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New Jersey parishioners take new missal in stride

Denise Simeone | Nov. 28, 2011 NCR Today

"Good morning. Hmm, I'm not sure I'm allowed to say this with the new Roman Missal. I feel edgy, like I've never done this before and it's my first Mass," quipped the priest, who had certainly celebrated at least his silver jubilee, at the beginning greeting of liturgy using the new Roman Missal in a New Jersey suburb in the Diocese of Camden. "I think I already made one mistake, but that's OK, we'll get through this together."

Prior to Mass, the music director had gone over a few responses, though it was obvious the community had been preparing along the way. With humor and encouragement, he said several times: "The Lord be with you," attempting to reprogram the previously normal response into "And with your spirit."

With grace and good humor, community members laughed and practiced. During the liturgy it was apparent longtime practices are hard to break, yet the community created powerful liturgy evidenced in its gestures, prayers, proclamations and music.

"Wait a minute," the presider interrupted the beginning chords of the closing hymn to acknowledge that in his anxiety he forgot the announcements. By an all-too-human response, he admitted to his congregation, "You're learning something about me today, I don't like change." Laughing along with him, heads all around him nodded in agreement.

Watching the interchange between the parish community, pastor and staff, I was struck by the ease with which they encouraged, prepared, laughed and prayed. Thinking about my childhood experience when the church last made a transition needing prayer cards, I never could have imagined those formal, proper and even stiff masses becoming what I saw today -- the life-giving liturgy of a human faith community. In the grand scheme of things, this challenge seems like a minor part of parish work to create and sustain disciples of Jesus Christ. New prayers and responses certainly won't change that labor or spirit.

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