

The Roman Missal: The Challenges of Change

By Beth Dotson Brown*

Change is often accompanied by fear that challenges priests in the United States when preparing to use the new translation of the Roman Missal. Yet, amidst the newness of the prayers there are also opportunities that church leaders say can guide congregations to a richer liturgical and spiritual life.

“I think we’ve always had an opportunity for a deeper prayer, but I do think the translation is getting more nuance out of the text than we’ve had before,” says Father Paul Turner, an author, lecturer and a pastor in Missouri. “So we’ve got some deeper possibilities for catechesis and for spirituality with this translation.”

That deeper appreciation of the liturgy begins with the priest who will lead the people in using the missal. Msgr. Anthony Sherman, executive director of the Secretariat of Divine Worship at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), sees this as an opportunity for priests to further develop their own spiritual life so they can ignite the faith of the congregation.

“The basic context of the Eucharistic prayers is the same, therefore it’s an opportunity for priests ... to take a look at some of the background material,” he says, noting the USCCB Web site has numerous resource materials posted.

He notes that in order for the missal to be successfully implemented, “The priest needs to be able to pray each prayer. And the only way one can approach this in a more prayerful manner is to educate oneself on the background of the prayers, theological concepts contained in the prayer, because then you can more intelligently and convincingly proclaim them for the people.”

Father Turner agrees. “Our greatest challenge is to get inside those and make them sound like our prayer and not just the missal’s prayer,” he says. “We need to spend time with the prayer ourselves, meditating on them and figuring out more deeply what they mean, imagining some context in our own lives that can make this prayer more authentic for us.”

Although priests have always tried to do this, the new language in the translation presents them with possible stumbling blocks they will need to work through.

Because the new translation is truer to the Latin syntax, the sentences are sometimes long and grammatically complex. There are also vocabulary changes. Msgr. Sherman suggests priests read over the text to learn the best way to proclaim them. The more comfortable the priest is with these changes, the easier it will be for the congregation to learn them.

Although new missals will not be available until a year after the final translation is approved, it’s not too early for priests to begin preparing their congregations as well.

Msgr. Sherman suggests printing some of the new text in the church bulletin so people will begin to understand it. He also encourages parishes to explain why the new translation was needed and how it was created.

“The books we use to celebrate are at the center of our liturgical life,” Msgr. Sherman says. “That’s what binds us all together. Every single country in the world has that text as the basis for the translation.” Therefore, every country will be using a new translation.

The process of translation has been long and difficult and included the participation of a number of people, something Father Turner feels is important for those in the U.S. church to know. Living in a democracy, he says, “I think there’s some natural resistance when something comes to us from the top down.”

If priests can peacefully introduce the new texts to their congregations, it can have great benefits. The new edition of the Roman Missal also has special items that Catholics can look forward to. For instance, one reason the new missal was needed was that Pope John Paul II canonized a great number of saints. The new missal will include texts to celebrate these saints.

“These prayers will have to work on us in our psyche and our prayer life for a number of years before we capture the whole meaning,” says Msgr. Sherman. “I think we’re also going to be on the verge of everyone in the church being able to appreciate these prayers in a way that we never did in the past.”

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