

GUIDELINES FOR INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE - ALTERNATIVE PAPER

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Introduction

The issue of inclusive language arises because of a change taking place in the English language. Only a few years ago it still seemed to all of us that women were included when we referred to ourselves as “sons”, “brothers”, “men” and “he”. Even the documents of the Second Vatican Council still use that language. But language changes, and women no longer feel included by these words.

This matters to us as Christians because our faith impels us to reflect in the way we speak and relate our belief that women and men are equal in dignity, equally loved by God, and equally made in God’s image. Obviously, inclusiveness is not just a matter of grammar. Nor is it primarily a matter of liturgical propriety; it is a matter of fundamental human aspirations, the aspiration of women to be treated as equally belonging.

In 1963, Pope John XXIII named the aspiration of women to participate more fully in what society says, decides and does as one of the “signs of the times” (Peace on Earth, n.41). It would have been strange if this rightful aspiration to be more included had not led to a call for clearer inclusiveness in the way we speak.

It would also have been strange if this need had not been felt above all when we stand together in prayer and worship. As the International Committee for English in the Liturgy said in 1985:

As a powerful tool of communication, language must be used in worship with the greatest care and precision. Modern studies have established the fact that language performs a highly important role in how one comes to perceive oneself and others. Furthermore, the range of symbols and images used determines the scope of the religious understanding and practice of the people of God, and if this range of symbols is limited, so also will be their understanding and practice. The way one is named within the worshipping community - and whether one is named at all, could affect the way one lives the Christian life. The failure of much of liturgical and theological language adequately to recognise the presence of women seems effectively to exclude them from full and integral participation in the life of the Church, and this exclusion can prevent the whole church from experiencing the fullness of Christian community...

Both sound theology and pastoral sensitivity require that the language used in all liturgical texts, as well as in all other aspects of liturgy, for example, preaching, should not only permit but indeed facilitate the full participation of women in the worship of the church. Sensitive Christians have begun to remedy the problem of liturgical language that is discriminatory towards women by careful choice of a vocabulary which includes all people. Such language is referred to here as "inclusive" language. (International Committee for English in the Liturgy, 1985)

This had been implied in the general principles governing the translation of liturgical texts:

The prayer of the Church is always the prayer of some actual community assembled here and now. It is not sufficient that a formula handed down from some other time or region should be translated verbatim, even if accurately, for liturgical use. The formula must become the genuine prayer of the congregation, and in it each of its members should be able to find and express himself or herself. (Instruction of the Congregation for Divine Worship, Rome 1969, n.20).

It follows that

1. The change occurring in the English language which has precipitated the call for language to be more inclusive should be seen by us as a new opportunity to let the gospel take flesh in our culture.
2. As a general rule, we should use language that enables both sexes to feel included whenever both are intended.

Part I - When we are talking to or about one another

1. Scriptures

The scriptures are God's word in the idioms of human language with all its limitations. *"The words of God, expressed in human language, have been made like human discourse, just as the Word of the Eternal Father took to himself the weak flesh of humanity, and became like us in every way except sin."* (cf Second Vatican Council, Revelation, n.13).

A faith which is comfortable with all the implications of incarnation learns how to distinguish between what the scriptures teach "without error", viz "that truth which God wanted to put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation"

(ibid, n. 11), and the cultural, historical and pre-scientific assumptions that belonged to the authors and people of their times. These assumptions are not part of what the scriptures “teach”. They include patriarchal and gender biases.

A faithful translation of the ancient text tells us exactly what the authors wrote. It does not try to correct or improve the original, because that would make it a different text - no longer the original. For example, when the ancient text speaks of Abraham and his sons, or “our Father”, the English translation will do the same.

By exactly the same principle, of course, wherever the original text intended both sexes, a faithful English translation will give our way of including both sexes. Some of the earlier English translations used terms which are now perceived as male specific even though the original text intended both sexes. To correct this is not a matter of changing the scriptures, but of improving the translation. Of course, sometimes it requires careful scholarship to know when the original did intend both sexes. Sometimes it is obvious.

2. Interpretation and Hermeneutics

Translating the original texts is not enough; we need to bring out the meaning of God’s word for us here and now. This is done in homilies, catechesis, the prayers of the liturgy, theology, devotional practices, hymns and “spiritual” writings. This is the level at which we correct the biases and incorrect assumptions of the ancient authors, as well as any incorrect assumptions of our time.

3. Special Translations for use in the Liturgy?

Traditionally, the Church has not been afraid to exercise some flexibility in translating texts - including texts from the Scriptures - for the sake of adapting them for singing.

The responses and antiphons, even though they come from Scripture, become part of the liturgy and enter into a new literary form. In translating them it is possible to give them a verbal form which, while preserving their full meaning, is more suitable for singing and harmonises them with the liturgical season or a

special feast. Examples of such adaptations which include minor adaptations of the original texts are numerous in ancient antiphonaries (1969 Instruction, n.36c).

What the Church can do with Scripture for the sake of singing, it can also do for the sake of enabling people to be properly included, especially as the word of God is by its nature addressed to all. Perhaps there needs to be discussion on whether translations for use in the liturgy should generally be regarded as having “entered into a new literary form” which allows for “minor adaptations of the original text” - adaptations that would be improper in translations used for scholarship and exegesis.

The Word of God proclaimed to all nations is by its nature inclusive, i.e. addressed to all peoples, men and women. Consequently, every effort should be made to render the language of biblical translations as inclusively as a faithful translation of the text permits.... (Criteria for the Evaluation of Inclusive Language Translations of Scriptural Texts Proposed for Liturgical Use, U.S. Catholic Bishops Conference 1990, n.14)

Liturgical texts

The liturgy (i.e. the Mass, sacraments and Liturgy of the Hours) is the official worship of the Church. Consequently, the Church has special protocols for ensuring that local churches and the universal Church act in harmony. Individuals have no authority to change the liturgy.

The Second Vatican Council provided that Bishops' Conferences are able to initiate and approve revisions they consider appropriate, and these are then submitted to the Holy See for “confirmation”. The Church also has special guidelines for new ways of inculturating the liturgy. These are for the guidance of those who are involved in the writing of new liturgical texts and re-shaping liturgical rites.

But our present concern is not a matter of liturgical change or new ways of inculturating the liturgy, or “changing” the scriptures. It is about being faithful to the scriptures and the liturgy according to their own inmost meaning and purpose.

Just as it can be necessary to correct earlier English translations of scripture texts, so too with liturgical texts. E.g “propter nos homines” is inclusive of men and women, and so the translation should also be inclusive. It can be correctly translated as “for us and for our salvation.....”

In the case of homilies, intercessory prayers and hymns, it is a matter of using inclusive language whenever both sexes are intended. At the same time, however, this should be done in a way that celebrates - not obscures - sexual identity and sexual differentiation. It is helpful to know that in the case of pronouns, it is grammatically acceptable to change from the third person singular (usually he) to the third person plural (they) when both sexes are intended.

Hymns are a form of poetry, and poetic licence can be used to avoid non-inclusive language. However, a sense of respect for our Catholic heritage, respect for the music and poetry of the hymns and, where it applies, respect for copyright, are also required.

Part II - When we talk to or about God

The only language we have for speaking about God is based on human experience in which persons are either male or female. (This is why gender-neutral language when referring to persons is unfamiliar and abstract.) From our childhood, we need to “attribute” human and bodily qualities to God, and gradually learn that these are only props to our thinking and speaking, not qualities in God.

The scriptures use both male and female images for speaking about and to God. But they address God mainly as male. This is to be expected of a patriarchal society. It might also have been counter-cultural, helping to distinguish Israel’s God from the goddesses and the pantheism of contemporary paganism.

It any event, the predominance of male imagery for God in scripture is related to the limitations of human understanding and to cultural circumstances and is not based on

anything male in God's own nature.

What about the language we use for naming the Trinity? First, it should be noted that the real distinction within the Trinity does not depend on the male names. The names Father, Son and Holy Spirit are given to the divine persons whose distinction from each other is revealed in the language of sending. The one who sends is necessarily distinct from the one who is sent; the one who is sent by both is necessarily distinct from the both. God's dealings with us in salvation history reveal these distinctions in God's own nature. (Because these sendings revolve around the incarnation, the Trinity is not properly speaking revealed until the coming of Christ.)

Therefore:

1. The divine names are not based on maleness in God. The name "father" does not imply maleness in the first person of the Trinity; the name "son" does not imply maleness in the second person of the Trinity. Male designation is given to the second person because Jesus was male; Jesus was not male because the second person of the Trinity was male. Nor is it appropriate to single the Spirit out for female designation if this is based on an assumption that the other two persons are male.
2. Just as there is nothing in the divine nature that requires male attribution, nor is there anything that excludes female attribution. The use of female in addition to male metaphors is desirable to offset the wrong impression that can be created by using only, or predominantly, male imagery.
3. Names which refer to what God does - e.g. creator, saviour and sanctifier, belong to all three persons, and therefore do not properly identify each as distinct from the other. Many recent alternatives to our traditional doxology simply fail to be Trinitarian, i.e. they name God's relationship with us, but they are not relationship and distinction within God.

A fully christian faith is conscious of the real distinction of persons, because the

very essence of christian prayer, christian liturgy, christian life, and salvation itself, is communion with the divine persons. To relate to "God", but not Trinity is, at best, pre-christian.

When we are assured that maleness is not being attributed to God, then it is easier to positively accept and enter into Jesus' teaching that God can be called our "father". We deepen this appreciation through interiorising Jesus' own ways of thinking about God, and so discover the wonderful intimacy and the profound assurance that Jesus himself felt in relation to God and wanted to share with us. This gives us a freedom to speak of God as Jesus did - both the ease with which he called God his father, and the ease with which he used female imagery for illustrating God's dispositions toward us. Women mystics especially, have kept alive the Church's tradition of using feminine imagery for God.

"Putting on the mind of Christ" will also compel us to think of each other in the ways Jesus did and to find the language that flows from deep respect for one another.

