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California parish prepares for new missal with weeks of explanation

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NCR Today

On Sunday, I went to my sister's parish, a historic church in northern California that dates back 100 years and serves about 7,500 rural families. According to the parish website, 95 percent of the parish is white, 61 percent consists of married couples and 13 percent of the parish is 65 years old or older. The parish also shares a school with a neighboring parish five miles away.

I only attend Mass at this church when I visit once a year at Thanksgiving, so I don't know anyone personally except my sister who attends Mass at various churches -- when she goes.

The ushers greeting people at the doors of the church were warm and welcoming.

Before the 10 a.m. Mass began, we practiced singing one of the revised memorial acclamations: "We proclaim your Death, O Lord, and profess your Resurrection until you come again." The service music throughout the Mass seemed to be drawn from various "Masses" that I am familiar with, but the new melody for the first line of the acclamation sounded like a dirge, and the next line only barely opened up to hint at the glory of the Resurrection. Perhaps some of the music has not yet caught up to the new translation. I couldn't find the melody in the missalette.

After the entrance, the celebrant approached the lectern, reminded us that we are beginning Advent and the use of the Revised Roman Missal: "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, the youthful-looking pastor repeated: "We can get through this!"

Father instructed us to use the pew cards or the missalette and began, "The Lord be with you."

The response was, of course, a mix of responses old and new.

He said, "Let's try this again. The response is: 'And with your spirit.'" People laughed softly and good-naturedly.

"The Lord be with you!"

Again, there were some distracted souls.

"Let's do it again: The Lord be with you!"

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This time everyone responded, "And with your spirit!"

Father began his homily about beginning the new spiritual liturgical year, Year 2, Cycle B readings from the Gospel of Mark, discussing Advent as a time of waiting.

Then: "It is an exciting time for Catholics in the United States as we begin using the new revised translation, and yes, I dare to say: changed! We've changed some of the words, but not necessarily changing what it means. It's an opportunity to deepen our understanding of what we celebrate and what we pray in order for us to make sure that our actions are consistent with what we believe."

Six minutes later into a lively 10-minute homily about Advent that he read mostly from a prepared text to which he added his own remarks, the celebrant said, "So what do we do this Advent season? It is perhaps an opportunity to appreciate the revised translation and the teachings of the faith in our prayer."

Because Father did not elaborate on the theme he repeated three times, that the new translation of the Roman Missal will help us understand and live our faith better, after Communion I slipped out to the vestibule to chat with one of the Knights of Columbus selling Christmas cards and the ladies selling tickets to the annual school fundraiser.

I asked the gentleman, who looked about 65, if the parish has prepared everyone 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."

"Did most people stay after Mass for the instruction?"

He looked to the two ladies, who agreed that most, though not all, did stay.

I asked him, "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 me, turned his head, shrugged his shoulders slightly, and said, "Well, the whole thing."

And then he proceeded to sell me a box of Christmas cards. "We're going to get something out of you today!"

I asked one of the ladies, who looked about 40, what she thought of the new translation.

"Well, translations are tricky things. I guess now the translation is more literal."

"But you like it?"

"Yes, sure."

"Anything in particular?"

A little shrug, "No, I like it all."

My impression from this one Mass at this parish is that people are pretty much on board with the changes, and Father is convinced that the new translations will lead to a deeper theological understanding of the faith. The parish invested considerable time and resources to prepare people, but it's hard to conclude from attending only this liturgy and talking to only two people, who were very nicely dressed and seemed well educated, how much more deeply they understand their faith at this point based on the new translation.

I think the parish deserves kudos for offering a four-Sunday program to prepare people for the changes of the revised Mass texts. Perhaps the next step is to assist parishioners to deepen their learning so as to better articulate the meaning of the faith based on the new translation. However, there was no information in the bulletin about ongoing instruction, nor, as I mentioned, did the celebrant offer an example of what he meant in his homily. I am thinking that church leaders might be depending on the osmosis method for understanding, and if so, will this be good enough?

In addition to a small stack of pew cards on the literature table in the vestibule, there was a pile of "Understanding the Revised Mass Texts" (Paul Turner; LTP) booklets. I took one each for my sister. Sometimes she comes with me to Mass, most often not. Although she is well educated and can argue tenets of the faith well enough, I am not sure she will notice the differences, and if she does, what the revisions or nuances mean. She has to care first, and understanding the Mass is not at the top of her priority list -- for now.

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