

ON TRANSLATIONS & UNDERLYING CONCERNS

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Under the heading “Don’t aim Mass translations too ‘low’”, Tony Molloy emphasizes the need for language that stretches our minds and hearts, “making us reach beyond our everyday selves.” In this he is right: hearts that are made for the infinite God will not rest in any diminished version of God or religion promoted by ‘lite’ liturgy, ‘lite’ devotional practices, ‘lite’ preaching or ‘lite’ catechesis. Walking away from diminished religion will seem no big deal to people who, consciously or unconsciously, seek the God revealed to Moses and the Hebrew prophets and revealed in Jesus. I think this is what Rahner meant when he predicted that the Christian of tomorrow will either be a mystic or will not be a Christian at all.

Mr. Molloy rightly urges “the arduous task of catechising the faithful into the full beauty of the Mass”. In those European countries which hardly took the liturgy renewal seriously, Mass attendances fell further and faster than in ours. In NZ, the catechesis sometimes didn’t get much further than how to do “the changes”. It’s not too late to say again: the key to liturgy renewal and to the needed catechesis is “participation”. This is not just more people doing more things, though it makes room for a wider sharing of ministries. Participation means allowing ourselves to become absorbed in the mystery of “Christ among us”, and responding – by word, gesture, song or silence, allowing ourselves to be drawn into the mystery.

However, “participation” is the participation of a congregation – the community of Christ’s body – in union with Christ and one another. The song, silence and gestures of a community acting in unison can be a very moving experience. This is the “reverence” of a community at prayer; it’s different from the reverence we experience in private, individual prayer and devotion even ‘at Mass’. Liturgy is a different thing!

The Council’s recognition of the need for “full, conscious and active” participation (Liturgy, 14) necessitated translation into the languages of the people. Both Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have reminded us that translation is not a mere word for word, phrase for phrase, equivalence, such as we expect to find in a dictionary. Rather, it is a matter of carrying across (trans-lating) the sense of the original, by expressing it in the idioms and syntax of other languages. The present translation’s awkwardness derives from its dependence on formal (dictionary-like) equivalence only. The words are English, but the syntax is still Latin; i.e. not translated.

Comparisons between the present translation and the one we used before it miss the point. The earlier translation was a somewhat hurried job, done under the supervision of an international committee of bishops set up at the Second Vatican Council. They were conscientious and careful men, whose work cannot fairly be described as a “banal bath in mediocrity”. (New Zealand’s representative on that body was the late Bishop Owen Snedden, and one of their advisors was the late Professor G.B. Harrison, previously general editor of the works of Shakespeare).

Nevertheless, the intention was always to revise that translation given more time. This revision was done during the years 1983 – 1997. I witnessed the considerable scholarship and hard work that went into this revision, resulting in a translation that was more sensitive to scriptural allusions, and language that was more elegant. It was approved by the English speaking Bishops’ Conferences and set to replace the earlier translation. But then the Congregation for Divine Worship and Sacraments blocked its use

because it wanted a translation based on dictionary-type equivalence only. That restriction was neither theologically required nor linguistically defensible.

Pope Francis' recent *Motu Proprio* allows translations to more fully respect the idioms and syntax of the receiving language, and instructs the Congregation not to impose its will as it had previously done. The New Zealand bishops have endorsed Pope Francis' three principles which he says should guide translation: "fidelity to the original text; fidelity to the particular language into which it is being translated; and a commitment to the intelligibility of the text". It is hard to argue with that, and it does not mean, as Mr. Molloy seems to fear, that NZ will "be lumbered with a translation that reflects the ambivalence and unbelief of a majority of today's Catholics".

Mr. Molloy's, and others' concern for language is part of a deeper concern for clarity and orthodoxy. He berates "newly appointed spokespersons in the Vatican (for) deliberately ambiguous and partly true half-statements that hope to be all things to all men (sic)." He manages to put into one sentence several of the insinuating phrases that are being used these days to undermine Pope Francis, even if that was not his own intention.

Such criticisms miss the point of what is actually happening. We all happen to live during a relatively recent and still unfinished development. I am referring to a devolution from more paternalistic ways of leading people and being led, to a greater acceptance of personal responsibility. This development is based on a greater appreciation of personhood and of the priority of conscience. Skeptics might need to be reminded that it is not all that long since some Church practices were based on the premise that "error has no rights", which in practice meant that people in error had no rights. As recently as the Second Vatican Council this was still being debated. The clear teaching of the Church now is that it is persons who have rights, including therefore persons who are in error or perceived to be in error.

Progress in this direction has had a bumpy ride within the Church. Several human and civil rights that we now take for granted were originally condemned by Popes Pius IX and Pius X. There are some who still long for styles of exercising authority that were typical of feudal societies. They feel the need for law and order and compliance at all costs. They seem to have forgotten how this often resulted in immature dependence instead of growth in personal responsibility.

The process must be allowed to unfold, even at the risk of some messiness. It does not have to involve a betrayal of objective truth or of Church teaching. Traditional Catholic moral theology has always recognized that people can be simultaneously in error and in good conscience. Somehow, our pastoral guidance, sacramental practices and participation in a pluralist society must function within these complexities. Pope Francis is leading us well.