

# The monks, the monastery, and the missal

Big changes are coming to the texts we use at Mass. Here are five ways to be ready and prayerful

**By Dan Connors**

A long time ago — more than 1,350 years, actually — the monastery of Melrose stood at a bend in the River Tweed, in the border region between England and Scotland. And in that monastery one day, its revered abbot, Eata, knelt in prayer, wrestling with a task and a problem.

The task was simple and straightforward. Melrose, and thus its abbot, Eata, had jurisdiction over another monastery, the one located on what was known (then and now) as the “Holy Island” of Lindisfarne. Eata’s task was to direct the monks of Lindisfarne to follow the Roman calendar and ritual, and to adopt Roman styles of monastic discipline.

The problem? Lindisfarne had been founded by Irish monks who followed the Celtic calendar (dating of Easter, etc.) and rituals and had their own Celtic style of monasticism, quite different from the style established by St. Benedict and promoted by Rome. And many of the monks at Lindisfarne weren’t interested in changing. They didn’t like the new styles and thought they were doing just fine with the old ones. The dividing lines between the old way and the new quickly hardened into battle lines, and Eata’s simple directive was in danger of rending the community.

In his prayer that day, Eata settled on a plan that he had been considering for some time: He would send to Lindisfarne, as his personal representative, a young monk named Cuthbert.

Anyone dealing with change in the Church knows how difficult it can be. In this case, Eata felt he needed a miracle worker, and he found the right man in Cuthbert. Even before Cuthbert became a novice at Melrose Abbey, he was known for calming winds at sea, as Jesus had done, and entertaining angels, as Abraham had done. And as a monk and priest, his reputation for holiness and wonders spread far and wide. He traveled the roads of what is now northwest England and southwest Scotland preaching God’s word to all he met. He ministered to the poor and healed the sick. He put out a house fire simply by the power of his prayer, expelled demons from many people, and was even known, later in life, to have changed water into wine.

He would need all his holiness in Lindisfarne. The Venerable Bede, who was 14 when Cuthbert died, tells the story of his life and what happened when he came to the Holy Island. Cuthbert met with the monks day after day — entreating, persuading, and listening to their anger, which was often directed at him. But, says Bede, he went about his work with patience, modest virtues, and winning ways. When Cuthbert grew tired of the bitter taunts hurled at him, “he would rise from his seat with a placid look and dismiss the meeting until the following day, when, as if he had suffered no repulse, he would use the same exhortations as before, until he converted them.”

Cuthbert went on to become abbot, and then bishop, of Lindisfarne, and is today one of the most beloved saints of the British Isles.

I find myself asking Cuthbert for help a lot these days, because I think our Church, in many ways, finds itself like the 7<sup>th</sup>-century monks of Lindisfarne, facing change in Church and society and filled with divisions, rancor, and more than a few bitter taunts. How desperately we need many holy men and women like Cuthbert with patience, modest virtues, and winning ways who can deal with rancor with a placid demeanor, refusing to be drawn into hatred but instead using persuasion until conversion comes.

One area where I hope Cuthbert will pray for us is actually not that foreign to his own mission to Lindisfarne: English-speaking Catholics around the world are getting ready to start using a new translation of the Roman Missal, and the change may not come easily.

On the surface, our task, like the one Abbot Eata faced, is simple and straightforward: The Roman Missal — which contains the prayers we use at Mass — has been retranslated. The new translation has been approved by Rome, and we will start using it a year from now, on the first Sunday of Advent, November 27, 2011 (the delay is to allow time for the missals and worship aids to be prepared and printed).

But just as with Eata's task, it's not that simple. First of all, we're all human beings, and human beings, like the monks at Lindisfarne, generally don't like change. The people's responses of the past 40 years have cut deep grooves in our memories, and lines like "And with your Spirit" instead of "and also with you" and "consubstantial with the Father" instead of "one in being with the Father" may not come fluently off our tongues. We'll get lost, we'll get mixed up, we'll have our heads buried in missalettes, and a lot of us will complain about it, saying, "Why did we have to change, anyway?"

Second, this new translation has already taken its place in the long line of things to complain and fight about in the liturgy. In a way, we fight about these things because they are so incredibly important to our life as Catholics. But the battles have often become bitter and threaten to crack the very unity we profess.

The language of our prayer has been part of this conflict. *Catholic Digest* ran an article by Rosemary Haughton in 1971 lamenting that the English translation of the Mass coming out after the Council was bland, unpoetic, and very difficult to pray. She wasn't alone in thinking so. More than a decade ago, at the direction of the Church, the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL) spent years and millions of dollars creating a new translation. Some in the Church thought it was wonderful, and some thought it was horrible. In any case, Rome tossed it in the trash and told ICEL to start over, with new translation guidelines. The translation they produced is the one Rome recently approved.

But just like the previous, tossed, translation, some think this new one is wonderful (for example, more faithful to the Latin; stronger in keeping connections to Scripture; and elevating our prayer with sacred language) and some think it's — if not horrible — then at least in need of extensive fixing (for example, too many words and phrases like "ineffable," "gibbet," "sullied," "unfeigned," "wrought," "thwart," "we pray you bid," and the "dew of your Spirit"; so slavishly faithful to the Latin that the prayers are sometimes hard to follow in English; and striving for an artificial sacredness using language average people can't connect to). Bishops and liturgists lined

up on both sides of the debate during the approval process, and many in the Church still aren't happy with the final results.

There are no bad guys in this fight. The bishops who lined up on one side or the other of the new translation love the Church and the liturgy, and there are a lot of valid points in all their arguments. The debate can continue, and will feed into the new translation the English-speaking Church will probably need in 20 to 30 years. But what about now? How should we prepare for the new texts?

**1. Like St. Cuthbert, stay calm and prayerful and patient.** You may hear a lot of people trumpeting the new texts, and a lot of others decrying them. Try not to get sucked into pitched battles over language. No text, no translation is perfect, and we won't know if these texts help us pray well or not until we've been using them for many years.

**2. Get to know the changes.** The bishops have set up a website ([usccb.org/romanmissal](http://usccb.org/romanmissal)) showing samples of the new texts. Speak them out loud. Start to work on praying them. Listen to Bishop Serratelli's (chairman of the Bishops' Committee on Divine Worship) video introduction on the site, and read some of the explanations and background the bishops provide. If your parish makes any resources available about the new translation, read them and ask questions.

**3. Realize that the introduction of new texts is going to be awkward.** It will take time before these new words are second nature to us.

**4. Recognize you might not like everything in the new language.** Let your bishop know how you feel, but please, when they are implemented in our parish liturgies, let's do our very best to pray these texts. In the Mass our own feelings and needs must take second place to the needs of the community — the community's need to have all our voices joined in prayer. It is, perhaps, one of the ways we enter into the Paschal Mystery, dying to our own feelings and opinions in order to serve others. We may end up unhappy with some line we're given to pray, but at Mass, as long as we consider ourselves part of the Body of Christ, we need to do our best to strengthen the unity of the assembly, not divide it. In the end, the quality of the liturgy is not judged by the words we speak or the songs we sing, but by how deeply we are challenged to enter into the Paschal Mystery, to be more fully what we are and are becoming: Christ — living his life in the events of our own.

**5. Move more deeply into the Mass.** In his video introduction on the USCCB website, Bishop Serratelli says these new texts are "a great opportunity ... not only to learn about the changes ... but also to deepen our own understanding of the liturgy itself." Amen! We can never exhaust the meaning of the Eucharist or the challenge it brings to our lives. Anything that prompts us to move more deeply into the eucharistic liturgy is an opportunity not to be wasted.

We'll be hearing more and more about these new texts as we move through the next year.

The Church is always growing and moving. May St. Cuthbert, calm, wise agent of change, and all the saints, help us use these moments of change and growth to move ever more deeply into Christ! CD

## **Faithful to the Latin?**

Many advocates stress how the new translations adhere much more closely to the Latin originals than some texts in the translation we're using now. For example, in Latin, when the priest says "Dominus Vobiscum" ("The Lord be with you"), the people respond "et cum spiritu tuo" ("and with your spirit"). But the translation we have been using for the past 40 years says "and also with you" — not a very literal translation. In contrast, both the French ("et avec votre esprit") and the Spanish ("Y con tu espíritu") have retained the literal sense of the Latin.

## **Many priests will be struggling too**

Priests, too, may have trouble with the new texts. Writing in the September issue of our sister publication *Today's Parish*, Father Kevin Mullins, OSA, a pastor in Wisconsin, spoke about a recent meeting of priests he attended and how much resistance there was to the new translation: "I was surprised to hear so much negativity about the impending changes," he wrote. Priests need to deepen their own understanding of the texts, he wrote, so that they'll "be better able to help others grasp what is to come."



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Dan was named editor-in-chief of Catholic Digest June 1, 2005. He served most recently as editor-in-chief of *Today's Parish*. Before that he served as managing editor of *Pastoral Music* magazine (the National Association of Pastoral Musicians, NPM), and managing editor of *Emmanuel* magazine. He has worked with parish leaders for 26 years and has been an active parish volunteer. His wife, Deborah, is pastoral associate at St. Mary Star of the Sea Parish in New London, Connecticut.