

by John L. Allen Jr.

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Editor's Note: *This article first appeared in the Sept. 25, 1998, issue of NCR under the headline: "On the lectionary, 11 men made the deal."*

Eighteen months ago, 11 men met in the Vatican to overhaul the American lectionary, the collection of scripture readings authorized for use in the Mass. Short-circuiting a six-year debate over "inclusive language" by retaining many of the most controversial uses of masculine vocabulary, and revamping texts approved by the U.S. bishops, this group decided how the Bible will sound in the American church.

To this day, the bishops, Bible scholars and liturgists whose contributions to the lectionary were either dumped or revised can only guess who was at the table when the decisions were made. Rome never said whose advice on questions of detail mattered, whose scholarship was relied on to settle disputes -- information vital, observers say, to evaluating the credibility of the work.

Over the past few weeks, NCR has learned who the members of this special Vatican working group were and pieced together something of their backgrounds. Based on this information, certain points -- long the subject of rumor -- can now be confirmed:

- Only one of the 11 men -- no women were included -- holds a graduate degree in scripture studies;

- Two members of the group were not native English-speakers, and another is from the United Kingdom with no significant time in the United States -- critical, some say, to an appreciation of idiomatic American English;
- At least one of the advisers was a graduate student at the time of the meeting;
- Several members of the group had a history of objecting to inclusive-language translations, including two of the American archbishops and the lone scripture scholar.

What has also become clear is that the elaborate consultative process used in developing English-language translations for nearly three decades meant little. Powers in Rome handpicked a small group of men who in two weeks undid work that had taken dozens of years.

"This is the scandal of it," said one source close to the battle over the lectionary, upon hearing the names of those involved. "These decisions were being made by unqualified people with a clear bias against inclusive language," said the source, who asked not to be identified.

Working group members

Members of the working group interviewed for this article see it differently, arguing that dozens of scripture scholars had been consulted along the way to that Vatican meeting. Putting together a lectionary, they say, is about more than Bible scholarship -- it's about liturgy, doctrine and the exercise of pastoral office.

The working group met from Feb. 24 to March 8, 1997, in the offices of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. It consisted of four archbishops, five advisers and two note-takers.

The four prelates were: Jerome Hanus of Dubuque, Iowa, the chair of the bishops liturgy committee; William Levada of San Francisco; Justin Rigali of St. Louis; and Cardinal Francis Stafford, formerly of Denver and now head of the Pontifical Council for the Laity. As a member of the doctrinal congregation, Stafford chaired the group's sessions. The bishops' names were made public at the time and widely reported.

The other members, whose names are published here for the first time, were Marist Fr. Anthony Ward, Jesuit Fr. Mario Lessi-Ariosto, Fr. Thomas Fucinaro, Fr. Charles Brown, and Michael Waldstein. Ward, Lessi-Ariosto and Fucinaro work for the

Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, while Brown works for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Waldstein, an Austrian layman who was teaching at the University of Notre Dame at the time, was the lone outside expert.

The group was rounded out by two note-takers: Fr. James Moroney, head of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Liturgy, and Fr. Joseph Hauer, Hanus' chancellor in Dubuque.

Hanus told NCR the identities of these other group members were never secret. Most sources contacted for this article, however, said they regarded them as such, citing Rome's long-standing practice of demanding that the identities of advisers and consultors be kept confidential. In some cases, sources told NCR, bishops have been asked to formally swear not to reveal the names of those with whom they met after a visit to Rome to discuss translation issues.

The working group is not merely a matter of historical interest. The effects of their deliberations are still being felt, as recently as decisions in June and July by the U.S. bishops to overhaul the lectionary's introduction and to lift the imprimatur from another translation of the psalms. Both decisions were made under pressure from Rome.

Moreover, the working group was the first body to apply a new set of Vatican norms for translation to an American liturgical document. Those norms, which had been issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in secret in the mid-1990s, superseded guidelines for inclusive language translations approved in 1990 by a vote of the full body of U.S. bishops. The Vatican norms ruled out inclusive language in many cases where it had been approved by the U.S. bishops.

By all accounts, Waldstein -- as the only Bible scholar, and the only one proficient in Hebrew -- played a key role in the group. His native language is German, though he is fluent in English. He's a member of Communion and Liberation, a conservative Catholic group with roots in postwar Italy. Currently, Waldstein runs a conservative theological institute in Austria affiliated with the Franciscan University of Steubenville, Ohio (see accompanying article, page 6).

Lessi-Ariosto's native language is Italian, and his command of English was described by one source as "spotty." Ward, though a native English-speaker and well-regarded scholar, has never spent an extended period in the United States -- much of his career as a priest has been spent in Rome, recently as archivist for St. Peter's

Basilica.

Fucinaro and Brown are American priests on duty in Rome. Both were ordained in 1989, Fucinaro in the diocese of Lincoln, Neb., and Brown in the New York archdiocese. Both went to Rome for graduate studies, Brown in sacramental theology and Fucinaro in canon law.

Though attempts to contact both men in Rome failed, several sources told NCR that Brown had not completed his studies at the time the working group met. They were unsure about Fucinaro's status. An official in the New York archdiocese said Brown's personnel file is incomplete; the chancellor of the Lincoln diocese refused to cooperate with NCR. Both Brown and Fucinaro are relatively lower level employees in their respective congregations but are apparently among the few in either office fluent in English.

Six-year controversy

By late February of 1997, the lectionary had been the subject of controversy for six years. In November 1991, the U.S. bishops approved a new lectionary that included three basic texts: the 1986 New American Bible version of the New Testament, the 1970 New American Bible version of the Old Testament and the 1991 revised New American Bible Psalter, or collection of psalms. In May 1992, Rome confirmed their approval, an act that had up to that point been largely pro forma. In June 1994, however, Rome notified the U.S. bishops that the confirmation was revoked.

"This was a novelty," said Msgr. Fred McManus, former head of the bishops' liturgy office and a longtime consultant for the International Commission on English in the Liturgy -- known as ICEL -- the body charged by English-speaking bishops' conferences with doing translations of liturgical texts.

"Since the bishops began doing a lectionary in the vernacular, back in 1964 or 1965, whatever was sent over [to Rome] was pretty much confirmed. There was never any question about it," McManus said.

That process, he said, reflected the understanding that local bishops' conferences should decide what was appropriate for their own use. "That point is embodied in the Constitution on Liturgy, that formal canonical approbation of texts for use in the liturgy would come from the conferences of bishops," he said. "The history of the process is that the Holy See would offer ready confirmation."

A series of letters, meetings and consultations ensued, culminating in a move unique to the history of the U.S. Catholic church -- the seven U.S. cardinals active at that time went to Rome in December 1996 seeking to resolve the dispute.

At the meeting, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Rome's top doctrinal official, said it was time to tighten up the process. In a speech, he told the cardinals that with the first generation of liturgical texts in the vernacular, "these translations were perhaps not as adequate as they might have been, but there was a real pastoral need to produce them quickly."

With "second generation" texts, however -- such as the new American lectionary -- Ratzinger said more care must be taken. "They will shape the biblical vocabulary, and hence the doctrinal foundation of future generations of believers," he said. The message was clear: There will be no rubber-stamping this time around.

Ratzinger also laid the issue on the line for the U.S. prelates. "I think we all recognize, from the perspective of doctrine, that the principal question is the use of inclusive language," he said.

The meeting with the cardinals led to the creation of the special working group. During its two-week session in late February and early March of 1997, the group decided to dump the more inclusive 1991 Psalter in favor of a 1950s-era translation, with some alterations. With the rest of the Old Testament and the New Testament, the working group made hundreds of changes, some more inclusive and some less so. For example, in Romans 5:12, the group opted to change "through one person sin entered the world" back to "through one man." More generally, the group accepted the Vatican position that it is not permissible to change pronouns from singular ("his") to plural ("their") for the sake of inclusivity.

The group also decided, however, to permit the Greek New Testament term adelphoi to be translated "brothers and sisters" in many cases rather than the more exclusive "brothers."

Rome approved their results, as did the U.S. bishops in June 1997, with a provision that they would review the matter after five years.

It was the decision on the Psalter that most infuriated many inclusive-language advocates. A July newsletter from the U.S. bishops' liturgy committee, summarizing the results of the working group, said that the Hebrew psalms have few masculine

pronouns for God -- but the 1991 translation, which cut down on masculine pronouns, was rejected anyway. Benedictine Sr. Ruth Marlene Fox said the working group "preferred to translate the Bible inaccurately rather than appear to concede to demands for more inclusive word choices" (NCR, Jan. 8, 1998).

Though members of the working group insist that their prime directive was to translate the text accurately, they acknowledge at least one sense in which theological commitments guided their work. Waldstein told NCR that the group wanted to honor traditional Catholic interpretations of scripture -- a point with special importance for the psalms, many of which have been read as references to Jesus.

Psalm 1, for example, reads in the New American Bible version, "Happy is the man who follows not the counsel of the wicked." Waldstein said that, "One device which translators may sometimes use is to use the plural here, but doing so withdraws the text from the possibility of that traditional rendering."

Radical alterations

This sort of theological screening, Waldstein said, is different from the demands of inclusive-language advocates because it does not imply "transformation" of the text.

At the June 1997 U.S. bishops' meeting, Bishop Donald Trautman of Erie, Pa., charged that the new lectionary was less inclusive even than recent translations for Biblical fundamentalists. "If even fundamentalist traditions can use inclusive language and we cannot, what does that say about our biblical scholarship?" he asked (NCR, July 4, 1997).

The lectionary had been "substantially and radically altered," Trautman said at the time, "rendering it no longer an inclusive-language text."

Inclusive language had by the mid-1990s become an ideologically charged concept, with many on the Catholic right arguing that feminists and advocates of women's ordination were twisting the words of scripture to advance their own agendas. Advocates of inclusive language, on the other hand, contended that Bible translators were simply catching up to changes in English, as well as the reality that in most cases scripture addresses both men and women even when grammatically masculine terms are used.

Complicating the issue is that inclusive language is not an "all or nothing" proposition. One key difference is between "horizontal" inclusivity, meaning the use of gender-neutral terms for human beings, and "vertical" inclusivity, avoiding masculine language for God. Debate also swirls around which Greek and Hebrew words must remain masculine and which can be translated more broadly. Making these decisions involves exacting line-by-line analysis of the texts in their original languages.

It is that need for deep familiarity with the original languages, with the "target language" (in this case, English) and with Bible scholarship in general that has led to questions about the qualifications of the Vatican working group.

According to Benedictine Fr. Joseph Jensen, president of the Catholic Biblical Association, almost 100 Bible scholars in the United States had been involved in preparing the texts that formed the basis for the lectionary -- 21 for the New Testament, 40 for the Old Testament and 36 for the Psalter.

But when the final decisions were made in Rome, only one was present -- Waldstein, an Austrian who holds both a license from the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome and a theology doctorate in New Testament and Christian Origins from Harvard. Though Waldstein has been a member of America's major association of Bible scholars, the Society for Biblical Literature, for more than 10 years, Catholic Bible scholars contacted for this article said Waldstein was not regarded as a "major player" in their field.

Waldstein said he did not consult with any of the scripture scholars who had worked on the lectionary in preparation for the working group. "It was not part of the process as far as I was concerned," he said.

Lessi-Ariosto is a former professor of liturgy with "at least a doctorate" in the field, according to Moroney, who described him as an "eminent scholar." He has for the past several years worked for the worship and sacraments congregation. Fucinaro has a degree in canon law, while Brown holds a master's degree from Oxford in theology. Ward is a liturgist, though he holds no degree in that area. Moroney called him "one of the finest liturgy scholars I have ever worked with." Ward has degrees in patristics and theology, and edits a liturgy journal called Ephemerides Liturgicae (a liturgical journal).

The prelates involved likewise possess no special expertise in scripture. Stafford has a graduate degree in social work. Hanus has a degree in theology from St. Anselmo's in Rome, while Rigali holds a degree in canon law and Levada holds a degree in theology, both from Gregorian University in Rome.

Given the critical nature of the decisions on the psalms, it is especially striking that Waldstein was the only member of the working group who had what he called "fluency and facility" in Hebrew. Waldstein told NCR that other members of the group used an "interlinear" edition of the Old Testament, which displays the original Hebrew and an English translation, to follow along. He also said that the American archbishops took a free day during the two weeks to consult with the rector of the Biblicum, or institute for biblical studies in Rome, specifically on the psalms.

Waldstein did not regard the lack of expertise in scripture as a deficiency in the other members of the group. "They didn't really need that sort of training. They had a general source-critical and historical awareness," he said.

A pastoral challenge

Hanus contended that the lack of specialized knowledge of the Bible did not handicap the bishops. "All of us are scholars, we hope. We were approaching this as a pastoral challenge," he said. "We weren't novices to the issues that were at stake."

Moroney said the three American archbishops have "exceptional academic expertise. Their credentials are highly significant. They're well-positioned both as bishops and as people with extensive academic accomplishments on their own resumes."

Should American Bible scholars have been in the group? Yes, according to several sources contacted by NCR. "What would be lost is that you don't have people on the local scene giving input, people who know and work with the local language all the time," said Jesuit Fr. Daniel Harrington, professor at Weston School of Theology in Cambridge, Mass., and editor of New Testament Abstracts. Carolyn Osiek of the Chicago Theological Union echoed the sentiment, saying "of course" American Bible scholars should be present for line-by-line analysis.

"You've got to have confidence in the process," said Richard Clifford, also at Weston and at one time a consultant to the U.S. bishops on the lectionary. Clifford argued that the well-regarded Pontifical Biblical Commission, not ad-hoc groups, should

handle these issues.

"If it's done by the Biblical Commission, the scholarly community will have confidence. [The late Sulpician Fr.] Ray Brown was a member, and he succeeded [Jesuit Fr.] Joseph Fitzmyer. It's hard to have someone more respected than Brown or Fitzmyer." Clifford said that under the terms of reorganization of the Biblical Commission approved by Paul VI, it must be consulted before the issuance of new norms on biblical matters. Apparently that process has not been followed with the American lectionary.

Moroney, however, rejected those suggestions. "Most of the work of scripture scholars was already completed. They were consulted all along the way at every stage of the process," he said. "Would it have been better if an American scripture scholar were there? That's not my judgment to make, and I don't think it's helpful to make it in retrospect."

Speaking off the record, one translator rejected the argument that because Bible scholars had been consulted, there wasn't a need for them in the working group.

"The final rejection of the lectionary was done by this group. Anything that went before was not germane. The decision was made at that table," he said. "That's where the dirty deeds were done."

Hanus makes a different point -- that the pope makes the final decisions, and it's up to him to decide how to do that. To suggest that the input of American scholars or the votes of American bishops should be decisive is not how things work in a universal church.

"All liturgical texts have to be confirmed ultimately by the pope," Hanus told NCR. "So the question is, what is the role of the successor of Peter with respect to local churches and their liturgical texts? The Holy Father is the one who has to confirm that this translation is effective in conveying the faith. It's his responsibility to see that unity is maintained as well as correctness of faith. Not absolute uniformity but sufficient unity."

But in that quest for unity, some observers suggest that the deck was stacked against inclusive language -- that the goal was less unity than conformity to a preordained conclusion.

To begin with, the American bishops who had worked on the lectionary most closely, and who were themselves Bible scholars -- Donald Trautman of Erie, Richard Sklba of Milwaukee and Emil Wcela of Rockville Centre, N.Y., -- were excluded from the working group. Instead, Levada, Rigali and Hanus were named. While Hanus told NCR that "Bishop [Anthony] Pilla [of Cleveland, president of the bishops' conference], was free to appoint whomever he wanted," rumors persist that the Vatican, directly or indirectly, asked for either Levada or Rigali and perhaps both.

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Known for their opinions

Why? Observers suggest it's because both men had a track record of opposing inclusive-language translations. "I heard that Rome requested them, but you'll never get that on the record," said one bishop speaking on condition that he not be identified. "In meetings of the bishops' conference, both men had intervened against ICEL translations before, and had spoken against inclusive language," the bishop said. "It was well-known."

The International Commission on English in the Liturgy is the official translating agency for the 26 English-speaking bishops' conferences. Its texts have become controversial in the 1990s for, among other things, allegedly reflecting "feminist" biases -- most prominently, avoiding masculine vocabulary in translation.

"It was well-known that he [Rigali] was against inclusive language. It's like sending the fox to guard the chicken pen," another source told NCR.
Neither Rigali nor Levada responded to requests for comment on this article.

In some ways, the working group's conclusions seem predictable in light of Ratzinger's Dec. 13 address to the U.S. cardinals. In it, Ratzinger criticized the lectionary for going too far toward "a more extensive or radical view of the requirements of inclusive language" in the New Testament. On the Psalter, he charged that "there are other influences at work in the translation, and these are cause for serious concern." The last comment was taken by many as a reference to pressure from women's groups for inclusive language.

Moroney rejects charges that the group was predisposed to reach its conclusions. "To make a judgment that this person or that person is not committed [to inclusive

language] is an unfair judgment," he said. "No one whose opinion I respect is unambiguously enthusiastic or unambiguously opposed. ... The question of inclusive language is far more complex than that.

"It's not a question of commitment to the principle of faithful inclusivity. It's in the means to achieving that end. It's a muddy, thick process," Moroney said.

Hanus pointed out that in some passages, the group actually made the text more inclusive where they felt accurate translation demanded it. "In four or five texts in the Pauline corpus, where he refers to the `New Adam' or the `New Man,' we actually made it more inclusive -- meaning, we made it more accurate," Hanus said.

No women involved

"No one wants a scripture text that's a paraphrase or a variant in the original text," Moroney said. "The goal is not to purify, expurgate or interpret but to faithfully proclaim the gospel."

Other critics have suggested that since the topic of inclusive language is of special concern to women, the absence of any women in the working group is striking. Waldstein, however, was untroubled. "The issues are well-known. I don't feel having a woman present would have added anything," he said.

Some have raised the question of why this group should be making these decisions in the first place. Why should Rome be deciding how scripture sounds in English, especially after the U.S. bishops had voted overwhelmingly in favor of the translation that Rome rejected? Fr. Jensen of the Catholic Biblical Association articulated this concern in a June 13, 1997, letter to the American bishops. "We are especially concerned over the ecclesial aspects of the matter," he wrote, "compared to which the matter of inclusive language pales into insignificance: On the claim of higher doctrinal competence, the CDF refuses to allow the U.S. hierarchy to determine what is appropriate for their own people."

Hanus, however, sees no rift between the U.S. episcopacy and Rome. "We work in collaboration and appreciate one another's service. The Holy Father's service is universal, and it complements our local perspective," he said.

Hanus argued that as Latin fades as a universal ecclesial language, English is in some ways replacing it -- meaning that the texts approved by the U.S. bishops have

a broader role than simply suiting American tastes. "Many smaller conferences use our texts. We don't normally think of that, but the Holy Father has to think of it. Others will use our books as the basis of translation. It's an unfair cultural imposition, but it's a fact of life. As we talked with the CDF in Rome, it became clear that English is the critical text for smaller language groups that don't have scholars, universities, to assist them," Hanus said.

Hanus insisted that the lectionary issue was resolved appropriately by the right people. "There have been good reasons [for the process followed], which have been clearly articulated to me. I've been satisfied," Hanus said.

But others are far less pleased. "This was a deeply demoralizing process," said one scholar close to the issue. "They [the Vatican] politicized what should have been a careful word-by-word judgment by people who knew what they were doing," the scholar said. "It's as simple as that."

[In 1998, John L. Allen Jr. was an NCR staff writer based in Kansas City, Mo.]

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