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Making do with a faulty translation

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Literature is displayed on a table during a workshop to prepare priests for the implementation of the third edition of the Roman Missal at St. Elizabeth of Hungary Church in Melville, N.Y., in May. The new Roman Missal will go into use in the U.S. at Advent. (CNS photo/Gregory A. Shemitz)

In the big tent we like to believe the church is, we recognize that tensions exist, that viewpoints differ and that different groups approach the Gospel imperative from different sets of priorities. Tensions exist within any big family, and disagreements too are part of family life. In the best of circumstances disagreements can be learning experiences, chances to grow as a family.

Because of our belief in one family in this big tent, we are loath to characterize disagreements as battles. Battles have winners and losers, and no one in the family should be known as a loser. (Historically, losers in church battles have been called schismatics and that is not a nice word to use among family.)

Yet this Sunday, Nov. 27, the first Sunday in Advent, when we are gathered around the eucharistic table -- what should be the greatest sign of our unity -- many of us will feel depressed. We will feel like losers when we hear not the words that Jesus? blood ?will be shed for you and for all? but that Jesus? blood ?will be shed for you and for many.?

This Sunday, Roman Catholics will use for the first time the third edition of the English-language version of the Roman Missal. The change from ?for all? to ?for many? is just one example of a multitude of changes we will hear and cringe at as we pray our way through this new liturgical year. The absence of even an attempt at inclusive language will hurt many in the congregation. Many of us will feel like a battle has been lost.

The scrimmages of this battle have been fought at many levels, from bishop conferences to parish halls. The official Vatican translators themselves have objected to heavy-handed edicts imposed from above. Resigning from the chairmanship of the music committee of the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL) in February, Benedictine Fr. Anthony Ruff wrote:

> The forthcoming missal is but a part of a larger pattern of top-down impositions by a central authority that does not consider itself accountable to the larger church. When I think of how secretive the translation process was, how little consultation was done with priests or laity, how the Holy See allowed a small group to hijack the translation at the final stage, how unsatisfactory the final text is, how this text was imposed on national conferences of bishops in violation of their legitimate episcopal authority, how much deception and mischief have marked this process -- and then when I think of Our Lord?s teachings on service and love and unity ... I weep.

The English translation that we have used since 1973 was a rush job done in the first burst of enthusiasm after

the Second Vatican Council. The English-speaking bishops asked for a new translation, a richer translation to better capture the beauty of these prayers. ICEL completed a translation in 1998 and all the English-language bishops? conferences of the world approved it. But the Roman Curia did not.

The Vatican issued new translation guidelines, *Liturgiam authenticam*, in 2001, reorganized ICEL to report not to the English-speaking bishops but to the Curia, and appointed a committee, Vox Clara, to advise it on the approval of English translations. All this was done ostensibly to ensure the authenticity of the translation, but it was clear from the beginning that a clerical, imperial ideology was being imposed on the translation. The poetry of language and beauty of prayers were secondary concerns.

These actions are well-documented and explained in two articles that have appeared this year: ?It Doesn?t Sing: The Trouble with the New Roman Missal? by Rita Ferrone in the July 15 issue of *Commonweal* (online at commonwealmagazine.org/it-doesn?t-sing) and ?Questionable Praise of the Old Liturgy? by Arnold Angenendt in the May issue of *Worship*, probably the most authoritative journal on liturgy in English. We cite these references in full because they are important. They show that the full range of human impulses, good and bad, are at play in this institution, even when it is about sacred work. Keep these texts, study them.

But do not use them to nurse a grudge. If we become bitter and arrested in anger, then we will be losers.

The Eucharist is ?the source and summit of the Christian life.? It is all that we are and what we strive to be. All prayer, but especially the Eucharist, is for deepening our commitment to ourselves and to God. The ?source and summit? line comes from *Lumen Gentium*, ?Light to the Nations,? the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. Later, that same document reminds us that we ?in times past were not a people, but are now the people of God.? We are, the document says, ?the new people of God.?

No words of any language can ever fully express this mystery. That is some consolation. Until we have better words, we can make do with this faulty translation.

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