NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

With some giggles and retakes, missal debuts

Tom Roberts NCR Staff | Dec. 6, 2011

Alyssa Brooks smiles as the congregation recites a newly worded response at the beginning of Mass at St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Alexandria, Va., Nov. 27. (CNS/Nancy Phelan Weichec)

The jarring term ?liturgy wars? once characterized the theological and linguistic struggles that produced the new language that landed, in the form of laminated cards, on most Catholic church pews in the United States on the first Sunday of Advent.

But the harshest realities of that long struggle remained largely hidden from view, scrubbed for public viewing like an evening news report, as congregations made their ways through the new responses, pronouncing ?And with your spirit,? in place of the previous, ?And also with you,? and ?I am not worthy that you enter under my roof? in place of the simpler, ?I am not worthy to receive you.?

NCR correspondents and staff reporting from a variety of spots across the country recounted a consistently similar story: Most people noticed little change, making do with the new lines they?d been given, and concluding that the new forms of prayer did little to alter their worship experience. There were smiles and giggles in those widespread cases where old habits lingered and caused mixed responses. In most instances, congregations just moved on to the next prayer; in some, the celebrant asked for a quick retake with the correct words.

At the Church of Our Lady of Sorrows in Takoma Park, Md., the largely immigrant crowd, including many for whom English is a second language, seemed unfazed by the new words. The pastor, Fr. Raymond Wadas, used an example from recent news to ease the transition. Last week, he said, he watched Diane Sawyer interview Gabrielle 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, 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 openhanded to welcome Christ.?

In a Connecticut parish, a 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.? In the same parish, a married mother of five took a more pragmatic view: ?Change is change, never easy,? she said, ?but we have been preparing for these changes for quite some time now and week one went well.?

At a parish in suburban Denver, there were few glitches, and in the after-Mass conversation parishioners in different ways said the things that really matter in shaping the quality of their liturgical experience boil down to three points: how good the preaching is, how good the music is, and how welcoming the community seems. If those elements are present, they agreed, a defective translation won?t keep them from returning.

If the majority of Catholics made it through the first live use of the new language relatively unaffected by the changes, some were unwilling to concede the issue quietly. While things went off smoothly in that suburban Denver parish, a small group, including members of the Sisters of Loretto, was holding a Sunday prayer vigil outside the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in Denver to protest the changes. Loretto Sr. Mary Ann Cunningham, a vigil organizer, called the new translation ?clumsy and very stilted.? As a former Latin teacher, she noted that a word-for-word literal translation of the Latin doesn?t necessarily lead to greater fidelity to the overarching meaning of a text.

?Jesus didn?t speak Latin,? she noted.

Kathy Faulkner, a laywoman who spent 38 years as a music director in her parish, complained that the changes are forcing alterations in the music that are less aesthetically pleasing. Faulkner said the new translation strikes her as awkward and convoluted.

And, she observed, ?there is not one female pronoun in the whole Mass now.?

Fr. Charles Morris, a priest in a small parish in Detroit, offered that he finds the new translation ?wordier and more abstract? than the previous. ?There is a conflation between obfuscation and mystery. The transliteration is stilted and abstracted. If the translators really wanted to enhance the sense of the sacred in the liturgy, why did they strip English of its power?? He compared the new translation?s attempt at a word-for-word exchange from the Latin to electronic translating programs ?in which reliance on word-for-word translation often results in stilted gobbledygook.?

Morris represents that small portion of the Catholic population that dares to venture deep into the weeds of the controversy. Most of the protest has to do with two items: the procedure used to change the translation and the approach to translating the Latin text that is the basis for the prayers of the Mass. Part of the debate also has to do with a discernible change in emphasis, which critics see as a rollback of reforms that grew out of the Second Vatican Council in the mid-1960s. In the revised texts there is a noticeably new emphasis on the believer?s unworthiness, most immediately seen in the reprise of the pre-Vatican II form of the Confiteor and its repeated phrases, ?Through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault.?

One of the most authoritative critiques recently rendered was by Benedictine Fr. Anthony Ruff. On resigning

from the chairmanship of the music committee of the International Commission on English in the Liturgy in February, he wrote: ?The forthcoming missal is but a part of a larger pattern of top-down impositions by a central authority that does not consider itself accountable to the larger church. When I think of how secretive the translation process was, how little consultation was done with priests or laity, how the Holy See allowed a small group to hijack the translation at the final stage, how unsatisfactory the final text is, how this text was imposed on national conferences of bishops in violation of their legitimate episcopal authority, how much deception and mischief have marked this process -- and then when I think of Our Lord?s teachings on service and love and unity ... I weep.?

Ruff was referring to the action by a small group that transformed what had been a broadly consultative process across the English-speaking world, an activity of a wide range of liturgical, biblical and linguistic experts whose work was openly reviewed by conferences of bishops, to a task undertaken secretly by a small group under control of the Vatican.

The debate over language, theology and tactics will probably endure at a level removed from the experience of most Catholics. More to the point for the average pew-sitter was the scene at a historic church in Northern California, where the youthful-looking pastor opened the service with a reminder about the new translation, saying, ?We can do this. These changes will help us to appreciate the beautiful theology that goes with our prayers.? In a confident, upbeat tone, accompanied by a slightly nervous chuckle, he repeated: ?We can get through this!?

In the vestibule after Communion, one of the Knights of Columbus selling Christmas cards was asked if the parish had prepared for the new translation of the Roman Missal. ?Yes!? he said. ?For four weeks, after every Mass, they showed a 20-minute video and explained the changes; there were booklets to take home, too.?

Are you pleased with the new translation?

?Absolutely!?

Why do you like it?

?Because it goes back to the authentic words of Jesus and translates the Mass correctly.?

You mean it translates the current Latin text, right?

?Well, yes, that?s what I mean. Like the Spanish translation has always been accurate, now the English is.?

Can you give me an example of what part of the new translation you are especially pleased with?

Blank stare.

In terms of what a certain word or phrase means?

He looked at the interviewer, turned his head, shrugged his shoulders slightly, and said, ?Well, the whole thing.?

And then he proceeded to sell the questioner a box of Christmas cards.

?We?re going to get something out of you today,? he said.

[*NCR* editor at large Tom Roberts complied this report drawing on 21 submissions from *NCR* contributors in all parts of the United States. Read all the individual contributions on the *NCR* website at NCRonline.org/node/27864 [1].]

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