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Bishops' liturgy debate ends in whimper rather than a bang

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Following the most protracted public debate of their June 17-19 spring meeting, the U.S. bishops were unable to make a final decision about four new translations of texts for the Roman Missal, the collection of prayers for use in the Catholic Mass.

Those texts, a set of Masses and prayers for various needs and intentions, represent the latest stage of more than a decade of struggle known colloquially as the "liturgy wars."

Those debates pitted one camp favoring a contemporary and accessible translation against another seeking a more "sacred" and traditional text, closer to the Latin originals. In that sense, the "liturgy wars" are related to deeper tensions in the church surrounding Catholic identity.

In broad strokes, the camp favoring a more traditional text, with Rome's backing, has had the upper hand since the late 1990s, and the texts considered by the bishops in San Antonio bear that stamp.

The four texts up for consideration today were:

- * Masses and prayers for various needs and intentions
- * Votive Masses and Masses for the dead
- * Ritual Masses
- * The Order of Mass II

Bishop Donald Trautman of Erie, Pennsylvania, a longtime advocate of a more contemporary style, opposed the new translations.

t?I say yes to translations faithful to the Latin,? Trautman said, ?but I say no to incomplete sentences, no to thirteen lines in one sentence, no to archaic phrases and texts that aren?t proclaimable, intelligible, or pastorally sensitive to our people.?

t?The texts aren?t ready,? Trautman said.

Bishop Victor Galeone of Saint Augustine, Florida, pointed to negative reaction in South Africa when, by accident, the new texts were accidentally put into use ahead of final Roman approval. He said that one report indicated that "priests and people were up in arms."

"I fear that what occurred there could happen in 2010, 2011, or 2012 here in the United States," Galeone said. "It doesn't seem like proper English."

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Archbishop Oscar Lipscomb, emeritus of Mobile, Alabama, argued that it was time to approve the texts after "eight years of revisions and revisions."

"I think Rome is getting tired of our hunting for reasons to delay, and they're insisting that we move on to catechesis," Lipscomb said.

Bishop Arthur Serratelli of Paterson, New Jersey, chair of the bishops' Committee on Divine Worship, argued that Rome appears determined to have the new Roman Missal completed by 2010, so that if the U.S. bishops drag their heels, they risk "losing the opportunity to influence these translations."

Archbishop Alfred Hughes, emeritus of New Orleans, argued that while ?no text is imperfect,? the new translations do a good job of reflecting a translation style ?not just faithful to the Latin text, but to the doctrinal meaning and to the scriptural and patristic references it contains.?

t?It uses a sacral language that stretches us,? he said, ?that?s poetic and elevates the spirit.?

Archbishop Henry Mansell of Hartford, Connecticut, said that many of the prefaces in the new texts are actually incomplete sentences, which in some cases run on at great length. While not necessarily opposing the translation, Mansell asked if the bishops "can have confidence" that the problem will be fixed in Rome.

Otherwise, the result could be "truly embarrassing," Mansell said.

Serratelli responded that the observation would be passed along.

tIn the end, all four votes were inconclusive, and thus the outcome will have to be settled by mail-in ballots from bishops who weren?t present in San Antonio. Since the final tally fell just short of approval in each case, most observers expect that the texts will eventually be accepted.

Last year, a similar vote on another proposed text for the Mass, the Proper of Seasons, similarly fell short of approval during the bishops' assembly, but was eventually passed by mail ballot.

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