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New Mass rites greeted with disappointment, shrugs in Virginia

by Jerry Filteau

NCR Today

"Why is this important?" asked Robert, a seminarian in the 1960s and a longtime parish music minister, when he was asked for his reaction to the changes in the liturgy introduced Nov. 25-26 in parishes across the United States.

"We'll get used to it," he added, although he found some of the language changes in the Mass prayers -- such as the creedal change from "one in being with the Father" to "consubstantial with the Father" -- "awkward."

Kathleen, a member of St. Thomas à Becket Parish in Reston, Va., objected strongly to the new formula at the end of the consecration of the wine, which has Christ saying the cup of wine is his blood given up "for you and for many" instead of "for you and for all."

In his homily on the changes, she said, the current parish administrator tried to explain that change as a reflection that all are called to salvation but not all respond to the call -- but in a way that suggested to her that it meant "many are called but few are chosen."

That, she said, seemed to her to "initiate a fear tactic [about who can be saved]. ? I found that disconcerting."

"The whole tone of everything [in the new translation of the Mass] is very arrogant," she said.

The new parish administrator also "said a lot of people are not going to like this and are going to leave the church because of it," she said.

She said she was among those who found themselves, after years of regular Mass attendance and involvement as a volunteer catechist, ready to leave active participation in the church.

"One of my colleagues (on a parish committee) said this is like we're going back to pre-Vatican II," she said, adding that the colleague she referred to is in her 80s.

In Anthem, Ariz., a Catholic couple from St. Rose Philippine Duchesne Parish wondered whether the changes were worth what was spent to develop and introduce them.

"To me, they're two different ways to say the same thing," said Sarah -- who asked that her real name not be used -- regarding the changes in the main parts of the Mass.

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She said the new translations are "not as easy to understand" as the old ones -- an issue she thought particularly troubling when it comes to weddings, funerals or other Catholic liturgies often attended by non-Catholic Christians. The arcane terminology of "was incarnate" and "consubstantial" in the new version of the creed will not resonate for them, she said.

"I don't understand why it has to be a very literal translation" from the Latin, her husband commented. A "more idiomatic" English translation might be more meaningful to those participating in worship, he suggested.

"I don't immediately feel that they improved any part of the liturgy, nor were they indicative of moving toward more natural English usage," said Robert, a member of St. Bede Parish in Williamsburg, Va.

He added, "References in the Profession of Faith to 'consubstantial with the Father' -- let's hear it for Aristotle and Aquinas! -- and 'was incarnate of the Virgin Mary' don't at first glance appear to be aimed at any particular rampant heresy, but I'm sure recitation will cause them to become familiar over time."

"Given the build-up over the months of the changes to come, they appeared to be underwhelming to this humble parishioner," he said in an e-mail.

In a follow-up phone conversation Robert recalled that in the late 1960s one of his teachers, Msgr. John K. Ryan, then dean of the School of Philosophy of The Catholic University of America and a notably conservative churchman, had praised the "beautiful poetry and reverence" of the first official English version of the Mass.

He said he hoped the latest translation would be seen as an improvement in the long run, although he had reservations about it.

Those interviewed, selected in part because they all have strong Catholic backgrounds but rather different political and ecclesiastical perspectives, asked not to be identified by last name in order to avoid problems in their local parish relations.

They range in age from the late 50s to early 70s -- the generation known in church research circles as Vatican II Catholics because they experienced the preconciliar church as children but experienced the council and the changes it brought as they were coming of age.

[Jerry Filteau is *NCR* Washington Correspondent.]

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