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US bishops, biblical association resolve dispute

by Jerry Filteau



Boxes containing copies of the New American Bible Revised Edition sit ready to ship from a warehouse in Charlotte, N.C., March 9. (CNS photo/Patricia L. Guilfoyle, Catholic News Herald)

WASHINGTON -- The U.S. bishops and the Catholic Biblical Association of America have settled a three-year-old dispute over how to divide royalties from scripture translations owned by the bishops but coordinated by the biblical association and done by association members.

The association's executive secretary, Benedictine Fr. Joseph Jensen, told *NCR* that, under the new agreement, the biblical association will receive 15 percent of royalties on sales of the New American Bible Revised Edition, or NABRE, which came out in March.

The New American Bible Revised Edition replaced the New American Bible, or NAB, which had been the chief Catholic translation of the Bible in the United States for more than four decades.

The new agreement gives the biblical association a significantly reduced share of royalties -- it was formerly 25 percent -- generated by sales of the revised edition itself and various other books that make use of its copyright translation, such as the Lectionary for use at Mass.

Jensen said that as part of the agreement the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine -- the agency of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops through which the bishops oversee and protect their NAB/NABRE copyrights -- will have more say in the future on how the biblical association spends part of its share of the royalties.

He said the agreement also provides that the bishops' conference will reimburse the association, at the 15 percent rate, for royalty revenues it has lost since the bishops' conference unilaterally halted all royalty distribution to the association in 2008.

The cutoff of royalties forced the association to halt grants for biblical archeological research, for full and partial scholarships for doctoral students in scripture studies, for visiting professorships at the world's two pontifical biblical institutes, and for other programs to advance scripture study. It also undercut the association subsidy for publication of one of the world's leading scholarly journals on scripture, *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*.

In the first year after its royalties were cut off, the association suffered a deficit of nearly \$200,000 in order to honor scholarship and research commitments already made before the bishops' conference halted the royalty proceeds. The association stopped making new grants.

Last summer *NCR* broke the story about the royalties dispute and the negative impact it was having on association support for biblical research and scholarship (*NCR*, Aug. 20, 2010).

As *NCR* reported at that time, most of the Bible royalties received by the bishops' Confraternity of Christian Doctrine went into the general fund to support the operations of the bishops' conference, with only occasional allocations to specific programs supporting Catholic Bible awareness or study.

The new agreement between the biblical association and the bishops' conference was signed June 1 and first reported June 13 by Catholic News Service.

"We're getting 15 percent of the royalties' from now on, Jensen said, and the agreement includes a provision for the conference paying that percentage to the biblical association for "the three years of back royalties" not paid since 2008.

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The new royalty rate will continue for the next 10 years, he said, at which time it will come up for renegotiation.

With the publication of the New American Bible Revised Edition, royalties in the next few years are likely to soar as Catholic publishers issue new versions of the Bible itself and of other books that use it as a basic resource. In recent years, New American Bible royalties have averaged around \$1 million a year, giving the association about \$250,000 a year in income to promote biblical research and scholarship.

Even with the reduced rate of 15 percent, royalty revenues from the new translation could, at least in the next few years, match or exceed income the association has received since the 1970s for its role in producing the New American Bible.

In the new 10-year agreement, Jensen said, "the twist is that in the second five years they [the bishops' conference] will be allowed to give out 50 percent of the grants. ... CBA members can apply to us for

grants, and we approve it and pass it on to them.

"In other words, they don't have the first say about it," he added. "We have the first say, and if we say that these people should get the grant, then we pass it on to them and they're supposed to give them the grant.

"The only thing is that the person then has to go through their regular grant process to get it," he said. "The grant money comes from them, but it's actually our money to dispose of."

The other half of the association royalties will be completely at the disposal of the biblical association, to subsidize periodicals or memberships or other things the association has traditionally used the royalties for, he said.

"We've had a very long, specific, profitable relationship with the bishops' conference through its Confraternity of Christian Doctrine arm that goes back 75 years, back to 1936 when the CCD was founded," Jensen said. "From the beginning we were given the mandate of revising the New Testament, using the original languages."

He said that over that period the relationship has been, on the whole, "very cordial."

"Part of the [new] agreement is that we will have a joint committee, three from their side and three from our side, to make proposals for cooperative endeavors and better relationships," he said.

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- **US bishops, biblical association in dispute over royalties**, Jerry Filteau, Aug. 17, 2010

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