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Anglican: New Mass translation ecumenically harmful

Cindy Wooden Catholic News Service | May. 5, 2011

ROME -- Because the Roman Catholic Church was a driving force behind the development of a common English translation of basic prayers used by many Christian churches for 40 years, more recent Vatican rules for translating Mass prayers "came as a bombshell," said an Anglican liturgist.

"I do not contest for a moment the prerogative of churches to change their liturgical texts," said the Rev. David Holeton, a professor at Charles University in Prague.

But he said other Christians were "both stunned and dismayed" when the Vatican abandoned the English texts of prayers Catholics had developed with them since the Second Vatican Council and when the Vatican discouraged Catholics from consulting ecumenically on the new translations.

The Anglican liturgist spoke May 5 at a conference marking the 50th anniversary of Rome's Pontifical Liturgical Institute.

He quoted "Liturgiam Authenticam" ("The Authentic Liturgy"), the Vatican document on liturgical translations, which said: "Great caution is to be taken to avoid a wording or style that the Catholic faithful would confuse with the manner of speech of non-Catholic ecclesial communities or of other religions, so that such a factor will not cause them confusion or discomfort."

Rev. Holeton asked if "slavish conformity" to the Vatican document on translations was a greater priority for the Catholic Church than its commitment to promoting Christian unity.

The use of common texts in English by dozens of Christian denominations around the world, as well as the way many of them reformed their liturgies, were inspired by the Catholic Church and the Second Vatican Council, he said.

"Liturgical reform and renewal have played a priceless role in paving the road toward Christian unity," he said.

When English-speaking Christians have visited each other's churches, even if the liturgies weren't exactly the same, there was "a sense of familiarity" and a feeling that "they were not with strangers but among friends," Rev. Holeton said. "Both the sense of being 'at home' and of being 'among friends' are foundational paving stones on the way to Christian unity and it is the liturgy, more than anything else, that has nurtured this sense of communality."

Concern over the abandonment of common texts "is a very raw point at the moment and has created an atmosphere of ecumenical mistrust," he said.

"We have seen the fruit that has been borne since the (Second Vatican) council, and we hope that the tree that bore it has just been badly pruned and not hewn down," Rev. Holeton said.

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