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TIME TO SAY “YES”

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Nearly two years ago, *America*, the Jesuit weekly, published an article entitled “What If We Said ‘Wait?’” in which I proposed that the new *Roman Missal* be “road-tested” before being implemented in parishes across the English-speaking world. More than 22,000 people liked the idea (they recorded their support at www.whatifwejustsaidwait.org), but the die was cast: The Missal train, it seemed, had already left the station.

Now, as the Advent date for the train’s arrival draws near—and in Britain it is coming even closer with the Order of Mass about to be used in parishes for the first time—I find myself posing quite a different question: What if we just said “Yes”?

Let me explain why.

While the Catholic press has published all kinds of articles on the translation and the blogs are boiling over with postings on the new Missal, the most silent voices seem to have been those of parish priests. This is curious because we priests are the ones with the biggest responsibility and the most work to do (I won’t say with the most at stake because that is clearly the people we serve).

We are expected to introduce the Missal to our largely unsuspecting parishioners and to convince them that the new translation will strengthen their prayer life, more properly position them in their relationship to God, deepen their understanding of liturgy, elevate its tone, correct decades of “inadequate language and deficient theology,” and put them in closer touch with the Church’s hallowed Latin tradition. By any measure, that is a tall order, especially in the light of the controversies that continue—despite a carefully planned campaign of “catechesis”—to swirl around the new Missal.

The controversies are not surprising, considering both the process by which the Missal came about and the resulting product. Whether you support the new Missal or not, it is undeniable that behind the scenes were power plays, a translation process driven more by ideology than by accepted principles of translation, and loyal but acquiescent episcopal conferences. This is not just a matter of opinion. These are facts that have been clearly and persuasively set forth in a number of responsible, mainline Catholic publications and even by some highly respected bishops who were closely involved (See Robert Mickens’ articles in *The Tablet* of June 18, July 25, and July 2).

But controversies aside, this coming Advent the new Missal will make its appearance in our parishes, and all of us priests and people will be expected to get in line. But will we? The more I talk with brother priests, the more I wonder. To be sure, it is a rare priest who



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declares he will not implement the new Missal. When it comes to the people's parts, there is really very little choice unless he wants to risk suspension. But when it comes to the celebrant's parts, the reaction I am hearing more and more is: "I'll use the new Missal, but I will feel free to modify texts whenever I consider them to contain questionable theology, awkward grammar, inaccessible vocabulary, or offensively gender-exclusive language."

Since most of my priest friends and colleagues are aware of my *America* article, they ask me what I intend to do. I surprise them by saying that I intend to implement the new Missal and not change a word, no matter how questionable or offensive I may personally find it. Why? Not because I am a legalist or a purist. No, I will make no changes because I am convinced that, after all the years of wrangling and behind-the-scenes maneuvering (including the shelving of the elegant and accessible 1998 ICEL translation), the only way the new Missal will have its full impact is if the People of God can judge it for themselves without edits of any kind.

This is another way of saying that the new Missal should be allowed to stand on its own and be judged for what it is, not for what we priests decide to make of it. I am of the opinion that the Missal will in time—I'm guessing not a long time—be judged deficient, but an informed judgment will never be made if we priests, even for the best of motives, give our people not the new Missal but our version of it. So we should do whatever is necessary to prepare our people for the new Missal but not take on the responsibility for making it work by doctoring or diluting it.

I will understand if our senior priest brothers, who offer their services to parishes that would otherwise not have a priest, want to avoid all this by staying with the present *Sacramentary* for the celebrant's parts. (They could make a good case with their bishops that there is already a precedent for doing so in the provision made for the use of the Tridentine Rite or in the liturgical accommodations being made for the new Anglican ordinariate.) The same might be true for some of our international priest brothers who have worked to master the current texts and who may find that the new ones are tantamount to learning a brand new language.

But for the rest of us who are doing our best to face ever-increasing pastoral challenges amid the relentless, though rewarding, demands of parish life, and who still embrace the Second Vatican Council's vision of a collegially governed Church—and of a liturgy in which the people are able to participate fully—we will best serve our people if we give them the new Missal just as it is. I doubt they will be slow to let us know what they think.

GETTING PRACTICAL

These suggestions are not part of Father Ryan's article. They are proposed by the NPM staff as a way to apply his suggestions to implementing the new Roman Missal.

1. GETTING TO CARNEGIE HALL

You know the old question: "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" And its answer: "Practice, practice, practice." The same thing is required of priests who truly want to implement the

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new English translation: We have to practice our part, especially the collect-style prayers, Prefaces, and Eucharistic Prayers. Without careful attention, it is easy to proclaim these texts in such a way that they will evoke “Huh?” rather than “Amen!” from attentive parishioners. If the collect-style prayers are to serve as conclusions for the silent prayer in which all are called to participate, and if the Eucharistic Prayers are truly to be the way for us “always and everywhere to give . . . thanks,” then they have to be proclaimed



well. No matter what our personal attitude toward the new translation, our role at Mass is not that of a critic of translations but as a leader of prayer and, indeed, as a proclaimer of the prayer of the whole assembly. If we're going to do our job properly, then we need to do the advance work that will strengthen our role. At recent workshops on singing the chant in the new missal, a number of our brothers have observed that singing the texts will actually help them to proclaim this new translation in ways that invite the entire liturgical assembly into prayer.

2. SOURCE FOR PREACHING

Most of us work hard to craft a homily that reflects and builds on the readings of the day. But sometimes we forget that those texts are not the only legitimate sources for a homily. The homily “should be an explanation of some aspect of the readings from Sacred Scripture *or of another text from the Ordinary or the Proper of the Mass of the day*” (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 65, emphasis added). This means something much more than explaining words like “consubstantial” or the Holy Spirit’s “dewfall” (Eucharistic Prayer II); it means probing the meaning of these texts, praying over them as we would over the Scriptures, and drawing images and ideas from them as we would from the biblical texts. The ancient homilies that are part of the Office of Readings offer us a wonderful resource for this kind of mystical preaching. After all, if the way we pray establishes the way we believe, these texts *are* the way we pray.

3. FIND STRENGTHS AS WELL AS WEAKNESSES

Priests who have examined the new *Roman Missal* are aware of some stumbling blocks that we will encounter soon enough, such as the collect for the First Sunday of Advent. Many of us know that we'll have to be looking at the texts of the Eucharistic Prayers as we pray them, lest we fall back into the familiar translations that we have memorized. But how many of us have paged through the missal to find real gems in the new translation—texts that attract us, surprise us with their beauty, or intrigue us and call us into meditation? We'll find many of them in the Holy Week and Triduum celebrations. The new Preface for the Christ Mass, for instance, is worth pondering for a reflection on our ministry as ordained priests and how we are called to serve the People of God. Another such text is the prayer over the offerings for the Mass of the

Lord's Supper: "Grant . . . that we may participate worthily in these mysteries, for whenever the memorial of this sacrifice is celebrated the work of our redemption is accomplished." There is also the hymn "Faithful Cross" ("*Crux fidelis*") on Good Friday, but the prime example of beautiful and intriguing translations is the new text of the *Exsultet*, "Exult, let them exult."

4. KEEP PERSPECTIVE

Remember that the liturgical renewal in which we are participating is now more than a century old. It first received papal recognition and support from Pope St. Pius X early in the twentieth century, and it has been supported and encouraged by every pope since then. Changes in the texts and rites began under Pope Pius XII, and changes in attitude, encouraging full participation by everyone in the assembly, became part of the missal's introductory texts under Blessed Pope John XXIII. We are now trying to find an appropriate vernacular in which to worship for the first time since the liturgy of the Church of Rome went from Greek to Latin—the vernacular of the time—in the fourth century. That process took quite a while; now, as then, we can't expect overnight miracles. The process of finding an appropriate vernacular language for worship will continue. In the meantime, we need to use this translation as best we can for prayer and not for protest. But we do need to be prepared, when asked, for suggestions on how to improve the language of our worship—suggestions drawn from our faithful praying of the texts of the *Roman Missal*.



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