

The New York Times  
November 27, 2011

## **New Translation of Catholic Mass Makes Its Debut**

**SHARON OTTERMAN**

Roman Catholics throughout the English-speaking world on Sunday left behind words they have prayed for nearly four decades, flipping through unfamiliar pew cards and pronouncing new phrases as the church urged tens of millions of worshipers to embrace a new translation of the Mass that more faithfully tracks the original Latin.

The introduction of the new English translation of the Roman Missal, the book of texts and prayers used in the Mass, appeared to pass smoothly in churches, despite some confusion and hesitancy over the new words.

But behind the scenes, the debate over the new translation has been angry and bitter, exposing rifts between a [Vatican](#)-led church hierarchy that has promoted the new translation as more reverential and accurate, and critics, among them hundreds of priests, who fear it is a retreat from the commitment of the [Second Vatican Council](#) in the 1960s to allowing people to pray in a simple, clear vernacular as they participate in the church's sacred rites.

There was no reference to that history Sunday morning in the cavernous nave of St. Patrick's Cathedral, on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, where Msgr. Robert T. Ritchie, in purple robes to mark the start of Advent, told thousands of worshipers, "Today is a special day — today is the start of a new translation of the Mass," and directed them to follow the new words listed on laminated pew cards.

But when Monsignor Ritchie said to the assembly, "The Lord be with you," many reflexively responded with the words that have been used for decades, declaring, "And also with you," rather than with the new response, "And with your spirit."

And though he had carefully studied the new service, even Monsignor Ritchie lost his place at one point, raising his eyebrows as he flipped through the missal, looking for the right words before the start of communion.

Across the Atlantic, the scene was similar at [Westminster Cathedral](#) in London, where the pews were filled with worshipers clutching freshly printed pamphlets under soaring, dark stone ceilings.

The Rev. Alexander Master, celebrating the Mass, made no direct mention of the change, but his sermon centered on the concept of upheaval, which, he said, had been “especially marked” this year. What the future holds, he said, “is known only to God.”

The new translation, phased in throughout the English-speaking world over the past year, was officially introduced over the weekend in every English-language Mass in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and India.

Because the form of the Mass was not changed — just the details of the translation — many Catholics reacted mildly.

Rebecca Brown, a parishioner at [St. James Cathedral](#) in Seattle, said she felt well prepared for the new translation. “I’m not fond of the linguistic choices, how it rolls off the tongue,” Ms. Brown said. “But on the other hand, the Catholic Church is always about renewal and reforming itself. This is just one of those changes.”

“It was interesting,” said Danielle McGinley, 31, a parishioner at the [Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels](#) in downtown Los Angeles. “It feels more like a Spanish Mass to me. The Spanish Mass is a more literal translation. I like it.”

But George Lind, 73, in New York, had a more visceral reaction. He tried to say the new language at the Church of the Holy Cross in Times Square during the Saturday night Mass, he said, but he became so angry that he had to stop speaking.

“I am so tired of being told exactly what I have to say, exactly what I have to pray,” he said. “I believe in God, and to me that is the important thing. This is some attempt on the part of the church hierarchy to look important.”

Most of the changes are within the prayers the priests say, but there are some notable differences in the responses by worshipers. The Nicene Creed, the central profession of faith, now starts with “I believe in one God” instead of “We believe in one God.” Jesus is now “consubstantial with the Father” rather than “one in Being with the Father.” Communion begins with the words, “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof,” instead of “Lord, I am not worthy to receive you.”

The mixed emotions in the pews broadly mirrored the reception that the new translation has received from clergy and liturgical scholars. More than 22,000 people, including many priests, endorsed a petition, on the Web site [whatifwejustsaidwait.org](#), to postpone the introduction of the new Mass. An association of hundreds of Irish priests called for the translation to be scrapped.

The Rev. Anthony Ruff, a scholar of Latin and Gregorian chant at St. John's University and seminary in Collegeville, Minn., worked on parts of the latest translation with the [International Commission on English in the Liturgy](#), but he left after he became "increasingly critical of the clunky text and the top-down secretive process" with which it was being created, he said.

"The syntax is too Latinate — it's not good English that will help people pray," he said in an interview. "Rome got its way in forcing this on us, but it is a [Pyrrhic victory](#) because it is not bringing the whole church together around a high quality product."

Catholics throughout the world worshiped in Latin until Vatican II, when the church granted permission for priests to celebrate Mass in other languages. The English translation used until this weekend was published in the early 1970s and modified in 1985. Scholars then began work on a new translation, and by 1998 a full draft of the new missal was completed and approved by bishops' conferences around the English-speaking world.

But Rome never approved that translation, and instead, in 2001, issued new guidelines requiring that the language of the Mass carefully follow every word of the Latin text, as well as the Latin syntax, where possible. That marked a dramatic philosophical shift from the more flexible principle of "dynamic equivalence" that had guided the earlier translations.

The Rev. Michael Ryan, pastor of St. James Cathedral in Seattle, who started the Web petition to postpone the new text, said he believed that nearly all critics among clergy would nonetheless use the new translation.

"I am not going to change a word, because the only way it will get evaluated is if people hear it as it is," he said. "I trust the people will indeed speak up."

The Rev. Daniel Merz, associate director of the secretariat of divine worship for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, which is in charge of promulgating the changes in America, said the text had been widely discussed before it was put into use. He said the new translation was more poetic and filled with imagery.

"I don't think there's ever been a document that's been so consulted in the history of the world," he said.

"Over time, we have realized that there is a better way to pray," he added. "Not that the old way was bad, but we hope and believe that this new way is better."

Ian Lovett contributed reporting from Los Angeles, Isolde Raftery from Seattle and Ravi Somaiya from London.

