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Maryland priest tells parish new missal is 'only words'

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NCR Today

The early evening sky was streaked with pink clouds as I hustled in to attend the vigil Mass at the Church of Our Lady of Sorrows in Takoma Park, Md. The church sits tucked between a bewildering array of shopping plazas, gas stations and auto repair stores that line New Hampshire Ave.

It was clearly an immigrant crowd, who had gathered in the brightly lit sanctuary to mark the start of the Church's new year. Aside from the pastor Fr. Raymond Wadas and my family, the 50 or so people attending were various shades of brown. The dress and demeanor of some suggested they had come from distant lands where English, let alone Latin, was not the mother tongue. There were tired-looking Latino men sitting alone in their pews, small clusters of Africans, and sweet-faced, elderly African-American women.

At the front of the church were laminated cards with the newly scripted prayers. The wording of the Mass had changed, the lector said, and he reminded us to use the guide. Even with this cue, some of us occasionally lapsed into the old utterances.

Fr. Wadas' homily was succinct and to the point: Last week, he watched Diane Sawyer interview Gabby Giffords, the Arizona Congresswoman whose recovery from gunshot wounds has fascinated and inspired the country. Giffords had to learn to speak all over again, to connect words with objects around her, Fr. Wadas said. And it was very, very hard. So it might be for us in learning the new wording of the Mass for we are creatures of habit. But in the learning, we are forced to think about what we are saying and that is good. These are, after all, only words. What is most important is how we live and he advised that this Advent, we clear our lives of "all clutter" so we can "run open-handed to welcome Christ."

The tweaking of the liturgy did not seem to be a matter of great significance for these parishioners. Most filed out of Mass quickly and quietly. Those who stopped to talk to Fr. Wadas asked for his assistance or

discussed the Thanksgiving dinner in which 1,500 people from the neighborhood had been fed.

The sweet-faced, elderly African-American woman I interviewed seemed unfazed by the new language. She had lived through the transition from Latin to English. These adjustments were minor in comparison.

Juliette Rosales, who hails from Jamaica, told me she was glad to see the laminated cards in the pews. She had been away from the Mass for quite some time to attend to her ailing 92-year-old mother and so welcomed having this guide to the prayers. "It was strange to make the changes," she said, but she thinks they are "wonderful."

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