

The Lord's Prayer

A few people have asked me recently if I intend to introduce some changes in the recitation of the Lord's Prayer at Mass. There has been some discussion, at least in Europe, about the phraseology of "Lead us not into temptation." The French bishops just approved an alternate translation. The nub of the issue is that the text seems to indicate that God might be considered a cause of temptation, although that clearly is a misinterpretation. On close inspection, the words may be awkward but since, according to the Gospels, it is the only prayer Jesus explicitly taught his disciples, it probably is best to be kept in its original form. Except for very serious reasons, tampering with Scriptural texts ought to be avoided, especially if they are prayers used by all Christians.

Changing even part of the Lord's Prayer is problematic because it would introduce a new and unfamiliar version to the only prayer common to all Christian denominations. In France, then, Catholics will pray the Our Father differently than the Protestants and the Orthodox. Ecumenically, this is unfortunate. Furthermore, there already is a variation of the Lord's Prayer because of the conclusion that the Protestants have traditionally used since the Reformation: "For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory now and forever." While this ending may not be Scripturally based, evidence exists that the earliest Church added it to the words of Jesus. It is not, as some may suppose, a Protestant invention. Vatican II acknowledged this truth by including these words in the prayers at Mass.

There are good reasons, therefore, to maintain the traditional wording. The recent English translations of the missal at Mass compelled by Pope Benedict XVI are a warning. Besides being inept, they were unnecessary. They also were unpopular and many priests refuse to use them. The original English translations from Latin into the vernacular commissioned by Vatican II involved both liturgy and language experts and were an important pastoral and spiritual improvement. There was no such coherent reason for the recent language changes. Forcing people to learn new Mass responses ought to be done only for very substantive reasons. The same for adapting the words of the Lord's Prayer.

Ultimately, I don't have the authority to introduce a varied translation. Not even a bishop can unilaterally decide to do this, but must act jointly with the National Conference. It would seem prudent, however, that similar language groups, not just individual national conferences, agree on the same translation. All the French speaking parts of the world, for example, not just France, ought to confer on a unified version, and the same with all the Spanish speaking parts of the world and all the English speaking parts of the world too. At the moment, however, only France has introduced this change. Changing the words of the Our Father is not a simple process. "Festina lente," according to the ancient adage, or "Make haste slowly."