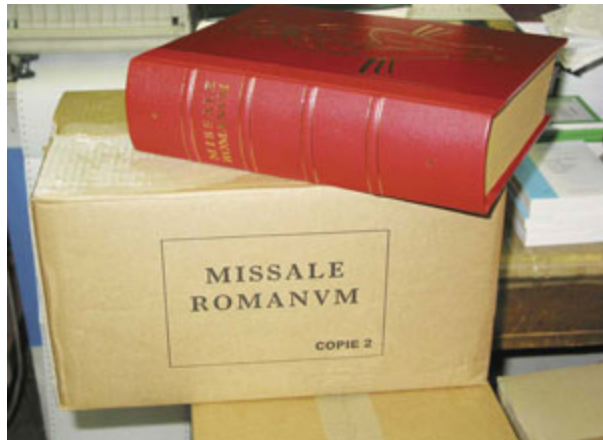


What If We Said, 'Wait'?

The case for a grass-roots review of the new Roman Missal

MICHAEL G. RYAN | DECEMBER 14, 2009



It is now 45 years since the Second Vatican Council promulgated the groundbreaking and liberating document on the sacred liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. As an eager and enthusiastic North American College seminarian at the time, I was in St. Peter's Square on the December day in 1963 when Pope Paul VI, with the world's bishops, presented that great Magna Carta to the church. The conciliar document transcended ecclesiastical politics. It was not just the pet project of a party but the overwhelming consensus of the bishops of the world. Its adoption passed overwhelmingly: 2,147 to 4.

Not in my wildest dreams would it have occurred to me then that I would live to witness what seems more and more like the systematic dismantling of the great vision of the council's decree. But I have. We Catholics have.

For evidence, one need look no further than recent instructions from the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments that have raised rubricism to an art form, or the endorsement, even encouragement, of the so-called Tridentine Mass. It has become painfully clear that the liturgy, the prayer of the people, is being used as a tool—some would even say as a weapon—to advance specific agendas. And now on the horizon are the new translations of the Roman Missal that will soon reach the final stages of approval by the Holy See. Before long the priests of this country will be told to take the new translations to their people by means of a carefully orchestrated education program that will attempt to put a good face on something that clearly does not deserve it.

The veterans who enthusiastically devoted their best creative energies as young priests to selling the reforms of the council to parishioners back in the 1960s will be asked to do the same with regard to the new translations. Yet we will be hard put to do so. Some colleagues in ministry may actually relish the opportunity, but not those of us who were captivated by the great vision of Vatican II, who knew firsthand the Tridentine Mass and loved it for what it was, but welcomed its passing because of what full, conscious and active participation would mean for our people. We can see the present moment only as one more assault on the council and, sadly, one more blow to episcopal collegiality. It was, after all, the council that gave to conferences of bishops the authority to produce their own translations (S.C., Nos. 36, 40), to be approved, it is true, by the Holy See but not, presumably, to be initiated, nitpicked and controlled by it. Further, the council also wisely made provision for times of experimentation and evaluation (S.C., No. 40)—something that has been noticeably missing in the present case.

This leads me to pose a question to my brother priests: What if we were to awaken to the fact that these texts are neither pastoral nor ready for our parishes? *What if we just said, "Wait"?*

Prayer and Good Sense

I know it might smack of insubordination to talk this way, but it could also be a show of loyalty and

plain good sense—loyalty not to any ideological agenda but to our people, whose prayer the new translations purport to improve, and good sense to anyone who stops to think about what is at stake here.

What is at stake, it seems to me, is nothing less than the church's credibility. It is true that the church could gain some credibility by giving us more beautiful translations, but clumsy is not beautiful, and precious is not prayerful. During a recent dinner conversation with friends, the issue of the new translations came up. Two at the table were keenly—and quite angrily—aware of the impending changes; two were not. When the uninformed heard a few examples (“and with your spirit”; “consubstantial with the Father”; “incarnate of the Virgin Mary”; “oblation of our service”; “send down your Spirit like the dewfall”; “He took the precious chalice”; “serene and kindly countenance,” for starters), the reaction was somewhere between disbelief and indignation.

One person ventured the opinion that with all that the church has on its plate today—global challenges with regard to justice, peace and the environment; nagging scandals; a severe priest shortage; the growing disenchantment of many women; seriously lagging church attendance—it seems almost ludicrous to push ahead with an agenda that will seem at best trivial and at worst hopelessly out-of-touch.

The reaction of my friends should surprise no one who has had a chance to review the new translations. Some of them have merit, but far too many do not. Recently the Archdiocese of Seattle sponsored a seminar on the new translations for lay leaders and clergy. Both the priest who led the seminar (an accomplished liturgical theologian) and the participants gathered there in good faith. When passages from the proposed new translation were soberly read aloud by the presenter (I remember especially the phrase from the first eucharistic prayer that currently reads “Joseph, her husband,” but which in the new translation becomes “Joseph, spouse of the same virgin”), there was audible laughter in the room. I found myself thinking that the idea of this happening during the sacred liturgy is no laughing matter but something that should make us all tremble.

There's more: the chilling reception the people of the dioceses of South Africa have given the new translations. In a rare oversight, the bishops of that country misread the instructions from Rome and, after a careful program of catechesis in the parishes, introduced the new translations to their people some months ago. The translations were met almost uniformly with opposition bordering on outrage.

It is not my purpose here to discuss in detail the flawed principles of translation behind this effort or the weak, inconsistent translations that have resulted. Others have already ably done that. Nor do I want to belabor the fact that those who prepared the translations seem to be far better versed in Latin than in English. No, my concern is for the step we now face: the prospect of implementing the new translations. This brings me back to my question: What if we just said, “Wait”?

What if we, the parish priests of this country who will be charged with the implementation, were to find our voice and tell our bishops that we want to help them avert an almost certain fiasco? What if we told them that we think it unwise to implement these changes until our people have been consulted in an adult manner that truly honors their intelligence and their baptismal birthright? What if we just said, “Wait, not until our people are ready for the new translations, but until the translations are ready for our people”?

Heeding Our Pastoral Instincts

The bishops have done their best, but up to now they have not succeeded. Some of them, led by the courageous and outspoken former chairman of the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy, Bishop Donald Trautman of Erie, Pa., tried mightily to stop the new translation train but to no avail. The bishops' conference, marginalized and battle-weary, allowed itself slowly but steadily to be worn down. After awhile the will to fight was simply not there. Acquiescence took over to the point that tiny gains (a word

here, a comma there) were regarded as major victories. Without ever wanting to, the bishops abandoned their best pastoral instincts and in so doing gave up on the best interests of their people.

So the question arises: Are we priests going to give up, too? Are we, too, going to acquiesce? We do, of course, owe our bishops the obedience and respect that we pledged to them on the day of our ordination, but does obedience mean complicity with something we perceive to be wrong—or, at best, wrongheaded? Does obedience mean going against our best pastoral instincts in order to promote something that we believe will, in the end, actually bring discredit to the church and further disillusionment to the people? I do not think so. And does respect involve paying lip service to something to which our more instinctive reaction is to call it foolhardy? Again, I don't think so.

I offer the following modest proposals.

What if pastors, pastoral councils, liturgical commissions and presbyteral councils were to appeal to their bishops for a time of reflection and consultation on the translations and on the process whereby they will be given to the people? It is ironic, to say the least, that we spend hours of consultation when planning to renovate a church building or parish hall, but little or none when “renovating” the very language of the liturgy.

What if, before implementing the new translations, we do some “market testing?” What if each region of bishops were to designate certain places where the new translations would receive a trial run: urban parishes and rural parishes, affluent parishes and poor parishes, large, multicultural parishes and small parishes, religious communities and college campuses? What if for the space of one full liturgical year the new translations were used in these designated communities, with carefully planned catechesis and thorough, honest evaluation? Wouldn't such an experiment yield valuable information for both the translators and the bishops? And wouldn't such an experiment make it much easier to implement the translations when they are ready?

In short, what if we were to trust our best instincts and defend our people from this ill-conceived disruption of their prayer life? What if collegiality, dialogue and a realistic awareness of the pastoral needs of our people were to be introduced at this late stage of the game? Is it not possible that we might help the church we love avert a debacle or even disaster? And is it not possible that the voices in the church that have decided that Latinity is more important than lucidity might end up listening to the people and re-evaluating their position, and that lengthy, ungainly, awkward sentences could be trimmed, giving way to noble, even poetic translations of beautiful old texts that would be truly worthy of our greatest prayer, worthy of our language and worthy of the holy people of God whose prayer this is? (If you think the above sentence is unwieldy, wait till you see some of the new Missal translations. They might be readable, but border on the unspeakable!)

“What If We Just Said No?” was my working title for this article. “What If We Just Said, ‘Wait?’” seems preferable. Dialogue is better than diatribe, as the Second Vatican Council amply demonstrated. So let the dialogue begin. Why not let the priests who are on the front lines and the laypeople who pay the bills (including the salaries of priests and bishops) have some say in how they are to pray? If you think the idea has merit, I invite you to log on to the Web site www.whatifwejustsaidwait.org and make your voice heard. If our bishops know the depth of our concern, perhaps they will not feel so alone.

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