

The liturgy that got lost in translation



German bishops are leading a move to ditch the latest version

The Germans have recently made another move in defiance of Roman commands that deserves attention and belated emulation.

This past Sunday, the First Sunday of Advent, was to be the day on which German-speaking Catholics would begin using a new translation of the liturgy. Like the one that has been used for two years in English-speaking churches, it would be more Latin than local. The English version uses English words in Latin sentence order, Latinate repetition and vocabulary that comes from Latin rather than English roots; presumably the German is similar.

However, the German bishops recently announced that they would not introduce the new version because of wide opposition to the translation's sins against the German language. Something that English-speaking bishops were afraid to do in the previous papacy is now being done by Germans apparently emboldened by the pastoral approach of Pope Francis.

Sunday was the second anniversary of the imposition of the English version. How have we fared after two years with it? Congregations have gotten used to their responses, though children probably sometimes think that the Holy, Holy, Holy prayer is to the Lord God of communion wafers.

But what of those for whom the greatest changes were introduced, the priests? Surveys have shown that a huge majority of priests are still, after two years, united in their dissatisfaction with the maltranslation. Many say that trying to use it actually hinders their prayerful leading of the liturgy.

If anything, their discomfort has grown as they have struggled to proclaim prayers whose tortured word order and repetitions are close to gibberish if spoken aloud before a congregation that cannot go back over the words to figure out the grammar. How does one proclaim a sentence that begins with the object of the verb rather than the subject, something entirely possible in Latin, but which English-speaking priests now know is at least strange in their language?

The answer is that increasingly priests are not trying. A pastor in the United States said that the only good thing he could say about the new translation is that it forces him to read the prayers on Saturday so that he will know how to revise them for proclamation on Sunday. The majority of priests in his diocese admit among themselves that they engage in the same editing process, turning the prayers into real English. In other words, many congregations do not hear the new version.

Two years ago I wrote: "Priests who want to help their communities pray will gradually, but increasingly, begin to rework and reword the translation we have been given. Instead of an authorized new translation from Latin such as was approved by the world's English-speaking bishops in 1998, we will now get an unauthorized plethora of ad hoc translations from Gibberish. I am not saying that should happen, but it shall happen."

Well, it has happened. What's next?

The 1998 translation that was meant to correct the hastily done 1973 translation has already been approved unanimously by all the English-speaking bishops' conferences of the world, but was suppressed by curial officials who were not even English speakers. So, why should not some conferences declare that translation valid for use in their countries? Failing that, individual bishops might take that initiative on their authority as leaders of worship in their dioceses.

Otherwise, my next prediction will come true. Priests will increasingly on their own initiative begin using the 1998 translation once they get a copy, available for downloading after only a few minutes' search on the Internet. Or, they will dig out their 1973 Sacramentaries, even in dioceses like that in which my friend the pastor serves and where the bishop thought he had confiscated them all in order to prevent just that sort of thing.

It is time for English-speaking bishops to learn from their German confreres and take back responsibility for the life and worship of their people.

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