

Revision of the Text of the Mass (1)

I wonder how old you were when the current English text of the Mass was introduced in the early 1970s? If you were too young to remember, or weren't even born at the time, then the text of the Mass that you have grown up with will be the "norm" for you. Those of us "of a certain age" who grew up with the Latin Mass, will – if we can still remember – have experienced quite a radical change when the English text was introduced. I think the process began in about 1970 and was completed in about 1973 – coinciding, if memory serves, with altars being turned around so Mass began to be celebrated with the priest facing the people.

How well, or otherwise, those changes were received at the time probably depended on how well, or otherwise, they were explained to us. My memory of that process is somewhat misty I have to admit, but I don't recollect any great effort at catechesis - the changes just seemed to be introduced and the whys and the wherefores weren't really explained. In many respects it was perhaps the novelty value alone that compensated for any difficulties we experienced in adjusting from the old ways to the new.

Sadly some within the Church have still not accepted the changes that took place and demands for the return of the how the Mass was celebrated pre-Vatican II continue to be heard. Even those who did accept them may feel that, after forty years, introducing yet more changes will simply be picking over a wound which, in that respect, has yet to fully heal. More basically still, many may wonder why these changes after all this time? To be honest that was also my thought and it's not as if I hadn't already had to come to terms with change and adaptation over the years...

At the time that the Mass began to be celebrated facing the people and that English was increasingly being introduced, I (aged about twenty at the time) was actively involved in supporting the newly created parish of St Alban in Redcar (formed from its mother parish, Sacred Heart, which had been my parish since I was born). Setting up for, and attending Mass, in a social club in the morning and a school hall in the evening, already required considerable adaptation and flexibility compared to the "normality" of Mass in church. Two years later I was working as a lay-missionary in Africa, attending Masses in two different vernacular languages and experiencing all sorts of other cultural adaptations within the Mass.

In addition to those four years spent with American Jesuits from the fairly progressive west coast Oregon Province, I became a novice with them for two years. During that time all kinds of things were tried out in the Mass (like using regular bread instead of hosts and experimenting with "liturgical dance" - not

something I ever experienced or felt was appropriate I have to say) until Rome declared those years of experimentation closed and authorised only those practices in the celebration of Mass that had stood the test of time. Why then these new changes after so many years?

It should first, perhaps, be said that they are not quite as new as they may appear - they have been under discussion and consideration for quite some time. When I was in the seminary (1988-93), we were aware that a new translation of the text of the Mass was being considered by Rome and, while it was subsequently approved and introduced by some language groups around the world, ICEL (the International Commission on English in the Liturgy) was not moving quite so quickly with the English text.

Part of the problem no doubt had to do with the size of the English-speaking Church and the varied use and understanding of the English language in as many countries and cultures as that included. But at the same time, as we'll see in a moment, Rome was not entirely happy with the English texts prepared by ICEL members and there have been several attempts to produce a text acceptable to all. In the meantime the years passed as that complex process continued. It sometimes felt as though it might never be concluded, and no doubt some hoped that it wouldn't(!), but finally we now have an agreed English text for the Mass which has been officially approved for use from the start of Advent this year.

My initial reaction on reading the text was that it hardly seemed worth all the hassle. The changes seemed so minor that, in a sense, they would be more of an inconvenience than anything else. By that I mean that, over the years, we have memorised the text of the Mass and the responses. The changes that have now been made – particularly to the people's prayers – are just enough that we will no longer be able to function at Mass on "auto-pilot", we will need to pay attention and, for a while certainly, we will need the new text in front of us.

And so my next reaction was that the only people who stand to profit from the changes are the companies that publish missals and missalettes. In every parish where I have been I have never had missalettes, feeling that there was really no need for them. We know the prayers of the Mass by heart and we have commissioned ministers of the word who are trained to proclaim the word of God clearly enough that people shouldn't need the text of the readings in front of them. Also people should be encouraged to exercise their senses, watching and listening and actively participating in the celebration of Mass rather than following a printed text. After all if there was, for example, a Charles Dickens serial on television, we would watch the drama on the screen, not read along from the book. It now seems, however, that we are going to need some sort of text in front of us until we get used to the changes that have been made but, as

far as possible, I hope we can do it by patronising the publishers of missalettes as little as possible – perhaps by producing something in-house.

The biggest changes that have been made are to the priest's text - particularly the Eucharistic Prayers - and so, apart from having to purchase new altar missals, we priests are going to have to do quite a bit of homework in familiarising ourselves with the new wording. Having said that, I have always avoided trying to learn even the current texts of the Mass by heart because there is too much of a risk of being distracted by something happening in church and then losing your place through not knowing where exactly you were on the page. I have also always tried to use a variety of Eucharistic Prayers, including the newer ones that have been introduced over the years, and so I hope that adapting to the changes that have been made to those prayers will prove to be relatively easy.

When the priests of the diocese had our initial meetings in connection with the revisions being made, to be honest I had a very negative attitude to the whole thing. The changes certainly weren't as radical as those made in the 1970s and so, as superficial as they seemed to be, what was the point? Well, I finally got the opportunity to ask precisely that question of the priest who was giving the presentations: If the current text has been OK for the last forty years, what is the point of changing it now? If it ain't broke, why fix it? I have to say that his answer was quite a surprise not only for its honesty, but also because it would appear from what he said that the text we are currently using is in fact "broke" and needs fixing – but we didn't know.

It would seem that when Rome authorised Masses in the vernacular, those whose task it was to produce the necessary English text basically fell over themselves to get the job done as quickly as possible and apparently they made a bit of a mess of it. Only those who knew Latin would have been able to judge how loosely, in many cases, the Latin had been translated in an attempt to produce a text in everyday English. What he said was:

ICEL's Missal appeared in 1973 and we started using it the following year. This was the "Book" everyone had been awaiting impatiently for five years or more. It was welcomed without further thought. After years of binders, sheets, etc on the altar, and a provisional Missal, now we had **the** Missal. People forgot that ICEL wanted to have a second go with greater thought than this one had had. No further editions were envisaged by most Catholics. It took time for the weaknesses of the Missal to get noticed and further time for this unease to reach the bishops. By the early 80s, ICEL was actively pursuing a second edition – and a much more satisfactory translation – as indeed it turned out to be when the "Sacramentary" was presented to the bishops in the late 1990s, but it was rejected by the Vatican which ordered a new version to be prepared. ICEL realised that its 1973 style was over simplified and had lost much of the Latin meaning. The process of preparing the new translation of the Missal

began in 2000 and has continued since. Most people were never aware that all of this was happening.

Most people in the benches on Sundays had no reason to question the text that was produced in the 1970s; the only objections came from those who had never wanted to leave the Latin Mass behind in the first place. Any who are still with us should find some consolation in the fact that the new text is a more faithful translation of the Latin and an effort to recapture the theological richness of the language of the Mass (as explained in more detail in the booklet you were given - *Understanding the Revised Mass Texts*).

I have to say that, as a result of that admission, I now have a much more positive attitude about what is going to be happening. In one respect it might seem like change for change's sake (which rarely goes down well with people) but, while the changes may appear somewhat cosmetic, hopefully the reasons for the Church's purpose in introducing them will become clearer - firstly the more they are experienced and, secondly, if it is accompanied by an adequate process of explanation (which, here in our diocese, will be happening in stages between now and the introduction of the changes from September¹). Although it will mean having to follow a text for a while, we will, of course, eventually get used to the changes just as we did back in the 1970s – except that the adjustment should be much easier because these changes are not nearly as extensive.

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¹ The introduction of the revised English text in all ICEL regions of the world is officially scheduled for the beginning of Advent.