

Mass changes have liturgists scurrying to craft new music

Josef Kuhn Religion News Service | Nov. 17, 2011



Singers from parishes in the Archdiocese of Louisville, Ky., perform July 18. (CNS photo/Marnie McAllister, The Record)

For the average American Catholic in the pews, the upcoming changes to the text of the Mass might mean little more than memorizing a few new prayer responses.

But when the revised translation of the Mass sweeps into churches across America on the first Sunday of Advent (Nov. 27), it will bring with it a slew of new missals and hymnals -- and perhaps a whole new (or old) style of worship.

For the last 40 years, there has been some leeway for "mild paraphrasing of texts" when singing parts of the Mass, said Monsignor Richard Hilgartner, who heads the committee of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops that is responsible for approving all liturgical books, including hymnals and missals.

But, said Hilgartner, the instructions with the new Roman Missal "are much more clear that musical settings are only approved when they follow the text strictly."

The new English translation of the Mass, meant to reflect the original Latin text more closely, is the product of eight years of work by an international commission of bishops. The final text was released this summer, and churches across the U.S. must begin using it on Nov. 27.

The textual changes do not affect hymns or other stand-alone songs that can be inserted in the order of the Mass, but they do affect the prayers that are sung or recited at every Mass, called "ordinaries."

That means composers have had to write completely new musical settings or adapt old ones for the ordinaries. According to Hilgartner, the musical options are as diverse as before, ranging from chant to contemporary styles.

But Jeffrey Tucker, managing editor of the journal *Sacred Music*, thinks the renewed emphasis on fidelity to the original Latin may bring about a shift toward more traditional musical forms.

"It's going to become more and more obvious over time that the missal is calling for a dramatic change in our music, too," Tucker said.

Whereas the old text contained a lot of short sentences and simple action verbs, the new translation employs more complex theological language and is less rhythmic.

"That creates a different ethos about the liturgy in general, a different kind of cultural environment, that over time is going to lend itself far more to solemn, chanted musical structures than pop," Tucker said. "To cram it into a pop-like mode is really to do violence to the text."

Timothy O'Malley, director of the Notre Dame Center for Liturgy, doesn't go quite so far. "Contemporary music will remain within the church," he said. "I think that it will simply be supplemented, improved, perhaps even inspired, by some of these styles of chant."

Nevertheless, O'Malley said, "This is kind of the first time that English chant has really taken off within the English-speaking world as a whole, but also American Catholicism."

For instance, all Catholic hymnals are now required to include official English-language chant settings of the Mass that were created along with the new missal.

O'Malley said chant is becoming increasingly popular with his students at the University of Notre Dame, and he knows of some churches that already are using the new missal's official chants.

Tucker sees a similar renewed interest in Catholic liturgical music -- especially in traditional forms like chant -- among young composers.

"We're seeing really great musicians ... who are striving to work very hard to produce music very fast for the Roman rite, because they've been inspired by the prospect of change in this new missal," Tucker said.

One of those musicians is Kathy Pluth, a hymn writer from Alexandria, Va., who is working on translating old Latin hymns into English and setting the traditional chanted prayers of the Mass to easily learned hymn tunes.

"The trends in the new hymnals are to be more responsive to the liturgy itself," Pluth said.

But Tucker said the demand among churches for more traditional music has not yet caught up to the number of composers eager to supply it.

Despite all the new musical offerings, most parishes seem to prefer sticking with revised versions of familiar favorites. The best-selling musical setting for the Mass in the English-speaking world remains Marty Haugen's 25-year-old "Mass of Creation," which was recently revised for the new translation.

Dianne Falvo, music minister at St. Winifred Church in Pittsburgh, decided to use a "retrofit" version of a Mass setting her parishioners were already familiar with, "A Community Mass" by Richard Proulx.

Falvo said she wanted something "comfortable and less disturbing, because change is not always received well."

Whether Catholic churches in the U.S. will witness a resurgence of chant or traditional Latin hymns remains unclear -- things are still in flux a half century after the Second Vatican Council ushered in the last set of sweeping changes.

"We're still, after the council, trying to discover what music is going to be like in the liturgy," O'Malley said.

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