

July 16, 2010
16 Gema
San Clemente, CA 92672

The Most Reverend Tod Brown
Bishop of Orange
2811 E. Villa Real Drive
Orange, CA 92867

Bishop Brown:

The proposed changes in the English translation of the Missale Romanum have exercised the English-speaking Church for some time. I write to express my concern, and indeed dread, at the premature forcing of these major and disruptive changes that may not have yet received sufficient pastoral reflection.

I am only a layman, but I have always considered myself a loyal and faithful Roman Catholic. In matters of politics, whether secular or ecclesiastical, I have hewn to the moderate tack: neither church nor state can survive unless good people are willing to work toward consensus.

In this particular area, I have some knowledge of the issues involved in translating the authentic Latin texts. I have worked with them for most of my sixty-seven years. I have a Ph.D. in classics from Yale, with a concentration in Early Christian studies, and I spent nine years in a religious order, pre- and post-Vatican II, reciting these texts every day. In the Latin they have a terse elegance that cannot be equaled in any English translation and it takes great skill and linguistic sensitivity to avoid spoiling them.

At the same time, I recognize that you are the authentic teacher of the Church in this diocese. I write only to express to you, my chief pastor on this side of the Atlantic, a concern that borders on panic for one who loves the Church.

What pushes me to panic? The simple fact that many of the proposed new texts are embarrassingly awkward, ham-handed, onerous with polysyllabic Latinism. One of the reasons why Protestantism succeeded so well in the English-speaking world is the unsurpassed linguistic beauty of the King James translation. Do we really want to yield good English translations to the Protestants or enter the lists with these lame phrasings which will merely mystify most Catholics rather than promote a sense of mystery.

You are probably familiar with many of the sore points identified by Bishop Trautman, like “*vouchsafe*” (sounds like a condom), “*incarnate of...*” and “*suffer*” in the obsolete sense of “*allow*”, and reintroducing the triple “*mea culpa*”, which does not make anyone any sorrier. Requiring good Catholics who have prayed sincerely in well-translated words for at least a generation to change their way of praying is something that should not be undertaken without compelling reason (“*lex orandi; lex credendi*”). Here is where I get really scared.

With the clergy pedophilia scandal spreading throughout this country and around the world faster than AIDS (and I recognize and appreciate your exemplary handling of it locally), I fear that the credibility of the Church is at its most fragile point since just before the Protestant reformation.

We could—and did—fight the intellectual cynicism of the 18th century and the scientism of the 19th with good, countervailing philosophy, theology and science. But this is a

crisis of faith in the judgment of the church, not in its teaching. It may not take too much more to provoke drastic reactions. Some are already incipient.

Is this extremely explosive and sensitive time really an opportune moment to wrench the good and patient people that Rome likes to call “the simple faithful” from patterns of a lifetime—patterns of praying which have never been shown to have caused any damage? The “simple faithful” are exactly the ones who are most confused and angry over the abuse scandals.

My hope is that drastic change will not be imposed precipitately. Indeed, Rome does not seem eager to do so. Other national language groups (German, e.g.,) are being given permission to work on their translations more thoughtfully, and even to continue to use the existing translations.

Surely it is a Catholic value that appropriate time be allowed for mature consideration of the language in which the body and blood of Christ come to His people. He surely would expect no less of us.

Sincerely,

John D. Madden, Ph.D.