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The power of prayer

Nicole Sotelo | Aug. 6, 2009

It is estimated that by 2011, parishes around the English-speaking world will be rolling out a new way of praying Mass that more closely resembles the former Tridentine rite. This summer, the U.S. bishops announced their approval of another section of these re-translated liturgical texts. While I believe in the power of liturgical prayer to lead us closer to God and am open to new ways of praying, what happens when that prayer is shaped by human power plays over pastoral concerns?

One would think that as a church we should not squabble over the words of new liturgical texts since we have more pressing concerns that warrant our attention: concerns over abuse, war and disease to name a few. But the machinations over the liturgical text translations reveal a larger battle in our church?s leadership ranks that affects the important pastoral concerns referenced above.

To understand the power struggles, one must look at the history of liturgical translations over the last 50 years. The Second Vatican Council approved the document Sacrosanctum Concilium that opened the liturgy to vernacular translation, since the Tridentine rite of the day, dating from 1570, was solely in Latin.

The first liturgical translations from Latin to English began in the years following Vatican II. It was decided that the bishops would support the translation of the Latin into the vernacular of the communities they served. Ostensibly, bishops would know the pastoral needs and linguistic nuances of local communities better than a Rome-appointed commission.

The bishops of English-speaking countries combined their efforts by in the International Commission on English in the Liturgy, known as ICEL, which created the texts we now pray during Sunday Mass and other liturgical occasions.

But under Pope John Paul II, things changed. The Vatican changed the staff of ICEL and created a new Rome-approved commission called ?Vox Clara.? The commission is appointed to review the re-translation of the liturgical texts so that they will conform more closely to the Latin texts and their syntax. As a result, certain additions that were not originally part of the Latin texts will be removed, such as the opening prayers of the Mass that were created by ICEL.

The name being placed on the new edition of liturgical texts speaks volumes about the power shift that has occurred since the creation of the Vox Clara commission. No longer will parishes use the ?Sacramentary? on Sundays. It will now be called the ?Roman Missal.? How true.

Bishop Donald Trautman of the Erie, Pa., diocese is former chairman of the Committee on Liturgy for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. For years he and other bishops have raised strong concerns about the translation process.

Some of the bishops? concerns center around the pastoral consequences of prioritizing the Latin syntax over the vernacular syntax of the people. For example, the phrase ?I have sinned through my own fault? will now read,

?I have sinned greatly ... through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault.? As someone who works with abused Christian women, I agree with the bishops? concerns over the pastoral implications of the new translations. How will the abused and suffering people in our churches, who may already feel unwarranted shame or blame, hear this and other phrases in the new translation?

Trautman has not only expressed concerns about the new translations of the liturgy, but also his concerns over the fate of some prayers that ICEL created for the pastoral needs of parishioners.

Trautman reminds us in an article in America magazine that ICEL had composed prayers in English to meet the challenging pastoral concerns of our times: ?prayers for a stillborn baby, the prayers for a person who committed suicide and the prayers for a person who has died after a long illness. These respond to pastoral needs that are not addressed in the Latin editions of liturgical books.?

He worries that these prayers from the Order of Christian Funerals, like some of those in the missal, may be lost once they and other texts are translated. He goes on to share his concern: ?How liturgically impoverished we would be if ICEL had not composed [these] prayers. ... The shepherds of the church need to be counted on this issue of pastoral sensitivity to God?s people.?

And yet can we count on the current shepherds? Those who are leading the newest flock of translations are following the trail of the Latin texts, but are they following the needs of the people for prayers that are clear and speak pastorally to their experience?

In the end, Vox Clara may have more faithfully translated the Latin texts into English, but I worry it has been less faithful to the people of God, who count on the church to speak to them in their hour of need. It is at times of suffering that we need the power of prayer the most, but right now I fear that the power to shape our prayers has been ceded to a small group at the Vatican, and not to the needs of the people.

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[1] http://www.WomenHealing.com