

Seattle pastor begins effort to review new missal translations

Thomas C. Fox | Dec. 10, 2009



Fr. Michael Ryan

Saying he woefully aware of how difficult it is going to be to "sell" faithful Catholics on the new translations of the Catholic missal, a Seattle pastor has begun a nationwide campaign to slowdown the program.

"For some time I've followed the bishops' debates, read many of the new texts, discussed them with brother priests, and visited about them with Catholics in the pews, and I've become aware of how difficult it's going to be to "sell" ordinary, faithful, good Catholics on the new, Latinized translations of the Missal," said Father Michael G. Ryan, pastor of St. James Cathedral for more than two decades.

"And with good reason, because some of them, in my opinion, are very poor and the principles underlying the translations are highly questionable."

Ryan said he is "troubled" when he realizes that it's "almost exclusively the overburdened pastors of this country who will be saddled with the task of getting people to understand why they are getting new translations and why the translations will be better than what they're used to."

"To put it as succinctly as possible, if I haven't been able to sell myself on this, how will I ever successfully sell it to the people I serve!"

So, said Ryan, he decided to start the "What If We Said 'Wait?'" campaign, the case for what he calls a grass-roots review of the new Roman missal. To this end he has set up a [web site](#) [1] and has [written an article in the Dec. 14 issue of America.](#) [2]

[Examples of the Current and New Missal Translations](#)

[3]

I spoke with Ryan this week to find out more his campaign. This question and answer grew out of that conversation.

Fox: Why did you start this campaign?

Ryan: For months I've been talking with priest-friends and associates whose reaction to the coming new translations was the same as mine. They lived in dread of them. They felt they were inferior, clumsy, and altogether unworthy of our greatest prayer. And, like me, they knew that the "selling" of the translations to the people would rest on their shoulders and on the shoulders of pastors all over the world. How would they convince their people of the value of making such significant changes if they themselves were not only unconvinced of their value but actually convinced that the translations were a disaster-in-the-making?

The more I thought about this the more I became convinced that something needed to be done, but everyone I talked with told me it was pointless. It was either too late because the translations were all but a fait accompli, or it was futile because no one in authority would pay attention. I suspected they were right but to me that didn't seem reason enough to remain silent. I kept thinking of our people whose prayer life this is and of my responsibility to them as a pastor. If I didn't speak up on their behalf and if no one else did how would I ever live with myself? So I sat down one day and put my thoughts down on paper. My first couple of drafts were pretty incendiary. My theme was not "What if we just said 'wait'?" but "What if we just said 'no'?" It was a call to my brother priests to stand up on behalf of our people and draw a line in the sand.

Over time, I realized that a more reasoned approach that invited the response not just of brother priests but of our people as well would be more constructive and in the spirit of what the church is all about. The church I have served as a priest for nearly 45 years, the church of the Second Vatican Council, is one that values dialogue and honors the fact that the Spirit speaks through all the people, not just the hierarchy. Why not, then, involve them by inviting their response? Why not take the time to test the new translations in a careful and methodical way? Didn't something of this importance deserve something better than a mandate from on high and a potentially manipulative catechetical program for introducing the new translations?

Are there other reasons?

Like many people, I care about good liturgy and I also care about good English. Good liturgy demands the best we have and will be compromised by texts that are awkward, arcane, clumsy, and in many cases far removed from the way people speak. That is not to say that our texts should be "down home" and colloquial. Far from it. They should be dignified, elegant, poetic, traditional in the best sense of that word, and easily understandable. And in the case of texts that are meant to be set to music, they should also lend themselves to a metrical form.

Bishop Donald Trautman, who has given more effort to this matter than any of the bishops in this country, [has also pointed out](#) [4] that many of the texts that will be proclaimed by the presiding priest will be difficult and even impossible to proclaim in an intelligible way. Some of them violate English grammar and syntax by not even being complete sentences! Add to that a comment of one of my priest friends recently made with regard to foreign-born priests - of which we have a growing number - who for the last several years have labored mightily to preside intelligently and intelligibly at Mass. He expressed the thought that many of them will find these new texts to be a great stumbling block. The same will likely be true for the people with whom they celebrate.

You mentioned the Second Vatican Council. What does all this have to do with it?

Everything. One of the great breakthroughs of the council had to do with the collegiality of bishops. The process followed in bringing about the new translations was, to my way of thinking and I am far from alone -- a clear violation of that great conciliar teaching. When it came to the matter of translation liturgical texts, the council's document on liturgy made it clear that conferences of bishops should appoint their own liturgists and translators who would begin and oversee the work and then submit it to the entire conference for approval. It is true that, under pressure, Pope Paul VI added that the Roman Congregation would then have to give its recognition to translations, but the clear intent was that the initiative would come from local conferences and the translations

would be done by people of their own choosing.

All that was bypassed in the development of the new translations. Not only did the Roman Congregation completely negate the work done by the experts of International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL) over a period of 15 years, they also overturned the very manner by which translations were to be done. Since the council, translations had been done according to the principal of "dynamic equivalency" which allowed for translating according to meaning. Now they were to be done according to the principal of "formal equivalency" which involves pretty much a literalist approach, slavishly tied to the original Latin texts. And, not surprisingly, for the drafting of the new translations they appointed their own hand-picked people who were of like mind.

Other thoughts?

Only that this campaign seemed to be a good way to allow the people to have a voice and speak their mind. The [What If We Just Said Wait?](#) [1] website is not meant to be a referendum but it does give people a chance to weigh in on a very important matter. When people are feeling powerless, it gives them a chance to do something, however small, to express themselves, to find a voice. And they are doing so in quite large numbers across the country, certainly, and even around the English-speaking world. The internet makes this possible. Why not make use of technology like this when it is available? (The Holy Father himself said in May of this year, on the 43rd World Day of Communications, "These new technologies are truly a gift to humanity. They respond to a fundamental desire of people to communicate and to relate to each other," and he urged Catholics to "bring the witness of their faith to the digital world.")

But I would observe that there's a rather sad aspect to this: many people (priests and lay ministers, especially) have chosen to sign on as "anonymous." We provided that option, knowing how many in the church today would fear for their positions were they to sign on. That seems regrettable to me, and I think it says something about the atmosphere of fear in our Church today. I am happy I personally didn't have to deal with that. I had no trouble whatever putting my name to the piece I wrote for America. I have an archbishop who respects people's rights to express their opinion. And I think we have a church where it is still possible to ask questions; where it is still our responsibility to ask questions.

Source URL (retrieved on 2016-05-25 20:42): <http://ncronline.org/news/faith-parish/seattle-pastor-begins-effort-review-new-missal-translations>

Links:

[1] <http://www.whatifwejustsaidwait.org/>

[2] http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=12045

[3] <http://ncronline.org/news/faith-parish/samples-new-latinized-missal-translations>

[4] <http://ncronline.org/news/faith-parish/liturgy-needs-not-sacred-language-pastoral-language>