

Liturgy needs not 'sacred language' but pastoral language

Jerry Filteau | Oct. 26, 2009



Bishop Donald W. Trautman of Erie, Pa., presents the third annual Frederick R. McManus Memorial Lecture at The Catholic University of America in Washington Oct. 22. (CNS)

WASHINGTON -- There is much good in the new English translation of the Roman Missal, but "there is much more that still needs improvement to make the text grammatical and accessible to the people," Bishop Donald W. Trautman of Erie, Pa., said Oct. 22.

"The present text still contains improper syntax, incomplete sentences, archaic and obscure words and idioms, lengthy and incomprehensible sentences and fails to respect the natural rhythm and cadences of the English language," he said.

He also criticized Rome's decision to try to create a "sacred language" for worship, so that in the new version of the Nicene Creed, "born of the Virgin Mary" becomes "incarnate of the Virgin Mary" and "one in being with the Father" becomes "consubstantial with the Father."

The new translation introduces words "like 'ineffable,' 'consubstantial,' 'incarnate,' 'inviolable,' 'oblation,' 'ignominy,' precursor,' 'suffused' and 'unvanquished,'" he said. "This vocabulary is not readily understandable by the average Catholic."

Trautman spoke on the nearly completed Missal translation project in the third annual Msgr. Frederick R. McManus lecture at The Catholic University of America.

McManus, an internationally renowned canon lawyer and liturgist who taught at the university for almost his entire career, was a theological expert at the Second Vatican Council and a leading figure in liturgical reform throughout the English-speaking world before, during and after the council.

As an example of the problems in the new Missal translation, Trautman quoted the opening lines of the preface for the Second Sunday of Lent: "Who, after he told the disciples of his coming death, manifested his glory to them on the holy mountain to show, as the law and the prophets also bear witness, that the path of suffering leads to the glory of the resurrection."

"This is a lengthy subordinate clause ending with a period," he commented. "While represented as a sentence, it is not a sentence. This is incorrect English grammar."

He said this was just one of many prefaces in the new translation that begin with a relative pronoun -- "who," "in whom" or "whose" -- treating a subordinate clause as if it were a sentence. "This is not acceptable English grammar," he said. "The translators have slavishly transposed a Latin *Qui* clause into English without respecting English sentence word order."

In 2001, the Vatican issued new norms for translating the Roman Missal from its original Latin edition into modern languages, and in recent years bishops' conferences around the world have been engaged in the lengthy process of reviewing and approving new translations developed by scholars in accord with those norms. After a bishops' conference approves a translation, the Holy See must confirm that text before it can be published for use in that country.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops is scheduled to take up the last four segments of the new translation when the bishops meet in Baltimore this Nov. 16-19.

Since 2006, when they approved the main texts used daily or regularly for Mass, at each national meeting the bishops have steadily worked through segment after segment of the prayers used in the course of the liturgical year, on the feasts of saints and for various other occasions.

Trautman, a scripture professor before he was made a bishop, has been one of the more outspoken opponents of the more literal translation of the Latin texts decreed by the 2001 Vatican norms. At last June's meeting, after he strongly criticized language problems in one segment ? containing the texts of Masses and prayers for various needs and intentions ? it barely received the two-thirds vote of the bishops needed for approval.

"The Latin text is not inspired," he told his Catholic University audience. "It is a human text, reflecting a certain mind-set, theology and world view. There are good Latin texts ? balanced, carefully crafted ? and there are bad Latin texts ? convoluted, lengthy, complicated, abstract ? that become a translator's herculean task. Because of literal translation in the new Missal, complicated Latin wording has become complicated English wording."

"For example, in the Preface of Christ the King there are 13 lines and 88 words in one sentence. How will this promote intelligible and meaningful prayer?" he asked.

He noted that the current English version of the Nicene Creed divides it into four parts, introducing each with the phrase "we believe."

The new version opens with "I believe" -- which "goes against all ecumenical agreements regarding common prayer texts" -- and does not repeat it even once through the rest of the prayer, he said.

"This results in incomplete non-grammatical sentences for the different articles of faith," he said, noting that one sentence 26 lines down into the Creed begins, "And in the Holy Spirit, the lord, the giver of life." The so-called sentence "lacks a subject and a predicate," he said.

He quoted from Vatican II's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, which said that liturgical rites and texts "should radiate a noble simplicity. They should be short, clear, free from useless repetition. They should be within the people's powers of comprehension, and normally should not require much explanation."

"If a translated text -- no matter how exact and faithful to the original Latin -- does not communicate in the living language of the worshiping assembly, it fails pastorally; it fails to dispose God's people to participate

fully, consciously and actively in the Eucharist," Trautman said.

On the imposition of a new "sacred vocabulary" in the new Missal texts, he cited several examples, including the passage in Eucharistic Prayer I, "When supper was done, he took this precious chalice in his holy and venerable hands." The current text says, "? he took a cup? ."

"Did Jesus at the Last Supper use a precious chalice or a cup?" Trautman asked. "The Gospels clearly say "cup." The Greek uses the word *poterion* which is a drinking vessel or cup."

Jerome's Vulgate used *calyx*, but standard Latin dictionaries define that term as "cup, goblet, drinking vessel," he said.

He said no English translation of the Bible, current or older, uses "chalice" to translate *poterion* or *calyx*, yet the Vatican "has imposed the word 'chalice' on the inspired text to carry out this 'sacred language.' ? To say not just 'chalice' but 'precious chalice' in Eucharistic Prayer I is clearly not a reflection of the biblical texts."

He said the U.S. bishops tried to change the new text back to "cup," but "the Congregation [for Divine Worship and the Sacraments] in Rome changed it. All of this is being done in the name of restoring transcendence."

"Certainly translated liturgical texts should be reverent, noble, inspiring, uplifting, but that does not mean archaic, remote, incomprehensible," he said. "The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy stipulated vernacular language, not sacred language."

He said scripture "presents God under a two-fold image: king and neighbor, transcendence and immanence," and "an exaggerated attention to the sacred distorts the balance."

"Our liturgy needs not a 'sacred language' but a pastoral language that will fulfill the mandate of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy for full, conscious and active participation," Trautman said. "The noble simplicity recommended by the Council Fathers needs to be emphasized."

He said amendments made by the U.S. bishops to the new translations done by the Vatican-approved scholars of the International Commission on English in the Liturgy have resulted in a text that "is vastly improved but not mature at this point for the worship life of the church."

At its present stage the new translation "does not have a pastoral style" that would lead American Catholics to "own the prayer text, its vocabulary, its style, its idiom, its cadence," he said.

"If the Roman Missal does not speak to our culture, the church in the United States will suffer," he said.

[Jerry Filteau is *NCR* Washington correspondent.]

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