put into the vernacular, was to explain the changes fully,” he says. “We need several layers of education and instruction about the translations, but even more importantly about the Mass itself.”