

THE LANGUAGE OF LITURGY: A TALE OF PRAYER, POWER, AND POLITICS

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Introduction

Since ending my teaching days in 1984, I have tried to keep up in the field of liturgy, both academically and pastorally. Particularly useful has been the LITURGY NETWORK out of Notre Dame University, an international list serve for qualified professionals in liturgy and related fields. We were often notified of coming developments well ahead of time. Moreover, I continue to live spiritually out of the scriptural and liturgical framework of the Catholic tradition. But like most Catholic professional liturgists, I am increasingly skeptical of what is going on in the name of liturgy in the Catholic tradition today.

Some conceptual framework

I find it useful to distinguish among authority, power, and politics. I describe authority as a position or office one has, admitting of any degree of power or powerlessness. Power is the actual use of one's position to move, to implement, to make changes. Politics is the art of the use of power, when and how to use power. In the Catholic Church there are many experts in the use of authority, power, and politics, concentrated particularly in the hierarchy and the Roman Curia.

Another useful concept is patronage. Patronage is the oldest system of using and sharing power in the world, practiced since time unknown. I become your patron, thus sharing power with you and helping you to advance. I accept your patronage, becoming loyal to you, sharing in your power and protection.

Patronage was the reigning system in the Roman empire of Christian beginnings. It included not only the real world of political transactions, but also the invisible world of the gods. So when the empire turned Christian, the city under the patronage of the goddess Diana changed to the patronage of, say, St. Agatha. Sometimes they didn't even need to change the statue. The history of hagiography in the Catholic Church is largely a system of patronage, in which saints are seen as having particular powers, and are therefore prayed to in that way.

Moving to the present, patronage has been the reigning system of getting things done in Afghanistan from time immemorial. American pundits call it graft and corruption; it will last long beyond our occupancy of the country. In the United States we tend to prize highly a system of democratic elections, and try to foist our system upon other peoples, while even here the working out of our political system is carried on mostly by patronage, especially through lobbying and political contributions.

During his time in office, Cardinal Maida of Detroit named 12 auxiliaries from among his parish priests, most of whom soon obtained their own sees and continued to rise, all west of Detroit (there are zones of influence, of course). This is a significant confluence of authority, power, and patronage, the decisive factors in the choice of bishops and auxiliaries. We are all well aware of how Rembert Weakland, though he had a position of authority, had increasingly little real power outside the archdiocese of Milwaukee.

Finally, I am a pluralist by temperament, not a dualist, even granting the importance of dualism in many political and social changes, and its relation to prophecy. And I am a post-modern Christian; I believe, but certainly not as absolutely as I used to.

Liturgical reform: remote history

Leaving aside scholarly research and pastoral efforts at liturgical renewal in the 19th century, I turn to Pius X (1903-1914) - a many-sided pope - as the first papal exponent of a complete reform of the Roman liturgy. While he carried out only a few liturgical reforms such as early 1st Communion for children (eventually very successful) and Church music (mixed results), he did, in his last years, develop a complete plan for the reform of the Roman liturgy, in a sad state of disrepair at that time. He died before he could realize his plan. There was a strong opponent of his reforms named Cardinal Giacomo della Chiesa, and he became Benedict XV. He shelved the whole project.

Toward the end of World War II, Pius XII, (1939-1958) opened up the archives of Pius X and began a project of liturgical reform and renewal. As secretary, he chose a newly ordained priest, Annibale Bugnini, and set up his efforts largely independent of the Congregation of Rites. The first results, reflecting Pius XII's scholarly bent, were the encyclicals Mystici Corporis and Mediator Dei, providing doctrinal foundations for the renewal of the liturgy. Actual reform came in the 1950's with the restoration of the Easter Vigil and Holy Week, beginning at the core of the liturgical year. This was followed by evening Mass, shortening of the Communion fast, increasing optional use of the vernacular in various sacraments and in the missa recitata, a low mass with vernacular hymns and prayers. This all came to a head at the Congress of Assisi in 1956, at which time many other reforms were ready and expected to be launched. But Pius XII, old and sick, contented himself with a radio address on theological/liturgical issues. Upon John XXIII's election, he was presented with all the plans for reform. He decided to incorporate them into his proposal for an ecumenical council.

Second Vatican Council

The Second Vatican Council. We recall that there were a number of initial drafts of documents that were rejected, and they had to start over. Not so with the

liturgy document, already the result of long planning and some pastoral practice. Opponents of the liturgy document, especially in the Congregation of Rites, created a great deal of negative buzz, confident that this revolutionary document would be rejected. To the contrary, and due to the pastoral sense of many of the bishops, it sailed through with only minor changes, on its two premises of liturgical reform (taking place in a certain time frame) and liturgical renewal (a perpetual task). It was the first major document to be approved. Msgr. Annibale Bugnini was a prime mover behind these developments.

Implementation

Paul VI turned to Bugnini and the creation of a super agency called the Concilium, relatively independent of the Roman curia, as the best way to get things done. The Concilium, as a consortium of experts, worked as thoroughly and as fast as they could to turn the document on reform and renewal into the actual life of Christian communities. The reform could only come about in stages; pastoral initiatives sometimes got ahead of reform. A transition time is inherently unstable. Increasingly the bishops of the world called for the reform to be accomplished as quickly as possible, so that things would settle down. This spurred the Concilium to work with all deliberate speed, but they were unable to carry out the kind of worldwide consultation and field work with new rites that had been envisioned.

A word about Latin orations. Reform involved reviewing all the orations in the current Roman missal and the other liturgical books. While there were a good number of excellent Latin texts, many were overly general or meaningless, or inappropriate in a vernacular language, or faultily transmitted through history. There was also a search through older sacramentaries and regional missals (As a liturgy student in Paris, I contributed in a small way to that project). Truth to tell, there were not that many good prayers, which is why, as published, the new Roman sacramentary in Latin contained many rather meaningless and pedestrian prayers, especially the Prayer over the Gifts and the Prayer after Communion. These then got translated into rather pedestrian vernacular prayers. You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.

There was also the problem of working from a dead language, which has denotation but little connotation. And while some ancient Latin prayers may have been composed for oral proclamation, eventually they became mostly literary compositions, to pray as ceremony rather than as communication. This is why the liturgical document Comme le prevoit, 1969, wisely said that eventually new compositions would be needed in vernacular languages.

But here is how ideology and politics work with that issue. Case in point: the eucharistic prayers for masses with children. The originating languages (new

term) were French, German, and Belgian, I believe. Then they were translated into Latin, which then became the original language from which all translations were to be made. The texts in French and German have a more vernacular and even colloquial flavor to them. Alas, there is no children's Latin, and that flavor has been lost in translation from Latin to other languages.

The first brake on the work of the Concilium came when the introduction to the Roman Sacramentary was issued in 1971. There was a huge brouhaha over the use of liturgical rather than doctrinal terminology. This was fixed in a new edition, 1973, notable for its parallel use of liturgical and doctrinal terms. A more serious development was the statement of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on general absolution in 1973. And the super agency, Concilium, eventually needed to be folded into the Curia and the Congregation of Rites, a quite inhospitable place. This was accomplished through a bewildering process, over several years, of combining and dividing and combining again, with Paul VI's preferred pattern of appointing now a liberal, now a conservative, which ended up pleasing no one, and caused him much suffering. Finally, the coup de grace, Archbishop Bugnini, the foremost architect of the liturgical reform and renewal, was made the sacrificial lamb and was sent in disgrace as apostolic delegate to Iran, a place where he scarcely had a congregation with whom to celebrate Eucharist. (He did minister to the American embassy captives in the late 70's.) He died in 1982.

The scene in the English speaking countries.

Most revolutionary in the Constitution on the Liturgy was that the initiative of translation, with subsequent recognitio or confirmation, was given to episcopal language groups. The current sacramentary was done in haste, under pressure from English speaking bishop to bring the time of massive change to an end. The main limitation was the Latin originals, so many generic and meaningless texts, so much emphasis upon heaven. But they did succeed in producing orations that were generally clear and simple for oral proclamation, even though not sufficiently poetic or prayerful. At times they were quite creative, as with the Roman eucharistic prayer, whose literary form and much terminology (adscriptam, ratam, rationabilem, acceptabilemque) drew upon the literary form and language of a letter to the emperor, which is why this prayer is almost all petition. It is significant that no authorized or unauthorized eucharistic prayer has been written on the model of the Roman eucharistic prayer; all follow the general model of the Eastern Rites. The main criticisms on the right were about the accuracy of the translation and the desire for a more elevated language.

A parenthesis. Over the years, I have sampled and made use of unofficial orations directly from French and German, in translation from Dutch, Italian, and Spanish, as well as many in English. There is a general common denominator: the Sunday orations tend to be composed in a three year cycle, drawing from phrases and images in the Scriptures of the day, seeking a more poetic

language, and expressing more contemporary rather than timeless concerns. These unofficial prayers have obtained great standing and use in a number of countries around the world, almost to the point of official status. Pastorally, it is very clear the kind of orations that are most desired.

At any rate, beginning in the 1980's and continuing through the 1990's, ICEL produced a new translation in five installments, duly presented to and approved by the English speaking conferences of bishops around the world, and in 1998 it was presented to Rome for the needed recognitio. There were also a small number of bishops who consistently opposed the new translations, and brought their concerns to Rome. Then there was silence, and silence, and silence.

The rise of the reform of the reform

Members of the Roman Curia, and especially the Congregation for Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments (the sacraments are now a discipline rather than a celebration), who had opposed the reform from the beginning, or who had grown increasingly critical of it, had bided their time through the years, gradually rising by patronage to more influential positions. They coalesced in the 1990's in Rome with some bishops of like mind and ample funding, and began a project to reform the reform of the Roman rite. The origins are obscure, without publicity, but with increasing position and power. One of their major objectives was to take away the power of the episcopal conferences over the liturgy, especially language, and return this power to Rome. This group increased in power and influence due to the patronage of Pope John Paul, who sought from the beginning of his papacy to reduce the power of the bishops in many ways, so that the church would speak in one voice, his voice. It is plain fact that the conciliar doctrine of the collegiality of the bishops is largely a dead letter, and we have more centralized authority and power in the pope and curia than ever before in the history of the Church. This includes more means of surveillance over bishops and clergy. A few remarks in your homily can be texted to a Curia official before the Mass is finished. In 1982, when Dan Pakenham informed me that he had learned that my class notes on liturgy were being forwarded to a curia official for a check on orthodoxy, I knew my days of seminary teaching were numbered,

This group planning the reform of the reform surfaced with the document Liturgiam Authenticam, which set new rules for translation of the liturgy, but, above all, took power away from the episcopal conferences and situated it in Vox Clara, a new super agency which was now to govern the English translation. This was a handpicked group of people, chosen by Rome, not chosen delegates of the episcopal conferences. (When very limited democratic methods do not yield the desired results, by all means revert to hierarchical control.) A very astute use of position, power, and politics.

And their aims were not just control of translations, but a total revision of the

rubrics, the calendar, the lectionary, and all the rites of the Catholic Church. Take the new introduction to the Roman Missal, already published and still being revised. The original plan of the Consilium was that their work in Latin, for the whole church, would only need to be done once, that in the future the process would continue in particular churches and linguistic groups, according to the normal processes of adaptation and inculturation. Similarly, the given rubrics were relatively spare; the experts had enough pastoral experience that they knew the complex rubrics of the past were unworkable for a worldwide church. Now I have sat down and studied, in Latin and English, the introduction to the current sacramentary, and compared it, in Latin and in English, to the proposed new introduction. It is a wolf in sheep's clothing. It follows the headings and principles of our current introduction for the most part, but the subsequent details take away or limit what the headings give, and add an enormous amount of ritual and rubrics. It is an exceedingly clever work which must have taken years, how to seem to be continuous by being discontinuous. It is a fine piece of work for a church which seeks to spend its main efforts on elaborate liturgical ceremonies; it is quite irrelevant for a church engaged in pastoral work. I explained some of its features to some missionaries from Nicaragua. They just laughed.

And by the way, the issue of continuity and discontinuity in interpretation of the documents of Vatican II is an ideological Trojan horse. Of course, there is much in the documents of Vatican II which is in continuity with previous teaching of the Church. But there is also much that is new, like collegiality, the vernacular, and ecumenism. The bishops were good scribes, drawing from both old and new.

The new liturgical texts

The rise of Vox clara meant that the whole English speaking project, elaborated over at least fifteen years, was largely shelved. No longer is it the bishops who propose, but the much more powerful Vox Clara. It is still necessary to get the approval of the various conferences of bishops, which has been like pulling teeth and has greatly prolonged the process. This is largely a story of power and politics. Major objections have been largely ignored. Some US bishops just gave up, finally. "They'll get what they want anyway. What's the use of fighting city hall."

Let's look at some of the main influences on the new texts we will receive. One of the minor features is what we might call the "King James and Book of Common Prayer" tactic, as found in the history of the Anglican tradition. Those translators and composers chose to make significant use of an English that was slightly out of date rather than the vernacular of the day. Their premise was that this could make the language seem more elevated or venerable. For instance, the use of "thee" and "thou", as the more personal and colloquial forms of address, was no longer current. Astonishingly, their use in Scripture and prayers became, not a more personal or colloquial way of addressing God, but a more exalted form.

And so on with "beseech" and "deign" and many more terms. You find this same tactic in Catholic devotional prayer books of the 19th and 20th century. What is behind this is the desire for a distinct liturgical language, a somewhat dualistic approach.

A second feature: the English translation should follow the Latin as closely and accurately as possible, even in grammar, even if this violates normative grammar standards of the receiving language, and with little regard for oral proclamation. To fully understand the translations (and we should study the Latin text behind them to fully understand), we need to renew our acquaintance with periodic sentences, with gerunds and gerundives, the various kinds of infinitive clauses, ablative absolutes, particular uses of the genitive and dative, and the peculiarities of Latin tenses. Granted that the English language did receive a huge overlay of Latin grammar and vocabulary in the 11th century and for several centuries later, much of this has deteriorated in the continuing development of the English language, particularly as it became dominated by oral use in the last century. What you end up with is an elegant or mediocre Latin that is translated, often, into poor English. The priority is given to an unchanging or dead language that is the reflection of an unchanging church in its teaching and discipline. The enemy is the vernacular as incarnated in dynamic and changing world cultures, as contrasted to unchanging truth and doctrine in the Latin language. The doctrine of the Incarnation may be getting shortchanged here. Some scholars speak of sacred languages, such as the Hebrew or Greek of the scriptures. Behold, Latin is our sacred language.

The 16th century Dutch humanist and theologian Erasmus, in his rhetorical guide "De duplici copia verborum ac rerum," elaborated for his students 150 plausible ways of translating the Latin sentence "Tuae litterae me magnopere delectarunt" (Your letter has delighted me very much). Add to this the multiplicity of ways in which a text might be heard. When I was a teacher, I learned quickly to be responsible only for what I said, not what the students heard. Thus the fragility of translation and language use.

The third and most important is the issue of sacred and secular. The objective of this reform is to re-sacralize the liturgy, which is perceived as having been desacralized. Thus there is an enormous effort to make the liturgy more holy through language and rubrics, as a pattern for the whole church. This goes beyond the reform of the reform, introducing new features never found before. Thus all the incipits in the lectionary will read St. Mark and St. Luke, not just Mark and Luke. And all possible words related to divinity will be capitalized, both in liturgy documents and in the scriptures, ignoring the customs of capitalization in the receiving language. (By the way, I have still not figured out how to proclaim or hear the capitalized words.) It even gets ludicrous at times. The proposed new translation for the Roman eucharistic prayer: "Jesus took this precious chalice in his sacred and venerable hands and said: This is the chalice . . ." If "cup" was good enough for Jesus, why isn't it good enough for us? Must we bowdlerize the

Scriptures? And connotations of words. What does the word "venerable" often connote? (old) And "precious chalice?" Well, that's just precious.

I would contend that these kinds of efforts at sacralization are, in our new liturgical books, a mile wide and an inch deep. The issues of sacred and secular are very deep and complex in our contemporary world, presenting themselves differently in different cultures. They are different in France because of a long history of anti-clericalism. They are different in Turkey, where Christians support secularization against a strong Islamic movement. For an adequate understanding of the history and complexity of the phenomenon of secularism, I would recommend the book A Secular Age, by Charles Taylor, a practicing Catholic, published in 2007, all 874 pages.

Finally, the new texts are best appreciated in reading and study, rather than live proclamation and hearing. As to criticism of lack of scriptural basis for the prayers, some make significant efforts to tease out a biblical background which is not evident in the hearing, but only through scholarly study.

Transcendence

Much is made of the new texts as a contribution to the experience of transcendence in the liturgy. But what are the normative avenues of possible transcendent experience in the liturgy? And let us remember that transcendence and immanence can be two sides of the same coin.

First of all the place of worship can lift our minds and hearts to God. Then the welcoming community that gathers. Sometimes the music, with a great capacity to draw us out of our individuality into an experience of the whole. It is no accident that biblical writers sometimes portray the heavenly realms in terms of massed choirs of angels singing, with trumpets and drums and incense. They were working from their own experience of transcendence in worship. Again, sensitive preaching reaching into the hearts of people, especially through examples and stories, sometimes leading to that sacred hushed silence in which you know grace has spoken. And also prayerful prayer leadership and respectful service by all of the ministers.

By contrast, what is our experience of transcendence through the texts, personally and in the assembly? I would submit: fairly minimal. In other words, the new texts may be a 5% solution to perceived issues of transcendence. Let us face it: probably the majority of Catholics will experience this as just a blip on the horizon, and go on with their lives. Some, perhaps feeling inconvenienced by change, will experience it as a dilettantish change of a few words here and there, like adding lace curtains to the windows of the church. And a small percentage will view it as a return to orthodoxy for ideological reasons. I would hope and pray that pastors will spend no more time on this issue than it is worth. In sum, the changes in language, flawed by their parameters, are to a great extent an

overplayed snow job.

Control issues.

Those who have worked out the new texts obviously have the power to control their publication and dissemination, not only through official books, but also missalettes and all materials of that kind. They have somewhat less control over how these texts are used, whether word for word or in adapted form or not at all. They have even less control over the manner in which presiders and congregations pray. (I know one thing I will do. When the texts are too long and complex, I will break them up into more understandable sentences. My sacramentary is already on computer, not in a book. I won't improvise; but I will revise.)

Related issues. Will there be room for alternatives? We could make a case for pluriformity. Roman Catholic authority already allows for use of the Roman Missal of 1962, and the Anglicans can retain much of their Anglican prayer tradition. What about a choice of continuing to use the present sacramentary? Even better, what about use of the sacramentary approved by English speaking bishops during the 1990's? It surely must exist on computers and in printed form somewhere. A pluralist like me loves all these options, but don't hold your breath. This is a done deal on the part of Rome, except for the implementation. There will be enormous efforts to persuade pastors to make this transition peacefully, out of fear of turmoil. We know from published reports that the process in South Africa has been quite rough, including some outright rejection. Tune in for future attractions.

You might wonder: where have all the professional liturgists been in this process? Largely absent and unconsulted. For the most part, we are not suitable partners in this conversation, and it has been even difficult to find a changing corps of translators who would agree to the ideological stipulations. Since Vatican II, there have been many ecclesiastics who feared that authority in the Church was losing control, the greatest nightmare of all. This is their response in the area of worship. A story of prayer, power, and politics.

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