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Bishops' staffer: 'Lamb of God' changes immediate

Joshua J. McElwee | Oct. 15, 2012

Changes ordered by the U.S. bishops to the music used during the Catholic Mass are effective immediately, the head of the bishops' worship office said Monday.

Mass-goers should no longer refer to Jesus by any title but "Lamb of God" before they receive Communion, said Msgr. Richard Hilgartner, the executive director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Divine Worship.

The change, first announced in the latest edition of a newsletter put out by the bishops' Committee on Divine Worship, affects the music Catholics use during the last part of the Mass when they sing or chant: "Lamb of God, you who take away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us."

While the Latin version of the Mass specifies that the refrain is to be sung three times before the faithful proceed to receive Communion, congregations in many U.S. parishes have been known to extend the litany, sometimes including other titles for Jesus, such as "Word of God," "Bread of Life" or "Light of Peace."

According to the bishops' newsletter, the U.S. bishops' Administrative Committee, a group of 36 American bishops, approved the changes to the music in September following a request by the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments.

Hilgartner told *NCR* the decision to make the change came after a Vatican official wrote to New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the head of the U.S. bishops conference, saying a document the bishops approved in 2007 allowing for flexibility on the matter "was contrary" to church law.

That 2007 document, "Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship," was approved by a wide majority of the bishops as a set of "non-binding" guidelines. Those guidelines, Hilgartner said, conflicted with the 2010 version of the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, the Vatican document that governs the celebration of the Catholic Mass.

"What the Holy See was observing was that our non-binding guidelines actually contradict the law, which they can't do," Hilgartner said. "The bishops can't post some guideline that's contrary to the law.

"The letter pointed out that even though we could argue from custom that it had been practice to allow that ... the law does not allow for adapting that text," Hilgartner said. "The General Instruction does not allow for adapting the text or adding other invocations."

According to the bishops' newsletter, Dolan received the notice regarding the issue "earlier this year" from Archbishop J. Augustine Di Noia, an American who until June was the second in command at the Vatican's worship congregation.

Several liturgists and liturgical composers contacted by *NCR* for comment [1] about the change last week said they were unsurprised the Vatican has decided the longer versions were no longer necessary, but they expressed

frustration that the Vatican congregation was apparently issuing directives to bishops' conferences on the matter.

Fr. Jan Michael Joncas, a Catholic liturgical composer and liturgist, told *NCR* the changes to the music of the "Lamb of God" are one side of "two kinds of visions for how liturgical reform/renewal/restoration goes forward."

"One is a restrictive form in which you are limited to precisely the texts that are offered in the officially approved Roman missal," said Joncas, an associate professor of Catholic studies and theology at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minn. "And that's really what has taken place now."

At the same time, Joncas said, the new version of the Mass has also shortened the time required for the consecration of the bread and wine, meaning there is less time for the congregation to sing before receiving Communion.

Hilgartner said the revisions in the new version of the Mass made an extended version of the "Lamb of God" unnecessary.

"In most places, the pastoral reality is that there isn't a need for a protracted 'Lamb of God,' " Hilgartner said.

Referring to a 2004 instruction from the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship, *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, Hilgartner said "the impact of this change is far less substantial than it would have been prior to the change in the procedures in 2004."

The 2004 instruction, which was prepared with help from the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, outlined a number of alleged abuses that were occurring during the Mass, calling some "even quite grave."

Regarding the "Lamb of God" litany, that document said its singing "should be brief."

"The abuse that has prevailed in some places, by which this rite is unnecessarily prolonged and given undue emphasis, with laypersons also helping in contradiction to the norms, should be corrected with all haste," the document read [2].

Asked what kind of consultation the bishops had with liturgists before deciding to change the 2007 document, Hilgartner said while the worship committee has several non-bishop consultants, the bishops' administrative committee decided to make the change on their own because they thought it was clear that their 2007 document was out of line with church law.

"The decision of the administrative committee was that ... there was a clear hierarchy of documentation that said, 'Here's what the law says. "Sing to the Lord" was clearly going beyond what the law said, or even counter to what the law said,' " Hilgartner said.

"And so the decision of the administrative committee of the conference and Cardinal Dolan, who was the recipient of the letter, was to make the change to comply with the law."

According to the bishops' newsletter [3], the paragraph in the 2007 document that mentions the matter has now been changed to reflect the change in music before Communion.

Referring to the Latin for "Lamb of God," the newsletter says that paragraph now reads: "The *Agnus Dei* should not be prolonged unnecessarily nor may other texts be added to this chant."

The bishops' committee's newsletter also states that the entire text of "Sing to the Lord" is undergoing an "editorial review" following the changes in the translation of the English version of the Mass.

In his interview, Hilgartner said those changes "will simply be cosmetic."

"The only substantial change will be this change relative to the 'Lamb of God,' " he said.

The 2010 General Instruction of the Roman Missal, which is available on the U.S. bishops' conference website, devotes three sentences to describing the "Lamb of God" litany.

"The supplication Agnus Dei (Lamb of God) is usually sung by the choir or cantor with the congregation replying; or at least recited aloud," it states [4].

"This invocation accompanies the fraction of the bread and, for this reason, may be repeated as many times as necessary until the rite has been completed. The final time it concludes with the words grant us peace."

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