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Is the new missal good prayer?

Tom Gallagher | Dec. 1, 2011 NCR Today

The anecdotal reactions to the new English-language prayers officially implemented Sunday break down into predictable categories. Those who dislike the changes describe them as simply bad and unreadable English, inhibitors to authentic prayer. Those in favor of the changes commonly use the term "poetic" in praising the new prayers. The quiet middle seems philosophical about accepting the new missal. Most appreciated the efforts by local parishes to prepare the congregations for the change-over.

Here are some reactions I collected Sunday.

At the Mass I attended, one octogenarian woman kept leaning over to the 40-something woman next to her and saying, "This is stupid. This is stupid. I'm never going to learn these changes," she said. After Mass, the older woman kept bemoaning the changes as she left the building.

One gentleman in his mid-60s and not well disposed to the changes summed it up this way: "We have ordained senior men making changes to align the English language that many don't speak well nor deeply understand, with their personal predispositions. It is not only sad! It is outrageous! Attention that one directs to the changes impedes his or her attentiveness both to personal and communal prayer."

A married mother of five children was philosophical about the changes and said, "Change is change, never easy, but we have been preparing for these changes for quite some time now and week one went well!"

A married mother of eight grown children and in her late 70s said, "I like the translations but would like more time to understand them and because of the simplistic nature of the changes they should not have a major impact on the responder."

A friend in his late 40s said to me that given the preparation in advance of implementation of the changes, all went well. He pointed out that the celebrant used Preface I of Advent and Eucharistic Prayer I (Roman Canon). My friend said that he "paused to reflect and ponder God's 'serene and kindly countenance' as He looked upon our offerings after the Mystery of Faith. It's a beautiful idea, really, to imagine God's countenance. Leaving aside the question whether people know what a 'countenance' is, I guess."

A 70-something woman said to me that she likes the changes and said that she recalls some prayers from before Vatican II.

Another friend appreciates the changes because the process of change makes us re-think the prayers of the Mass.

"My first thoughts are favorable insofar as we are forced to rethink what we say and why we say it," said an active Catholic professional in his mid-50s. "Instead of 'going through the motions,' we need to re-address 'language' and that should make us think about what we are saying. Change is always tough and no one wants re-learn the Mass, yet the changes are somewhat small and manageable, nothing earth-shattering. On the whole, I

would say, "It's fine".

A well-educated priest friend of mine is quite pleased with the changes and told me: "I find the new texts much more prayerful and poetic, leading me to a deeper reflection on the words. Hopefully, the seemingly endless debate around the new translation will not cause a loss of the season of Advent."

In Sunday's *New York Times*, Reverend Daniel Merz, associate director of the Secretariat of Divine Worship of United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, said the new translation had been widely discussed.

"I don't think there's ever been a document that's been so consulted in the history of the world," he said. He called the new text more poetic than the simple language used for the last 40 years.

"Over time, we have realized that there is a better way to pray," he said. "Not that the old way was bad, but we hope and believe that this new way is better."

Notwithstanding the questionable logic of the view that there is a "better way to pray," the words of the poet and critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge are worth remembering. According Coleridge, prose is "words in their best order," while poetry is "the best words in their best order."

One thing is for certain. There is no unanimity as to whether the new prayers have achieved good prose or good poetry, let alone good prayer.

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