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Contact: Jeannie Kenevan
Marketing Director
320-363-2964/jkenevan@csbsju.edu

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Survey results show priests are divided on new English translation of the Roman Missal

U.S. Catholic priests are sharply divided in their evaluation of the new English translation of the Roman Missal, with a clear majority of priests disliking the new Missal and calling for its revision, according to the 2013 “Survey of U.S. Priests on the New Roman Missal.” Priests’ comments in the survey are negative by more than a four-to-one margin.

A majority of priests do not like the more formal style of language, do not think the Missal is an improvement upon the previous translation and do not think work should go forward translating other rites besides Mass in the same style as the Missal. Over 80 percent of survey participants think that some of the language of the Missal is “awkward and distracting.”

But in what could be a sign of priests’ demoralization around the new Missal, less than one-fourth of priests are confident that their views will be taken seriously in future translation decisions.

The survey was conducted under the auspices of the Godfrey Diekmann, OSB Center for Patristics and Liturgical Studies at Saint John’s University School of Theology•Seminary in Collegeville, Minn. The project manager was Chase Becker, and the project adviser was the Rev. Anthony Ruff, OSB, associate professor of theology at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University. All 178 Roman Catholic Latin rite dioceses in the U.S. were invited to take part in this study; 32 dioceses participated. A total of 1,536 priests participated in the survey, with a response rate of 42.5 percent.

“I was pleasantly surprised at the willingness of so many dioceses to participate, and the very high response rate from priests,” Becker said. “It was palpable that priests really want to talk about this, really want their voices to be heard.”

This survey shows fairly widespread skepticism about the new Missal by U.S. Catholic priests, with strong differences in opinion between the majority of priests who do not like the Missal and the minority who do. Among the principal findings of this survey:

- By a 3 to 2 margin, priests do not like the new text – 59 percent do not like it, compared to 39 percent who do.
- By a similar margin, 57 percent to 36 percent, priests do not like the more formal style of language, with over one-third (35 percent) strongly disliking the new language.

- Similarly, only 35 percent of priests think that the new translation is an improvement on the old one, against 56 percent who do not think it is an improvement. Over one-third of priests (34 percent) strongly disagree that the new Missal is an improvement.
- Priests overwhelmingly think that some of the language is awkward and distracting – 80 percent agree with this statement, with nearly three out of five (59 percent) agreeing strongly with this negative appraisal.
- About three in five priests either agree (18 percent) or strongly agree (42 percent) that the new translation urgently needs to be revised. Only 29 percent disagree that the new Missal needs revision.
- Similarly, more than three in five priests (61 percent) do not think work should go forward translating the Liturgy of the Hours and other sacraments in the same style as the new Missal, with 43 percent strongly disagreeing with this work continuing. Only slightly more than three in 10 -priests (32 percent) would like to see translation work continue in the same style.
- Most priests (55 percent) are not confident that priests' translation views will be taken seriously, with less than one-quarter of priests (24 percent) confident their views will be taken seriously.
- Nearly half of all priests (49 percent) do not approve of the Holy See's leadership in bringing about the new Missal, with nearly three in 10 priests (29 percent) strongly disapproving of the Holy See's role. Less than two out of five priests (39 percent) approve of the Holy See's leadership on the new Missal.

Priest respondents were given the opportunity to submit comments about the new Missal, and over half (52 percent) did so. Analysis of the 799 comments shows that critique of the Missal outweighs affirmation by a four to one margin.

“In some ways, the priests' comments are even more significant than their responses to the nine questions,” Becker said. “It's hard not to be moved reading the comments and seeing the priests' evident love of the liturgy, care for their people, ability to see both the good and the bad in the new Missal, and a longing to make a constructive contribution to liturgical renewal. One can only hope bishops and church officials will take note of this.”

The revised English translation of the Roman Missal was introduced in the United States on the First Sunday of Advent (Nov. 26-27), 2011. It hews more closely to the Latin original of the *Missale Romanum* in its vocabulary, grammar and syntax, which is a marked change from the previous translation in use since 1974 which was translated more freely to make the language more accessible for worshippers.

The 2011 translation came about as a result of the 2001 Vatican document *Liturgiam authenticam*, which removed most authority for liturgical translations from national bishops' conferences (as had been called for by Second Vatican Council in 1963) and gave Rome complete control over the final version of all translations worldwide.

The new translation theory has been sharply criticized by many liturgists and experts in translation. The new English Missal has also been controversial, especially after the Vatican's liturgy office, the Congregation for Divine Worship, made over 10,000 changes to the Missal text approved by the world's English-speaking bishops.

The new English Missal was a key initiative of the papacy of Benedict XVI. According to Msgr. James Moroney, executive secretary to the Vox Clara Committee which assists the Congregation for Divine Worship in issuing English liturgical texts, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI gave “exceptional support” to the new Missal translation and desired “an ever deeper, fuller participation of the faithful” through a more accurate translation. But the recent survey shows only two in five priests support the leadership of the Holy See (Rome) in bringing about the new Missal.

For full coverage of this survey, including commentary and analysis of respondents’ comments, and reactions from a several authorities and experts, see the Diekmann Center website: www.csbsju.edu/SOT/Programs/Diekmann-Center. For ongoing coverage of this survey and other liturgical issues, see also the *Pray Tell* blog: www.PrayTellBlog.com, which is moderated by Ruff.