

Bob Harvey

VATICAN CRACKDOWN ENDS GENDER-NEUTRAL LITURGY

In a new war on words, the Vatican has ordered bishops around the world to correct faulty translations that have been part of Catholic worship in Canada and other countries for at least a decade.

One of the Vatican's major concerns is the gender-sensitive language that has been a goal of the Canadian bishops since 1984. Under the guidelines set by a document called *Liturgiam Authenticam* (Authentic Liturgy), Jesus may once again invite Peter and other apostles to be "fishers of men" instead of "fishers of people." And the Nicene Creed may say "the Son of God was made man," instead of the Son of God "became truly human."

The Vatican rejects the feminist argument that gender-specific language might make women feel excluded. *Liturgiam Authenticam* says there is nothing in the church's sacred texts that would allow prejudice or discrimination on the basis of gender or race. "It is the task of catechists or of the homilist (teachers and the priest) to transmit that right interpretation of the texts," it says.

Other concerns raised by the Vatican include the retention of the words of biblical passages in popular prayers, and of a distinctly Catholic vocabulary.

Under the guidelines issued last May, bishops around the world have just five years to come up with a plan to correct flaws in existing texts.

Sister Donna Kelly, director of the Canadian Catholic bishops' liturgy office, said "it is hard to know what difference this is going to make to the people in the pews, and when."

The Canadian bishops have been awaiting Vatican approval of a lectionary of scripture readings since 1994, and of a sacramentary, the book of prayers read by priests and the faithful during Mass, since 1998.

"We have no idea how Rome is going to respond to these texts, whether it is going to simply send them back and say 'start all over again' or simply note the things that need

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to be changed,” said Sister Kelly.

The Vatican says liturgical books must be “marked by sound doctrine, which are exact in wording, free from all ideological influence.”

The new crackdown is widely interpreted as aimed primarily at translations produced for English-speaking Catholics in 26 countries by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL). It has refused approval for some ICEL translations and insisted on major changes in others.

In 1999, Cardinal Jorge Medina Estévez, head of the Congregation for Divine Worship, urged a complete reform of ICEL and said it “is not in a position to render to the bishops, to the Holy See and the English-speaking faithful an adequate level of service.” He said that many bishops had complained about the translations, which “assume a particular gravity” because the impact of English on other language groups is “an observed and unavoidable fact.”

Cardinal Medina Estévez said that from that date on, the Vatican must approve all appointments of ICEL staff. In another clash with ICEL, he refused to approve the translation of the rite of ordination, and suggested all the translators be replaced.

The list of ICEL works troubling the Vatican is long, and includes the 1994 English translation of the Catholic Catechism, whose publication had to be delayed for two years for corrections.

A more current problem is the ICEL translation of the sacramentary. It has been awaiting approval from Rome since 1997, and Rev. James Moroney, the U. S. bishops’ adviser on liturgy, said recently that it will probably never be approved.

The Canadian bishops’ English-language sacramentary uses that same ICEL translation.

The Canadian lectionary has been held up in Rome because the scripture readings are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. The first two of the three volumes of the lectionary were published in 1992 and 1993 and are still in use in parishes. The Vatican decided in 1994 there are problems with the language and theology of that gender-sensitive translation, and rejected its use in the Catholic Catechism. Among other

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things, Vatican officials disliked the use of “mortals” as a synonym for “humans” and rejected “humankind” as too abstract in many instances.

As a result, the third volume of the Canadian Lectionary has never been published.

Rev. Paul McDonald thinks he knows why. He recently moved to a parish in Niagara on the Lake, where he is using the lectionary for the first time.

He says there are many faults with it, including a lack of reverence for God. Instead of “beseeching” God or “begging” God, as they once did in Latin, Catholics now sound like they are ordering God around, with phrases like “Remember, Lord...” or “Look with favour on these offerings.”

Some translations are also simply inaccurate, he said. One example is the story of Herod’s slaughter of all the boys in Bethlehem in an attempt to kill Jesus. In the lectionary’s translation, Herod orders the slaughter not of male children, but of “all children.”

“That is just not true,” said Father McDonald.

Msgr. Peter Schonenbach, general secretary of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, visited Rome in November with the CCCB president, Bishop Jacques Berthelet, and they discussed the long delay on approvals of the lectionary and the sacramentary with Vatican officials.

“Our general feeling is that it is not as bad as it looks,” said Msgr. Schonenbach.

But he admitted the lack of Vatican approval “is causing us a bit of a crunch financially. We were hoping to have the sacramentary back so we could publish it and sell it.”

Msgr. Schonenbach said the controversy over *Liturgiam Authenticam* and the Canadian translations will also “play into some sort of polarization in certain dioceses, where you have some groups that are extremely conservative.

“They will be looking at the document, examining what things have been done, and telling bishops that some things are deviant. So in that sense there will be some irritants,” he said.

In a 1997 survey in the U.S., seven in 10 Catholics rejected the notion that liturgical texts should be written in more inclusive language. According to the survey commissioned

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by Catholic World Report, women were no more likely than men to want inclusive translations.

Msgr. Schonenbach said the Canadian bishops' real difficulty with *Liturgiam Authenticam* is its attempt to limit the number of translations, because of concerns that some languages may not have the linguistic resources necessary to adequately express the Catholic faith. "We raised that in several places in Rome and feel very strongly about it, because of our northern missions," he said.

Many Catholic missionaries are already using books that have been translated into Cree, Ojibway and other native languages. "It would be a shame if we had to backtrack on that good work," said Msgr. Schonenbach.

Liturgiam Authenticam clearly repudiates a 1969 document, *Comme le Prevoit*, which promoted translation of the thought behind the words, instead of a literal translation. That principle, labelled "dynamic equivalency," guided many of the translations that began coming out after the Roman Catholic church decided in the 1960s to end almost two millennia of worship in Latin in favor of worship in hundreds of contemporary languages.

In *Liturgiam Authenticam*, Vatican gave notice that it will no longer tolerate translators who inject their own views instead of faithfully translating the historic documents that are the basis of today's Mass. One example of that practice is set out in an ICEL memo explaining why its translators decided to eliminate use of the masculine pronoun for God in its translation of the Book of Psalms.

"The revision committee proceeded on the conviction that the bishops would agree that urgent pastoral needs override the demand for strict literalism. To that end we eliminate the use of the masculine pronoun for God where it can be done gracefully," said ICEL.

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