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New missal inspires cacophony at University of Maryland church

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NCR Today

All the chairs at Mass this Sunday at the University of Maryland's Catholic Center had the pamphlets with the new translation of the missal, published by Liturgical Training Publications. Before the service began, people thumbed through the leaflets, reading the parts of the Mass.

Is this a good thing? After all, sometimes when something becomes rote, it loses its sense of participation. On the other hand, I called to mind a conversation with a young Greek Orthodox girl. She was asked when she first took communion and she replied, "I have always had communion." That, too, spoke of a sense of participation.

The chapel only had about a third of its normal contingent because of the Thanksgiving holiday, and there was no choir. The priest began by asking if everyone had their "cheat sheets" and said he had started the Mass a little late so that everyone would have time to read through the pamphlet. Then he began, "In the name of the Father ..."

When he got to the first "The Lord be with you," the response was a cacophony. Despite the mention of the new words, and despite the omnipresent pamphlets, old habits die hard, and half the room responded, "And also with you" while the other half said, "And with your spirit." The priest skipped the Confiteor and we proceeded to the Liturgy of the Word.

At sermon time, the priest said, "I feel like we are all on eggshells. But, we're going to get used to it. It will all be fine. But I want to focus on something else now."

He went on to preach about the consumerism of the holiday, about the need to prepare for Jesus' second

coming, about how we need to prepare for death, about how in his childhood he had wanted all these different toys, and about a hundred other things, but nary a word of catechesis about the new translation of the missal. During the Mass, a couple of times, he seemed to get lost in the sacramentary, turning the pages back, then forward, looking for the words. The longer prayers, such as the Creed, went better than some of the shorter ones, but everyone was reading from the pamphlets and, perhaps, not really praying the words so much as reciting them.

After Mass, I asked the priest how he thought it had gone.

"It's going to take some getting used to," he said. "I know some priests have been practicing with the new words, but I haven't really had time to practice."

I spoke with some of the congregants as they left. One young woman from Portugal said, "I'm not so good in English, so it's hard for me."

Another young woman acknowledged she needed to get used to the new words, but that "everyone is open and willing to try."

One young man had, in the course of the few steps from the interior door to the chapel, down the hall, to the door leading outside, re-inserted his iPod's earphones. He took them out long enough to tell me, when asked, "It went okay." The earphones went back in and he scrambled back to his dorm.

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Three older congregants seemed alternately bewildered but engaged with the new texts.

"I'm struggling," one woman said. "I blurted out the old words a couple of times." She said the pamphlets were helpful.

Her husband confessed he had not really looked at the material the church had distributed in the weeks leading up to the changes, but a friend said she had read it all and even gone online to learn about the translation. Nonetheless, she also admitted to using some of the old words during the Mass.

Me? It is always difficult for me to get into a campus liturgy. It is way, way too low church for my liturgical sensibilities. Next week, I am going back to my usual Sunday haunt -- the 10 a.m. Latin Mass (novus ordo) at St. Matthew's Cathedral. There, next week's words will be like last week's, and we will also pray them in unison, some more than others needing the Latin guidebooks. I think that Latin may be God's vernacular: Always new but always the same.

He noted that he had grown up with the old translation but seemed undaunted by the new one. "It's an incredible opportunity."

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