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My, yours, ours: a prayer out of balance

Melissa Musick Nussbaum | Apr. 16, 2012 My Table Is Spread

Pray, brothers and sisters, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father.

I?ve played with the font -- ?my sacrifice and yours? -- and tinkered with the punctuation -- ?my sacrifice, **and yours**? -- and still the words jar, like a mathematical equation in which the two parts are uneven, and, so, forever out of balance.

As issued by the church in 1975, the translation of the prayer at the presentation of the gifts reads, ?Pray, brethren, that our sacrifice may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father.? Going back to the sums analogy, ?my and,? or, plus, ?yours? equals ?ours.? Why, then, did this part of the Mass need a new translation? My sacrifice and yours is our sacrifice.

The need, we are told, is to move from a ?dynamic equivalent? of the Latin rendered in English to a ?formal equivalent? of the Latin rendered in English. But the work of the translator is both dynamic *and* formal. Formal because the translator must respect the original language and meaning, and dynamic because translation is, by its nature, a movement from one thing to another. The Latin root, *trans*, means across. Words come across from one language to another by means of translation.

If the plain meaning, in both Latin and English, of ?my? and ?yours? is ?ours,? what purpose does this new wording serve?

If the phrase is meant to express different roles, priest and lay, different in function but equal before God, then the construction would follow the pattern of the Nicene Creed. How do we express the reality of God the Father and God the Son, separate, but consubstantial, or one in being? We repeat these rhythmic words, ?God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God.? The balance is kept in word choice and punctuation. There is a clear delineation between the Father and the Son. They are distinct, but one. This unity can be heard and felt, as well as read, proclaimed and understood.

The life of the Christian is made and meant to mirror the life within the Trinity, the household of God. We have distinct roles, but we are one in Christ, one in baptism. The grammar of the revised translation fractures that unity while emphasizing the distinction between roles. ?My sacrifice and yours,? gives an ?oh, yeah? reading to the prayer that is happily missing from the simple and single word ?our.?

?My sacrifice, and -- oh, yeah, right -- yours.?

The sacrifice, of course, is Christ?s sacrifice. Christ offers his body and pours out his blood for us. Christ sets the table, prepares the altar and bids us come. Christ is both victim and priest.

Just as God the Father allows Adam to participate in the work of creation by naming all the animals, so God the Son allows us to participate in the work of the new creation by celebrating Mass.

The commentary preceding this prayer makes this clear:

?Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation, for through your goodness we have received the bread we offer you: fruit of the earth and work of human hands, it will become the bread of life.?

What we offer has been given to us. We have not created or summoned forth or manufactured these gifts. The fruits of the earth are God?s gift to us. Our work in making bread and wine out of wheat and grapes is God?s courtesy in allowing us, like Adam, to work in cooperation with God.

God gives these gifts; we offer them back in praise and worship.

The rest of the prayer emphasizes God?s goodness and our reception. Eucharistic Prayer I, the Roman canon, is laced with these bold declarations:

?We make humble prayer and petition,? and ?We offer you,? and ?We offer you this sacrifice of praise.? It is ?we,? not ?I? and ?you.?

The prayer continues:

?Lord, we pray: graciously accept this oblation of our service,? and ?We, your servants and your holy people, offer to your glorious majesty from the gifts that you have given us.?

Based on frequency alone, it seems clear that the phrase ?my sacrifice and yours? is the outlier, and the use of the words ?we? and ?our/s? is the standard.

We have this new revision. It is here to stay. But having a rite that has been revised means having a rite that can be revised, when change is necessary and right. A return to the simple word ?our? in the *Orate Fratres* portion of the Mass is such a necessary change, both for good understanding and good order.

My parish priest and I have different roles. It would be foolish to pretend otherwise. Like the apostle Paul, we can name our distinctions. When he writes to the Colossian church he is not foolish enough to suppose that they are unaware of ?Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free.?

Then he points the Colossians to a higher truth and an everlasting one: ?But Christ is all in all.? Before the altar, or as Paul writes, ?here,? there is neither Greek nor Jew, slave nor free. We all bow and bend. We all receive what we can neither fully understand nor ever fully repay, the love of God poured out in Christ Jesus. We are one, ?God?s chosen ones, holy and beloved.? May the words of the liturgy reflect and remind us of the truth of who, and whose, we are.

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