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The New Translation of the Mass

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Distinctly Catholic

The new translation of the Mass in English is at the publishers. Controversy continues to surround the translation. Noted liturgist Father Anthony Ruff, O.S.B., recently announced he was canceling speaking engagements about the new translation because he could not, in good conscience, praise the new work. At a liturgical conference in San Francisco, participants were very worried about both the process by which the new translation was achieved and its final form. Still, it appears that come the First Sunday of Advent, we will all be using this new translation.

I am not a liturgist nor a Latinist, so I have no special expertise on the subject. The two smartest priests I know are divided on the subject, one thinks the new translation preferable to the old, the other calls it a disaster. Simply as a Mass-goer, I confess I find some of our current translations a tad pedestrian but I also find some of the new translations clunky.

But, whatever one thinks about the new Missal translation itself, it is very important that we, as a Church, do not lose this opportunity to teach our people about the Mass itself. Many people of my generation ? myself included ? received dreadful CCD instruction. It was only when around the age of thirteen that I began playing the organ at church and became friendly with a very smart priest that I started to learn about the Mass in any meaningful way. I knew the basics, of course, that the Last Supper served as the model of the Mass, that the Jewish Seder was the context for this Last Supper, that unlike our Protestant friends we believed in transubstantiation, although I am not sure I could have explained what transubstantiation meant. Mind you ? it is more important to believe in faith than to understand it, but if we do not understand it, we certainly have difficulty sharing it.

I had never noticed, for example, that the priest always prays to the Father while the people pray to Jesus. This fact of the people praying to Jesus played a critical role in the early Christological debates at the

Councils of Nicaea, Chalcedon and Ephesus: Many bishops were heretics, Arians, who denied the divinity of Christ, but the people of God prayed to Jesus so he had to be God. Indeed, the worst, most regrettable section of the current translation is the Memorial Acclamation. The Latin is clear enough: "Mortem tuam, annuntiamus Domine?" The people address Jesus in the second person: "Your death, we proclaim Lord?." In the English, this became, "Christ has died, Christ is risen?." in the third person. At my parish, the priest only uses the alternate memorial acclamations that are truer to the original Latin, but by far the most commonly used is #1, which has the people of God speaking of Jesus in the third person. Why is this important? Call me silly, but the fact that in the early Church the people of God called on Jesus in the second person seems to evidence the fact that they understood the doctrine of the Incarnation better than the theologians and the bishops. They understood that only a God who was so close He became a man could save them, and that such a savior must be truly God as well.

Some of the criticisms of the new translation also point, naturally, to the role of catechesis. I recall someone objecting to some words that seemed archaic. One such word was "ineffable." I do not know how many people in the pews know that word, but I know that it is a useful word in describing the Godhead. Indeed, unless you find some other way to connote what ineffable means, people will have a flawed understanding of God. There aren't really any great synonyms for the word either. "Inexpressible" is not exactly the same thing. A pastor who thinks his people may not understand the word should teach them about the word, and why it is so perfect for describing the Christian God.

Another related criticism is that some of the new language is too ethereal, that it does not resemble common, every day language and that liturgy should be accessible. There is, I suppose, a spectrum here. Some particular translations do not appear to be ethereal: They appear to follow Latin syntax so rigidly the words become garbled in English. But, there is also something to be said for language that is not common, not everyday, because the Mass is not an everyday happening. The priest, after all, does not wear a toga to the supermarket, but he wears a chasuble at Mass, and what is a chasuble except a toga? Except at Mass, where do we kneel? Oh, if I drop something on the floor, I have to kneel down to pick it up, but at Mass, we kneel down so that we can be picked up by the grace of God and held close.

So, I am hoping to remain a perfect agnostic about the liturgical issues swirling around the new translation. I just hope that our bishops and priests use this time to teach our people about the Mass itself, not just about the words we are using. I hope they will explain why we say the Creed every Sunday, why we kneel at some parts and not at others, where the Eucharistic prayers come from, etc. If people know more about the Mass, they are more likely to participate deeply, and if they participate more deeply, they are more likely to understand and believe deeply. Good or bad, the new translation is an invitation to learn about the Mass again. It would help, as well, if those who champion the new translation would stop using it as a battering ram to hit others over the head.

In a related development, Cardinal Donald Wuerl has just released a new book about the Mass. I have not read it yet, but if it is like a Cardinal Wuerl sermon, you can be sure it will have lots of content, presented very clearly and accessibly. And, if you truly hate the new translation, come on down to the Novus Ordo Mass at Wuerl's cathedral, St. Matthew's, where there is no controversy about the new translation!

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