USCCB: End may be in sight for great gibbet debate

by John L. Allen Jr.

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Although public attention during the fall meeting of the U.S. bishops this week is largely focused on what the bishops have to say about abortion and the incoming Obama administration, the assembly may also be remembered as the climax of a long-simmering debate over liturgy — one which, improbably, has come to be symbolized by the fairly obscure term “gibbet.”

In recent decades, the Catholic church both in the United States and around the world has seen major debates over liturgy, especially the vexed question of liturgical translation. In broad strokes, the Vatican has insisted on an approach which is closer to the Latin originals and more “Roman” in both syntax and vocabulary, a thrust which has been resisted by some bishops and liturgists who argue for a style that’s more contemporary and closer to the idiom of the local culture.

That debate erupted anew last June when the U.S. bishops met in Orlando to consider a draft of the “Proper of Seasons,” part of a new translation of prayers and other texts for the Mass. Several bishops argued that the new text is too unclear and awkward to be effectively proclaimed in American parishes.

Auxiliary Bishop Richard Sklba of Milwaukee, for example, said last June, “If I have trouble understanding the text when I read it, I wonder how it’s going to be possible to pray with it in the context of worship.”

In terms of concrete examples of that broad indictment, bishops pointed to several alleged oddities in the new text, but the most popular case in point was its use of the word “gibbet” to render the Latin term “patibulum.”
Bishop Victor Galeone of Saint Augustine, Florida, mockingly said, "The last time I heard that word was back in 1949, during Stations of the Cross in Lent." Bishop Donald Trautman of Erie, Pennsylvania, a longtime critic of the new translations, said the draft Proper of Seasons contained a number of archaic and obscure terms, chief among them 'gibbet.'

The International Commission on English in the Liturgy, the translation body responsible for the Proper of Seasons, took the assault on 'gibbet' seriously enough that it issued a statement in its defense after the Orlando meeting.

"None of the critics of this word seems able to produce a workable alternative," that statement read. "'Guillotine', 'electric chair' and 'syringe' share the purpose of patibulum, but not its shape. 'Gallows' denotes a device similar in shape and purpose to a patibulum, but in modern speech seems only be used for structures designed for hanging by a rope. 'Yoke' is a possible translation, but it has the weakness that it denotes the shape of the device but not its purpose, whereas the pati- element in patibulum draws attention to its purpose. A vivid modern translation might be 'death-machine', but this would be found unacceptable by those many commentators who prefer blandness in liturgical language."

"In choosing 'gibbet' to translate patibulum, [ICEL] has also been aware that the phrase 'the gibbet of the Cross' was used by Saint John Fisher."

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In the end, the bishops failed to muster the two-thirds vote needed to approve the Proper of Seasons in Orlando, so it went back for additional tweaking. The text before them this week is the result of that revision and although the new draft may not satisfy its most severe critics, the symbolically laden word 'gibbet' is conspicuously absent.

On the Wednesday of Holy Week, for example, the Orlando version read: "Oh God, who for our sake willed that your Son should suffer on the gibbet of the Cross." That has been retouched to: "Oh God, for our sake you willed that your Son should suffer the ignominy of the Cross." A similar phrase is used in place of 'gibbet' on Good Friday. Elsewhere, 'gibbet' is simply replaced with 'cross.'

Yesterday, Bishop Arthur Serratelli of Paterson, New Jersey, chair of the bishops' committee on liturgy, presented the new draft to the conference. During a press briefing later in the day, Serratelli was asked if deletion of the term 'gibbet' ought to be read as a choice in favor of a text that's more understandable.

"We want to make it accessible, as well as to draw upon the rich diversity of our Biblical and theological language," Serratelli said.

"I wouldn't want to see any of us put on the gibbet of vocabulary," Serratelli laughed.

In fact, regardless of what the bishops decide to do today, they may not have seen the last of "gibbet." The text will have to go to Rome for approval, which means it's possible that "gibbet," as well as other revised points of word choice and sentence structure, could still stage a comeback.

The Proper of Seasons is one part of the much-anticipated new translation of the Roman Missal, the comprehensive collection of prayers and other texts for the Mass. During brief floor discussion yesterday, Serratelli was asked when he expected the project to finally reach completion. The liturgy committee's
hope, he said, is that the U.S. bishops will finish their review of all the translations by November 2010, sending them off to Rome in hopes of speedy approval. That would give publishers a year to crank out new English editions of the Roman Missal, he said, with the roll-out date in parishes thus tentatively set for Advent of 2012.

Knowing the long and bumpy history of translation debates, however, Serratelli quickly added: ?All this is subject to change.?

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