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Pastor's effort merits support

by NCR Editorial Staff



Fr. Michael Ryan

Fr. Michael Ryan is no firebrand liberal out to upend church authority. Pastor of St. James Cathedral parish in Seattle, a position he has held for two decades, he is a measured and thoughtful priest and highly regarded member of the wider community.

Consider what Paul Wilkes, author of *Excellent Catholic Parishes: The Guide to Best Places and Practices*, wrote recently on the NCR Web site: "Father Ryan is the ultimate parish priest, concerned about his people, offering them opportunities for service and providing them with some of the best liturgy I've seen."

So it is worth noting that Ryan has begun a national campaign (see the Web site at www.whatifwejustsaidwait.org) to put the brakes on the implementation of the most recent, Latinized translations of the missal. He explained to *NCR* that had he not taken up the cause (see story) he would forever regret that he had not tried as best he could to serve the interests of his parishioners.

Wish him success. We encourage our readers to go to his Web site and consider signing a petition that will be forwarded to our bishops asking for more examination of the misguided liturgical effort.

Some might dismiss Ryan's campaign as fruitless and impractical. Powerful clerics in Rome and certain

U.S. bishops are intent on having a missal translation that studied liturgists find stilted and awkward and, in places, grammatically incorrect.

Maybe Ryan's efforts will inspire an outpouring of support. Maybe the soundness of his arguments will have an effect. Whatever the outcome, however, the effort has significance well beyond this moment and this issue.

The liturgy flap should not be viewed as a discrete occurrence but as one of a string of events, some ongoing and others more episodic, that are part of the overarching post-Second Vatican Council narrative. Less than 50 years out from that momentous event, the council has become the victim of caricature, constructed both by the extreme left, which treats the council as if it had issued a call for absolute democracy in the church, and the extreme right, which wishes to convince us that the council, held over four years and involving all of the world's bishops, did nothing more than affirm all that had gone before.

The reality, of course, is not so much somewhere in the middle as somewhere parallel to those two conceptions. The undeniable reality is that the council -- different in language and in content from any previous council -- envisioned a significantly changed church. The council opened doors to ideas of serious collegiality and dialogue. While the documents were hardly prescriptive about how such concepts would eventually work themselves out, what was clear from the outset is that the hierarchical culture stood the most to lose from the movement toward decentralized authority and influence indicated by the language of the council.

As noted above, Ryan is no fool, nor, we suspect, does he have inordinate free time to dabble in futile projects. "One of the great breakthroughs of the council had to do with the collegiality of bishops," he told *NCR*. The process that resulted in the new translations was "a clear violation of that great conciliar teaching" as well as a negation by non-experts of 15 years of work by a commission of experts using translation protocols approved by a previous pope.

So Ryan decided to take this unusual step to make the case for prayers that would be more appropriate to not only his parishioners but also the wider U.S. Catholic community.

Ryan makes a profound point: Parish pastors, closest to worshiping communities, understand the needs of worshiping Catholics and the challenges of providing them with good liturgy.

The recent struggle over liturgical translations is part of a larger church panoply: the censures of theologians; the investigation of U.S. women religious; moves by bishops to excommunicate and silence voices who ask hard questions; a lack of episcopal accountability; and, of course, the hierarchy's woeful cover-up of the sex abuse scandal.

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At the heart of these events are fundamental questions that emanate from Vatican II. What does it mean to be the people of God? What kind of church are we? How are we to conduct ourselves? Where is the authority? Where is the accountability?

The theology upon which those answers rest has already been articulated by the council. In many ways the theology is now serving the needs of a community experiencing dramatic demographic shifts and a jarring shortage of ordained ministers.

In time, the extremes and the caricatures will fall away and the realization that our church has already changed -- irrevocably -- since the council will settle in. In the meantime, a pastor from Seattle, understanding the vital need for prayer that is coherent and literate, is leading us in the right direction.

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