NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Anthony Ruff: The accidental activist

Jamie Manson | Oct. 19, 2011 Grace on the Margins

The last time Father Anthony Ruff, OSB, came to New York, he was visiting with an editor from *First Things*, a theologically and politically conservative journal founded by the late Richard John Neuhaus, six years ago.

Ruff recently returned to Manhattan to offer the first presentation sponsored by the newly formed New York City chapter of Call to Action. Since CTA groups are rarely allowed to meet on Roman Catholic property, Ruff gave the lecture in the common room of an Episcopal Church in Greenwich Village.

This radical change of scene isn't the only transformation that has marked Ruff's life in the last six years.

A monk of St. John's Abbey and professor of liturgy, liturgical music and Gregorian chant at St. John's University in Minnesota, Ruff accepted an invitation to join the team of the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL) in 2005.

Earlier this year, six years into his work with ICEL, Ruff suddenly resigned. He published an open letter to U.S. Catholic Bishops in *America* magazine [1] explaining why he why he withdrew from all of his speaking engagements on the new Roman Missal.

"I'm sure bishops want a speaker who can put the new missal in a positive light," Ruff wrote in February of this year, "and that would require me to say things I do not believe."

Ruff joined ICEL for reasons similar to those that led him to associate with the editors of *First Things*. He was committed to guarding and promoting faithfulness to church tradition. Back then, he believed that the current Missal used in the United States "was a symptom of a mistake: that Vatican II had implemented these texts in a way that was too liberal and too much a sell-out to the secular world."

ICEL is a translating agency formed in 1963 by English-speaking bishops at the Second Vatican Council in response to the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy's decree calling for translations of the Missal into the vernacular. Article 22 of the constitution stated that these translations were to be "prepared and approved by territorial bodies of bishops," such as the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

But six weeks after the bishops approved the constitution, the Vatican sent out its first instruction stipulating that these translations would have to be sent to Rome and be approved by the Holy See. The bishops' memories were long enough to recall that they did not agree to this arrangement.

Assuming goodwill on the part of the Holy See, the bishops acquiesced.

"They didn't know that in future years, further instructions would give more and more power to the center," Ruff said.

Throughout his almost two-hour lecture, Ruff took pains to chronicle the history of the translation of the Missal beginning in 1963, and was careful to ensure that his portrait of its development was accurate and balanced. He read directly from a number of church documents and explained the theological implications of liturgical language.

Ruff pointed out that Rome gave ICEL a remarkable amount of freedom as it embarked on translating the Latin into English. In a 1969 document, the Vatican reminded ICEL that it was "necessary to take into account not only the message to be conveyed, but also the speaker, the audience and the style." By providing this guideline, the hierarchy was working from their own theory of how Christianity ought to relate to local cultures.

In 1969, the Vatican recognized that these translations would be somewhat loose, and that eventually translations from Latin would not be adequate. The ultimate goal was that all the texts of the Missal would be created in the original language rather than translated from the Latin.

But history did not pan out that way. By 2001, Rome's primary emphasis had shifted from respect for receiving cultures to respect for, if not idolization of, the original Latin language of the Missal.

This shift was made evident by the Vatican's 2001 establishment of an advisory committee, known as Vox Clara, to oversee ICEL. Previously, ICEL was directly supervised by Rome. Under this new arrangement, Vox Clara's power was upgraded, and ICEL's authority was significantly downgraded.

Vox Clara was a committee that met several times a year for three days at a time. ICEL was a high-functioning office staffed with full-time employees, consultants and translators. And yet, Vox Clara was suddenly entrusted with the power to override any of ICEL's work.

More than 7,000 consultants worked on various aspects of ICEL's translation of the new Missal. Every translator was appointed by invitation only -- and he was appointed by someone to whom he was ultimately obedient. Ruff himself was not appointed since, as a musician, his task was to set the new translations to melodies.

The process was highly secretive. No progress reports were ever published, and no drafts were made available to those who requested them. This was a marked departure from the protocol followed by ICEL in the 1980s and 1990s.

ICEL completed its translation of the new Missal in 2008, and the text was handed over to Vox Clara and the Vatican. Rome made more than 10,000 changes to ICEL's text, many of them unexplainable. The resulting translations from the Latin were so literal that some of the renderings in English sounded convoluted, if not confusing.

Worst of all, the Vatican's version wasn't based on the final draft submitted by ICEL.

"It was as if they pulled up the wrong file to work on. The last three years of consultation felt as if it was all for

nothing," Ruff said. Even though more than 100 bishops approved ICEL's work, Rome trumped them all.

Beyond his objections as a liturgist, on a pastoral level this cumbersome wording worries Ruff.

"I offer Mass for inmates at an area prison," he told the audience. "Some of them cannot even read English." How will these men and women adapt to the changes and find meaning in this language?

What troubles Ruff most about the experience is that not one bishop, even those with close ties to Rome, seemed to have the courage to speak up.

"Our system is not set up to tell the truth. It is not possible for those doing the work to say to those in charge 'this isn't working,'" he said.

"The bishops would be critical of Rome's translations over drinks at night, but the next day we would read that they were publicly defending the new Missal as a great moment of renewal. Our problem is that our structure doesn't allow people to say what they believe for the good of the church."

Ruff said he doesn't think all of the changes in the new Missal are bad. But because the process was so cloaked in secrecy, it necessarily became tainted.

"If there had been more collaboration at the table, those who are upset or confused by the new translations might have had the opportunity to see the reasons for the changes," Ruff said. "This lack of transparency leads us to automatically assume the worst of church leadership."

Since his open letter to the bishops, many have asked Ruff whether he is "in trouble" with the hierarchy. At first, he was surprised by these questions.

"This is not exactly a hot-button issue in the way issues of sexuality are. I would hope that we could at least have a variety of opinions about translation."

He has learned, however, that this new translation is just one more symptom of a profound dysfunction in the hierarchical structure.

"It reflects deeply problematic views of the relationship between the See of Peter and local church, the relationship between the church and culture, and the relationship between tradition and the ongoing need for renewal," he said.

These are large problems that pervade the church. But it is a church that Ruff intends to engage in and be a part of for the rest of his life. His own disillusionment with the institutional church has sparked a new kind of creative vision. He now dreams of a renewed church that honors the prophetic tradition while also celebrating the beauty of tradition.

"I would love to belong to a community that was working for the transformation of unjust structures in church and society as well as offering direct outreach to the victims of oppression," he said. "But this fantasy religious community would also pray the entire office in Latin chant. So, I'm not sure I'm going to find many fellow travelers."

Here's hoping that, on this point, Ruff may stand to be pleasantly corrected.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

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