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Latin whiz, 16, finds new liturgy language lacking

by Robert McClory

NCR Today

Erik Baker is a 16-year-old high school student who has been studying Latin since 6th grade. Now as a senior at Evanston Township High School near Chicago, he has completed all the Latin classes available at his school, including the Advanced Placement courses. He is pursuing his ongoing interest through Latin classes at nearby Northwestern University.

Erik has been raised as a Catholic and attends Mass with his family at the Sheil Catholic Center at Northwestern. Recently, when materials were distributed explaining the new liturgical changes based on the original Latin text, he studied them with special interest.

"When I looked at the new version, I had a sort of knee-jerk reaction," Erik said. "What I saw didn't sit well with me. Yeah, the changes are more literal and faithful to the Latin, but is that desirable? Much of the phrasing and the changes seemed kind of ridiculous."

So he did an analysis and wrote a brief essay, not for class, but just to get his reaction down on paper and out of his system. He said he hadn't read any reviews of the translation before he produced his version. A friend of the family suggested *NCR* readers might be interested in Erik's critique.

On the revised Roman missal

By Erik Baker

It's definitely a better translation. That's probably the biggest misconception that critics of the recent revision of the General Roman Missal have. They perceive the new translation as some sort of conservative formalization of the text that is only ostensibly more faithful to the Latin. Unfortunately, that's not the case. Though there are some changes that really are no better, and certainly tend towards

archaic jargon, the vast majority of the dramatic shifts -- especially to the Confiteor, the Gloria, and the Nicene Creed -- are certainly far more accurate.

In fact, looking over the Latin, it's quite clear that the former translation didn't even attempt to be literal. So the question clearly isn't "is it a better translation," if "better" is defined in terms of accuracy vis-a-vis the Latin. The question is "is a more accurate translation desirable?" For many that question will seem like a no-brainer. Of course we want to stay as close to the Latin as possible. And yet, I think it's valuable to use these changes as an opportunity to examine the value of the Latin Mass and ultimately the nature of the Mass itself. I think that the conclusions might be startling.

Let's start at the beginning. The first major change is to the Confiteor, the prayer used in most forms of the Penitential Rite. The new translation translates the adverb "nimis" as "greatly", so that it now reads "I have greatly sinned." It's certainly a dramatic change, but one that's grounded in the Latin. In fact, the word "nimis" means something more than "greatly"; it actually connotes the idea of "excessiveness". The other change is that the Latin "mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa" is now translated "through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault." This is pretty much a literal translation. So the Latin is solid.

The problem, though, is that the Latin itself seems to be hyperbolically critical of humanity. It might aim to promote humility, but inevitably it fosters guilt instead. It promotes a vision of human nature as overwhelmingly and inexorably sinful-- a vision more in line with the heretical Janesenist doctrine of centuries past than Catholic dogma.

An apologist of the translation reminds us that "the guiding principle of the new translation is a closer adherence to the Latin--not a sharper critique of our virtue." But this makes absolutely no sense. Who cares what the "guiding principle" was? The end result is that the Latin is more condemnatory for no discernible reason. And there is no scriptural grounding for this ?sharper critique? either-- the first appearance of the prayer is in 1100 AD, over a millennium after Christ.

The next major change is to the Gloria. Most of the changes are innocuous enough, but there's one at the beginning of the prayer that seems bizarre to me. The familiar "and peace to his people on earth" is changed to "on earth peace to people of good will." Not only is the latter far more awkward in English, but there's also a problematic sentiment implicit in the new phrase. Why are we only praying that people "of good will" receive peace? This seems to say that people who are without "good will" are not deserving of peace.

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But what is "good will"? It seems to me that it could either mean "good" in the virtuous sense of the word, or, more specifically, Catholic. In either case, it expresses a profoundly anti-Christian sentiment. The notion that only moral or Christian people deserve peace and our prayers is anathema to everything Jesus ever taught. There is simply no sound reason for abandoning "love your enemies" simply because it's closer to the Latin. The original *Greek* text recognizes this, and expresses "goodwill to all people." Ironically, the Latin is then actually a *mistranslation* of the Greek. This just highlights the fact that the possibility of human error doesn't disappear when writing church texts. It's hard to see what inherent reason we have for respecting this highly fallible process.

Finally, I think the changes to the Nicene Creed merit some discussion. As before, all of them have good grounding in the Latin, but it's the Latin that's problematic. The first is the fact that all of the "believe"s

are in the first person. This destroys the sense of communal vision found in the "we believe" of the previous translation. Faith becomes something of the individual, by the individual, for the individual -- ironically, a very Protestant idea. Catholicism is supposed to *value* unity and togetherness.

Furthermore, there are two bizarre translations of particular words in the Latin that sound awkward and even obscure: "consubstantial" and "was incarnate." The former is a translation of the word "consubstantialem" in the Latin, so it certainly *resembles* the Latin the most. But does that make it a better translation?

Surely not. The first rule that every Latin translator learns is that often Latin words may look like certain long, rare English words -- but comprehensibility matters more. The same applies to "was incarnate." The whole reason why an English translation is used in the first place is so people can actually understand the Mass. For the average churchgoer "consubstantial" is no more comprehensible than "consubstantialem.?" Ridiculous words defeat the point of a translation in the first place.

Ultimately, the whole affair just begs the question of why the Latin Mass has any particular spiritual significance. It's certainly not Scripture, and it's often just an amalgamation of various communal prayers used throughout Europe for several centuries. In fact, many early bishops would write their own Masses or translations to best fit their community's needs. And that's the essence of Mass. The reason why we come to Mass in the first place rather than just praying by ourselves is the interaction with others that has spiritual importance. In the Mass the people become the Body of Christ, conceived as the organic whole Paul writes about in the famous passage from 1 Corinthians: "for the body is not one member, but many.?"

The problem with the new translation and indeed the notion of a codified Latin Mass at all is that it destroys the communal and egalitarian nature of the act. Rather than an act of *communion* through which the churchgoer relates to God, it becomes an individualistic act through which the churchgoer relates to "experts" in Rome. It sets certain people above others in terms of their knowledge of a dead language and of dogma -- concerns that clearly distract from the message of God. If the Mass has any meaning, it must be grounded in communal concerns and vision-- not an effort to include as many four-syllable words as possible.

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