

Thousands join campaign to delay changes to missal

Nancy Frazier O'Brien Catholic News Service | Feb. 25, 2010



Fr. Michael Ryan

WASHINGTON -- A Seattle pastor who was present in St. Peter's Square as a seminarian in 1963 when Pope Paul VI presented the Second Vatican Council's liturgical document, "Sacrosanctum Concilium," is leading a campaign to delay implementation of the latest English translation of the Roman Missal.

Father Michael G. Ryan, pastor of St. James Cathedral in Seattle since 1988, has gathered more than 17,000 signatures from English-speaking Catholics around the world asking that the new translations of the prayers used at Mass be tested through a pilot program at selected parishes for a year before their full implementation.

"It is ironic, to say the least, that we spend hours of consultation when planning to renovate a church building or parish hall, but little or none when 'renovating' the very language of the liturgy," Ryan wrote in *America* magazine late last year.

As of Feb. 24, his Web site at www.whatifwejustsaidwait.org had registered 17,305 signatures from people who identified themselves as Catholic priests, deacons, religious or laypeople from England, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the U.S. and other English-speaking countries.

"We are convinced that adopting translations that are highly controversial, and which leaders among our bishops as well as many highly respected liturgists and linguists consider to be seriously flawed, will be a grave mistake," says a "statement of concern" endorsed by the signers.

But Bishop Arthur J. Serratelli of Paterson, N.J., chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Divine Worship, said in an article for the March 1 edition of *America* magazine that "the translation process has involved linguistic, biblical and liturgical scholars from each of the 11 English-speaking countries" that belong to the International Commission on English in the Liturgy.

"The texts may be unfamiliar now, but the more one understands their meaning, the more meaningful their use will be in the liturgy," he added.

Although he made no direct reference to Ryan's article or to the campaign to delay use of the missal in U.S. parishes, Serratelli said some have criticized the new text, "often without having seen more than a few examples out of context." He also acknowledged concerns "about unfamiliar vocabulary and unnecessarily complicated sentence structures."

But the bishop said that because of his involvement with ICEL and the divine worship committee, "I can attest that the new translation is good and worthy of use."

"It is not perfect, but perfection will come only when the liturgy on earth gives way to that of heaven, where all the saints praise God with one voice," he added.

According to an announcement at the Vatican in late January, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments is pulling together the final version of the English translation of the missal. Because bishops' conferences approved the Roman Missal in sections over a period of years, a final review and minor edits were needed to ensure consistency, said a congregation official.

Most English-speaking bishops' conferences are preparing materials to introduce and explain the new translation with the hope that people will begin using it in parishes at the beginning of Advent 2011.

But in South Africa, where the bishops' conference mistakenly introduced the new translations into parish use in late 2008, much of the reaction has not been positive.

The Southern Cross, South Africa's Catholic weekly, reported early in 2009 that it received "a flood of letters" about the changes.

"Almost all of them are angry; none gave the revised version unqualified support. One correspondent, in a passage excised from the published version, went as far as writing: 'I hate you, hierarchy.' Feelings are running deep indeed," the newspaper said in an editorial.

"The anger of the people in the pews and many priests (and some bishops) seems to be rooted not so much in what they feel are anachronistic and clumsy translations -- vexing though they appear to be to many -- but in what they see as an arbitrary imposition of liturgical values that are foreign to them by faceless bureaucrats in distant Rome," the editorial said.

Gunther Simmermacher, editor of The Southern Cross, told CNS Feb. 25 that, a year later, "there are still many people who are emphatic in their opposition to the translations, but it is difficult to say how strong they are in numbers -- or, indeed, how strong those who support the changes are."

But even in cases where opposition was initially strong, there appears to be now "a sense of resignation, that 'resistance is futile,' as one priest put it to me," Simmermacher added in an e-mail to CNS.

Although priests of the Archdiocese of Cape Town, South Africa, were almost unanimous in their rejection of the translations at a meeting a year ago, for example, "a few months later almost all parishes had begun implementing them," he said.

"I don't think most of the faithful care one way or another," Simmermacher added. "They trust that there are good reasons for whatever is being implemented."

Under Ryan's proposal for the U.S., each region of bishops would designate places where the new translations would be used for a year, "with carefully planned catechesis and thorough, honest evaluation." The sites would include urban and rural parishes, affluent and poor parishes, large, multicultural parishes and small ones, religious communities and college campuses, he said.

Opposition to the translations "might smack of insubordination," Ryan said in his America article, "but it could also be a show of loyalty and plain good sense -- loyalty not to any ideological agenda but to our people ... and good sense to anyone who stops to think about what is at stake here."

"What is at stake, it seems to me, is nothing less than the church's credibility," he added. "Does obedience mean going against our best pastoral instincts in order to promote something that we believe will, in the end, actually bring discredit to the church and further disillusionment to the people? I do not think so."

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