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

Dealing with the new translation of the Mass

Richard McBrien | Dec. 26, 2011 Essays in Theology

There used to be an anti-liturgical joke circulating that said that the only difference between a terrorist and a liturgist is that you can negotiate with a terrorist.

By the same token, there is a seriously mistaken impression abroad that the new translation of the missal was inspired and promoted by liturgists. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The great majority of liturgical scholars were opposed to the new, literal translations. Those who favored the changes were adherents of the so-called "reform of the reform."

In other words, the changes were inspired and promoted, not by liturgists, but by traditionalists in the hierarchy and a minority of ultra-conservatives within the Catholic church generally.

Such Catholics were never supportive of the liturgical reforms initiated by the Second Vatican Council: turning the altar around so that the priest would face the congregation during Mass, receiving Holy Communion in the hand, celebrating the Mass in the vernacular, having altar girls as well as altar boys, and so forth.

In the extreme, they attended Latin Masses wherever they were available. Their celebrants continued to wear the so-called fiddle-back chasubles and birettas. A Catholic Rip Van Winkle awakening from a long sleep beginning sometime in the 1950s would assume that nothing had changed in the meantime.

To be sure, the advocates of the "reform of the reform" have won only a partial victory with this new translation (for example, "I believe ..." rather than the more communal "We believe ..." in the *Credo*). But the Mass is still in the vernacular; the altar is still turned around; the great majority of people receive Communion in the hand; and there are more likely to be altar girls in the sanctuary than boys.

Such changes as these are anathema to traditionalist Catholics, who continue to receive Com-munion on the tongue (as is their right), grit their teeth when they see girls serving Mass and attend a Latin Mass from time to time.

But they are happy nonetheless to see so many of their fellow Catholics out of sorts because of the new translation of the Mass. They know that it galls Catholics for whom Pope John XXIII is a hero and Vatican II was a great event.

I've heard Catholics say that their pastors, though not conservative, have praised the new translations. Either their pastors are not being honest because they don't want to be reported to their bishop or they are deep-down right-wing in their thinking.

A retired pastor I heard prepare his congregation the week before the changes were to go into effect had the congregation practice giving the simple response, "And with your spirit." But he said by way of introduction that the "what" of the changes he and they could handle; the "why" he would leave to the Holy Spirit.

I suspect many older priests had the same reaction. Only some of the younger (or not-so-young), conservative priests, ordained during the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, would more likely be in favor of the changes than opposed to them.

But what good would come of outright opposition? A well-respected priest in Seattle led a movement recently to have the U.S. bishops slow down the process until all the kinks could be worked out, but that movement, though it gained thousands of supporters, fizzled and died in the end.

The Vatican had already made up its mind, and the largely conservative U.S. hierarchy would not buck the Vatican, even if it were disposed to do so.

Some Catholics may continue to say "And also with you" rather than "And with your spirit," or "We believe ..." instead of "I believe ..." in the Creed, or "one in being with the Father" instead of the highly technical and indecipherable "consubstantial," also in the Creed.

Presiders at Mass will have the most difficult time because there have been many tongue-twisting changes in the texts of the Eucharistic prayers.

Those priests who have been reciting these prayers for many years will inevitably stumble over the new wording, and those priests whose eyesight has failed them and who have memorized unchangeable parts of the Mass will continue to recite the words with which they have been long familiar. At least, that is what I would advise them if they were silly enough to ask.

This column will return to this subject a number of times in the future because it affects us all. In the meantime, I wanted to dispel a few of the most common misunderstandings about the new translations and their origin.

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Source URL (retrieved on *12/09/2013 - 06:04*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/essays-theology/dealing-new-translation-mass

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