

Marketing or Mystagogy: Reception of the New Roman Missal and Reverse Catechesis

Edward Foley

By all accounts, the process leading to the approval of the English translation of the third edition of the Roman Missal has been drawn out, difficult, and highly contentious. Ironically, settling on a final text (only announced on 20 August 2010)—something that did not happen until *after* the *recognitio* was granted (25 March 2010)—was neither the end of the process nor a guarantee of smooth sailing. The task ahead is catechesis, something that has already been underway for quite some time. Official pamphlets outlining the changes between the previous and new translations have been printed and distributed; various websites (including the US bishops at <http://www.usccb.org/romanmissal/index.shtml>) are filled with multimedia resources, theological commentaries and pastoral suggestions; and an array of speakers are barnstorming the country offering commendations and recommendations on the new texts and their implementation. This effort is only going to intensify as we move toward the official implementation date on the First Sunday of Advent (27 November 2011).

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Reception and Sensus Fidelium

The goal of this catechetical deluge could be characterized by the word “reception.” Quite frankly, however, the word is easier to vocalize than it is to understand. What exactly is “reception” of a new Missal, or translation or, for that matter, the “reception” of any liturgical book? On the one hand it sounds vaguely passive, as though the faithful are receiving something that is apart from them, acceding to the work of some third party, about which they have little to say or do other than utter a polite “yes.” Such an admitted caricature does not correlate well with the vision of the liturgical assembly embedded in the documents of Vatican II. Of particular import is the clear emphasis in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy that the baptized are “subjects” of the liturgy with Christ (no. 7). Since that Constitution stresses people’s activity (no. 14) as a hallmark of the reform, the faithful not only “receive” sacraments and prayers and blessings and homilies, but they are active agents in those sacraments, prayers, blessings, and homilies.

In one sense, the act of “full, conscious, and active” reception could be considered an exercising of the *sensus fidelium* (Latin, “sense of the faithful”). Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (Latin, “[Christ is the] light of the nations”) teaches that “the whole body of the faithful who have received an anointing which comes from the holy one cannot be mistaken in belief” (no. 12). The Constitution offers this teaching in light of its previous assertion that the “holy people of God shares . . . in Christ’s prophetic office” (no. 12). From this prophetic perspective one can define the *sensus fidelium* as a capacity (belonging to all the baptized) for achieving “a basic means of understanding the faith and as such [it] exercises a truth-finding and truth-attesting function that has as its special characteristic that it takes into account the faithful’s experience in the world.”¹

It is clear that this contribution of the faithful is not something apart from the church’s magisterium, which guides the faithful and that the people of God “faithfully obeys” (no. 12). At the same time it is clear that this gift of the faithful does not spring from the magisterium but is rooted in the divine invitation through Christ to be “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (1 Peter 2:9).

In the wealth of writings on the *sensus fidelium* since Vatican II, various theologians have explored this ancient concept whose origins lie at the very origins of the church itself.² Particularly rich is the work of Jean-Marie-Roger Tillard (d. 2000) who understood the mutual interplay of the teaching magisterium of the church, the people of God, and theologians as an exercise of communion, in which each has something to contribute as each shares in the ecclesial gift of the *sensus fidelium*.³ In discussing the importance of an “acute spiritual discernment of the communion” in dialogue with “the determination of those who exercise a ‘magisterium’ in it,” Tillard defines reception as a consensus based upon the “talent of the believers” and “proposed by those whose job is to perceive this *sensus* and interpret it.”⁴

Noting that the role of the faithful is not simply one of blind obedience, he remarks “that a magisterial declaration in which the *sensus fidelium* does not recognize what is good for it is *a priori* very awkward or even suspect.”⁵ Playing on this theme, in his later writings Tillard articulates what John Burkhard characterizes as a theory of “reception in reverse.” Burkhard, who coins this phrase, explains: “[Tillard’s] accent is on the need of the bishops to attend to what the Spirit is saying in the Church as a whole, not by abandoning their judgment but by applying it carefully to the *sensus fidelium*.”⁶

Full, Conscious, and Active Catechesis?

This insight into the mutual and communal nature of the *sensus fidelium*—communion not in the sense of obedient assent but as Spirit-filled and discerning engagement—raises fundamental questions about the various catechetical approaches currently deployed in preparation for the implementation of the new translation of the Roman Missal. Many, for example, are understandably choosing to put the best face possible on a difficult and challenging situation. This sometimes translates into catechesis with a one-sided emphasis on the contributions, increased accuracy, and superiority of the newly translated text. The perceived goal of such an approach could be more about garnering agreement and approval than inviting authentic engagement both with the texts and with the processes that produced these texts. On the one hand this may be an admirable stance, modulated so as not to get anyone upset, undergirded by a fundamental hope of making the transition a virtual non-event and getting through the transition with as few questions as possible. Some bloggers who appear to be of such a mindset are even urging that we forgo any extensive period of catechesis, since that will only get people riled up; instead, they argue, we should implement the new translation post-haste, and in three months’ time we will have all forgotten about it.

The other side of the catechetical polarity would be to use this crucial formational moment as a not-to-be-missed opportunity to critique both the prose and the processes of the newly translated Roman Missal and, in effect, to advocate for non-reception. Touting the supposed superiority and unassailability of the 1973 English translation of the Roman Missal, this wildly swinging side of the liturgical pendulum champions holding onto those tattered and retaped 1974 Sacramentaries. There are even some not so secretly praying for a papal indult for permission to use the 1974 Sacramentary as a second “extraordinary form,” along with the 1962 Missal of John XXIII. This witless approach overlooks the fact that the 1973 translation was always considered provisional, that English as a living language is dynamic and evolving, and that flash-freezing a liturgical translation from the Nixon era is about as advisable as promoting a word-for-word revival of US foreign policy from the same era.

From my perspective, neither the “this is so wonderful and such a great improvement” response, nor the “this is a disaster and has reversed Vatican II” response is helpful. Both seem more about political posturing than about authentic pastoral response. Advocating non-reception is simply anti-ecclesial, divisive, and wholly against the spirit of Vatican II. On the other hand, sugar-coating the reception process in such a way as to give the impres-

sion that we have arrived at some liturgical nirvana is also problematic and seems dissonant with the conciliar legacy. Full, conscious, and active participation is not simply about hearty liturgical singing and frequent Communion. It is also about intelligent and respectful engagement with both the newly translated texts and the processes that produced them. It is about respecting and nurturing that ecclesial gift previously named as *sensus fidelium*.

In this new “age of transparency,” a church so rocked by scandal with its credibility under such scrutiny—both by insiders and outsiders—cannot afford a catechesis that lacks similar transparency. If the faithful are to be invited to exercise their *sensus fidelium* so that this ecclesial gift redounds to the good of the *ekklesia*, a richly modulated formation process that addresses both the promise and challenges of the new translation is both “right and just,” to quote the newly translated preface dialogue. What is being presented to us is the translation of the third typical edition of the Roman Missal; there is going to be a fourth as well. Some reading this article will probably experience the latter in their lifetime. The community’s “reception in reverse”—their ability to negotiate the language, manage a more Latinized syntax, and sing reshaped phrases—is critical to the ongoing reform of the liturgy and the evolution of vernacular Roman Catholic worship in the US.

Transparent catechesis is particularly important for priests, who will be the primary heralds of these new texts in our worshipping communities. Tillard had special concern from them in his discussion of *sensus fidelium*. He considered what tradition calls its *presbyterium* as that

very slender network by which, on the one hand, the questions, the difficulties, the *praxis*, but also the convictions of the *sensus* of the community give way to the bishop and by which, on the other hand, the decisions of the bishop . . . are not only communicated but explained, interpreted, if necessary, to the community.⁷

This axial ministry has a crucial role to play in this formative process. Clergy in particular need a comprehensive catechesis so that they are adequately prepared for their mediation of the *sensus fidelium*. Having an overall grasp of the processes, reversals, and change in translation rules, retranslation, and the rest provides the needed context that equips the clergy adequately for animating a dialogue that actually moves us toward communion. Such a formational context will not only prepare clergy to embrace the new translation, but also contribute to the ongoing development of vernacular liturgy. For example, fully contextualized preparation equips clergy along with other ministers and the people of God in the ongoing assessment of the newly proposed translation as a tool of

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evangelization in a country in which the fastest growing segment from the viewpoint of religion are those who identify themselves as non-believers (currently about 16%). Unvarnished catechesis will allow pastors and people alike to discern to what extent “and with your Spirit,” “consubstantial with the Father,” “like the dewfall,” and other changes enable or inhibit communal prayer.

From Marketing to Mystagogy

One of the more seductive terms to emerge in the post-conciliar reforms is that of “mystagogy.” Largely through the influence of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, mystagogy has become a mandatory part of contemporary liturgical jargon, and cross-pollinates with everything from preaching to religious education. Despite its virtual ubiquity, however, many still consider mystagogy only and essentially as a post-ritual mode of liturgical reflection: one of the unfortunate results of the way it was recovered in the RCIA. Our pluriform Christian tradition, however, demonstrates that mystagogy is not a “when” but a “how.” Possible before, during, or after a ritual event, it is more about making the communal experience of the ritual central to the reflection than deciding when that reflection occurs.

This interim of grace—between the announcement of

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an implementation date of the newly translated Roman Missal and its actual implementation—is a privileged moment not only for undertaking the mystagogical task, but doing so in such a way as to underscore the “how-ness” rather than the “when-ness” of mystagogy. While we are not permitted to employ these texts in worship until Advent of 2011, we can employ them mystagogically in formational processes, especially at the parochial level. If done so imaginatively and intelligently, a proper mystagogical catechesis can also be an authentic exercise of the *sensus fidelium* of the church, especially among the laity.

And how might one combine mystagogy and the exercise of the *sensus fidelium* together in full, conscious, and active catechesis on the new English translation of the Roman Missal? Key could be introducing the new texts in a manner that allows the laity actually to exercise the texts in ways ordinarily not available to them during the celebration of the official liturgy. For example, Roman Catholics never have the opportunity to hear women or children proclaim these prayers. As part of the introduction of these texts, instead of simply showing the texts to parishioners, or having the clergy read them, it could be instructive to have different groups of people proclaim these texts. What if a group of grade schoolers acted out or did a choral recitation of one of the eucharistic prayers? What might we learn if we heard a grandmother or college-age woman proclaim these texts? Could their proclamations help the clergy figure out how to interpret these texts? Is there a local speech teacher or theatrical director who could offer some expertise here? It might

also be an interesting exercise for a community to think about how they might interpret not only texts of the priest-presider, but also their own liturgical texts. People often recite the Nicene Creed, for example, as though on autopilot. Could public engagement with these texts beyond explaining “why” or “how” the translation was achieved, enable a community to proclaim such texts more intelligently and prayerfully?

Without turning this into a plebiscite, could this kind of proclamatory exercise—especially through the voices of those who never publicly proclaim, for example, a eucharistic prayer—not only aid community and presiders in interpreting these new texts, but also enable a community to decide which texts are most fitting for their context and needs? For example, it is very common that the selection of the eucharistic prayer is a decision (or non-decision) by the priest-presider. The presider may not naturally gravitate towards the prayers for reconciliation or for various needs and occasions. It could be, however, that the *sensus fidelium* is that such prayers are more appropriate than the overused Eucharistic Prayers II and III.

Such mystagogical exercises might also permit a reframing of the questions surrounding this new Missal. Rather than allowing a community to get stalled at the level of the “what” or “why” of the new translation, can a performative exploration of these texts help a community to reignite the spirit of Vatican II in their worship? If the formation around the new Missal actually inspires a community to reassert the centrality of quality public worship at the heart of their faith life, then marketing has been vanquished and mystagogy has done its graced work.

Epilogue: Reception and Hybridity

Unquestionably there is considerable anxiety about the reception of the newly translated Missal operating on many levels these days. The bishops are certainly concerned that it is embraced wholeheartedly, and have preemptively made it clear when announcing the implementation date of the new Missal that from the 27th of November 2011 “no other edition of the Roman Missal may be used in the dioceses of the United States of America.” Pastors, whom Tillard understood as critical to the communication of a *sensus fidelium*, have their own anxiety not only about how to proclaim these new texts but also about how such texts will be received by the faithful. After all, the presider still gets to say “The Lord be with you”; it is the people who will have to modulate the new “And with your Spirit.” Many of the faithful will also have anxieties about new texts to learn, new musical settings of the ordinary to achieve, and changes in

language that over forty years have become familiar and comfortable.

One of the valuable things that history provides is a sense of perspective about such anticipated changes. The history of reception of the Roman Rite in the West is quite illuminating. During the early and even late Medieval periods, for example, celebrating the Roman Rite always included introducing changes and local adaptation. When Pope Hadrian (d. 795) sent Charlemagne (d. 814) “the” sacramentary that was going to help unify the worship of the entire Frankish kingdom, it seemed to be missing a few things. Consequently the imperial advisor and Monk Benedict of Aniane (d. 821) wrote a small “supplement,” which in modern editions⁸ runs virtually as long (254 pages) as the original papal sacramentary (263 pages). Even the ever obedient Francis of Assisi (d. 1226) adopted the Roman form of the Liturgy of the Office except for its Psalter, opting instead to employ a Gallican form of the Psalter more familiar to him and his brothers.

This history of mixed reception marked the reforms of the Council of Trent (1545-63) as well, despite the monolithic caricatures of that council. For example, despite the fact that Rome promulgated a new Roman Ritual in 1614, many dioceses in Europe continued to use their own diocesan rituals. In Spain the Roman Ritual was not adopted until the 19th century, and in France not until 1853.⁹ Some historians further reckon that even after the Tridentine reforms had been accepted in some places, they were eventually abandoned; it is estimated that by the French Revolution at the end of the 18th century, eighty out of 130 French dioceses had abandoned the liturgy of Trent and were following a Neo-Gallican form of liturgy.¹⁰ More broadly, one could consider the widespread acceptance of the new rituals of Luther and Zwingli and other 16th-century reformers a most notable form of non-reception: after all, the faithful in these places were largely Roman Catholics opting for different forms of worship and polity.

Even after Vatican II there should be no illusion that the 1974 Sacramentary found 100% reception in a country like the United States. Often non-reception came in the form of ill-informed presiders (priests as well as bishops) performing the *Novus Ordo* as though it were the Tridentine Rite. One commonplace example of this is the preparation of the gifts, which many still consider an “offertory” (it is not), with priest-presiders holding the gifts chest high (rubrics say “slightly raised above the table”) and proclaiming the text out loud while the people are singing (forbidden by the 1969 rubrics). Also commonplace are the textual rewrites or improvisations that presiders are wont to launch during eucharistic

prayers or other canonical texts, even though the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (2002) and other directives disallow such tampering.

Reception is a dynamic event, and usually results in some form of hybridity. Previously that has meant mixing local adaptations or Tridentine interpretations with the 1974 Rite. History suggests that the reception of the newly translated Missal will be hybrid as well. For example, while the texts for the “Holy, Holy” have changed, if a place of worship owns a hymnal, it is likely that those people will be singing familiar settings of the Ordinary that employ the 1973 translation of those texts. Similarly, many faithful who have one text of the Nicene Creed or “Glory to God” in their head will likely continue to repeat it: some out of habit, others out of determination. On the one hand, this projected “mixed” reception of the new translation of the Roman Missal could be considered a failure in reception. On the other hand, maybe it is precisely what reception as an exercise of the *sensus fidelium* is all about.

The word “catechesis” comes from two Greek words that literally mean “to echo down” or “resound.” Not employed to describe the dynamics of any noise, it is a word about human speech, about language cued not only to human physiology but intent on the “ear in the chest,” hoping to create an echo in the mind and heart of the listener. That is why catechesis is not simply the imparting of information, but the engagement of the other in the formative process. When a faith community participates in such full, conscious, and active catechesis the echoes surely are traces of the *sensus fidelium* with which God’s Spirit has gifted the church. May the liturgical catechesis ahead, in full mystagogical mode, stir such an echo that resounds to the good of the whole church and to the ongoing reform of the liturgy.

1. Wolfgang Beinert, “Sensus Fidelium” in *Handbook of Catholic Theology*, ed. Wolfgang Beinert and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 656.
2. Ormond Rush, *The Eyes of Faith: The Sense of the Faithful and the Church’s Reception of Revelation* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 1.
3. See his *Church of Churches: An Ecclesiology of Communion*, trans. R. C. De Peaux (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992 [1987]), especially “The Church of God, People of the Faith,” 105-18, here 113.
4. *Ibid.*, 110.
5. *Ibid.*, 112.
6. John Burkhard, “Sensus Fidei: Recent theological Reflection (1990-2001) – Part I,” *Heythrop Journal* 46 (2005) 450-75, here 456.
7. Tillard, *Church of Churches*, 115.
8. Jean Deshusses, *Le sacramentaire grégorien: ses principales formes d’après les plus anciens manuscrits*, 2nd ed., Spicilegium Friburgense 16 (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires, 1979).
9. James White, *Roman Catholic Worship: Trent to Today* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003 [1995]), 31-2.
10. Theodor Klauser, *A Short History of the Western Liturgy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 119.