

Criteria for the Evaluation of Inclusive Language

On November 15, 1990, during the plenary assembly of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, the members approved the Criteria for the Evaluation of Inclusive Language Translations of Scriptural Texts proposed for Liturgical Use. These criteria, developed by the Joint Committee (Liturgy and Doctrine) on Inclusive Language over the past three years, are intended to assist bishops in evaluating the suitability of inclusive language translations of scriptural texts proposed for liturgical use. The text follows:

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Introduction: The Origins and Nature of the Problem

1. Five historical developments have converged to present the Church in the United States today with an important and challenging pastoral concern. First, the introduction of the vernacular into the Church's worship has necessitated English translations of the liturgical books and of sacred scripture for use in the liturgy. Second, some segments of American culture have become increasingly sensitive to "exclusive language," i.e., language which seems to exclude the equality and dignity of each person regardless of race, gender, creed, age or ability.¹ Third, there has been a noticeable loss of the sense of grammatical gender in American usage of the English language, English vocabulary itself has changed so that words which once referred to all human beings are increasingly taken as gender-specific and, consequently, exclusive. Fifth, impromptu efforts at inclusive language, while pleasing to some, have often offended others who expect a degree of theological precision and linguistic or aesthetic refinement in the public discourse of the liturgy. Some impromptu efforts may also have unwittingly undermined essentials of Catholic doctrine.

These current issues confront a fundamental conviction of the Church, namely, that the Word of God stands at the core of our faith as a basic theological reality to which all human efforts respond and by which they are judged.

2. The bishops of the United States wish to respond to this complex and sensitive issue of language in the English translation of the liturgical books of the Church in general and of sacred scripture in particular. New translations of scriptural passages used in the liturgy are being proposed periodically for their approval. Since the promulgation of the 1983 Code of Canon Law these translations must be approved by a conference of bishops or by the Apostolic See.² The question confronts the bishops: With regard to a concern for inclusive language, how do we distinguish a legitimate translation from one that is imprecise?

3. The recognition of this problem prompted the submission of a varium to the National Conference of Catholic Bishops requesting that the Bishop's Committee on the Liturgy and the Committee on Doctrine be directed jointly to formulate guidelines which would assist the bishops in making appropriate judgments on the inclusive language translations of biblical texts for liturgical use. These two committees established a Joint Committee on Inclusive

Language, which prepared this text.

4. This document, while providing an answer to the question concerning translations of biblical texts for liturgical use, does not attempt to elaborate a complete set of criteria for inclusive language in the liturgy in general, that is, for prayers, hymns, and preaching. These cognate areas will be treated only insofar as they overlap the particular issues being addressed here.

5. This document presents practical principles for the members of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops to exercise their canonical responsibility for approving translations of scripture proposed for liturgical use. However, just as this document does not deal with all cases of inclusive language in the liturgy, neither is it intended as a theology of translation. The teaching of *Dei Verbum* and the instructions of the Pontifical Biblical Commission prevail in matters of inspiration, inerrancy, and hermeneutics and their relationship with meaning, language, and the mind of the author. While there would be a value in producing a study summarizing these issues, it would distract from the immediate purpose of this document.

6. This document treats the problem indicated above in four parts: General Principles; Principles for Inclusive Language Lectionary Translations; Preparation of Texts for Use in the Lectionary; Special Questions, viz., naming God, the Trinity, Christ, and the Church.

Part One: General Principles

7. There are two general principles for judging translations for liturgical use: the principle of fidelity to the Word of God and the principle of respect for the nature of the liturgical assembly. Individual questions, then, must be judged in light of the textual, grammatical, literary, artistic, and dogmatic requirements of the particular scriptural passage, and in light of the needs of the liturgical assembly. In cases of conflict or ambiguity, the principle of fidelity to the word of God retains its primacy.

I. Fidelity to the Word of God

The following considerations derive from the principle of fidelity to the Word of God.

8. The People of God have the right to hear the Word of God integrally proclaimed³ in fidelity to the meaning of the inspired authors of the sacred text.

9. Biblical translations must always be faithful to the original language and internal truth of the inspired text. It is expected, therefore, that every concept in the original text will be translated within its context.

10. All biblical translations must respect doctrinal principles of revelation, inspiration, and biblical interpretation (hermeneutics), as well as the formal rhetoric intended by the

author (e.g., Heb 2: 5-18). They must be faithful to Catholic teaching regarding God and divine activity in the world and in human history as it unfolds. "Due attention must be paid both to the customary and characteristic patterns of perception, speech, and narrative which prevailed at the age of the sacred writer and to the conventions which the people of his time followed."⁴

II. The Nature of the Liturgical Assembly

The following considerations derive from the nature of the liturgical assembly.

11. Each and every Christian is called to, and indeed has a right to, full and active participation in worship. This was stated succinctly by the Second Vatican Council: "The Church earnestly desires that all the faithful be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations called for by the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Pt 2:9, see 2:4-5) is their right and duty by reason of their baptism."⁵ An integral part of liturgical participation is hearing the word of Christ "who speaks when the scriptures are proclaimed in the Church."⁶ Full and active participation in the liturgy demands that the liturgical assembly recognize and accept the transcendent power of God's word.

12. According to the Church's tradition, biblical texts have many liturgical uses. Because their immediate purposes are somewhat different, texts translated for public proclamation in the liturgy may differ in some respects (cf. Part Two) from those translations which are meant solely for academic study, private reading, or *lectio divina*.

13. The language of biblical texts for liturgical use should be suitably and faithfully adapted for proclamation and should facilitate the full, conscious, and active participation of all members of the Church, women and men, in worship.

Part Two: Principles for Inclusive Language Lectionary Translations

14. The Word of God proclaimed to all nations is by nature inclusive, that is, 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, especially when this concerns the People of God, Israel, and the Christian community.

15. When a biblical translation is meant for liturgical proclamation, it must also take into account those principles which apply to the public communication of the biblical meaning. Inclusive language is one of those principles, since the text is proclaimed in the Christian assembly to women and men who possess equal baptismal dignity and reflects the universal scope of the Church's call to evangelize.

16. The books of the Bible are the product of particular cultures, with their limitations as well as their strengths. Consequently not everything in scripture will be in harmony with contemporary cultural concerns. The fundamental mystery of incarnational revelation requires the retention of those characteristics which reflect the cultural context within which the Word was first received.

17. Language which addresses and refers to the worshipping community ought not use words or phrases which deny the common dignity of all the baptized.

18. Words such as "men," "sons," "brothers," "brethren," "forefathers," "fraternity," and "brotherhood" which were once understood as inclusive generic terms, today are often understood as referring only to males. In addition, although certain uses of "he," "his," and "him" once were generic and included both men and women, in contemporary American usage these terms are often perceived to refer only to males. Their use has become ambiguous and is increasingly seen to exclude women. Therefore, these terms should not be used when the reference is meant to be generic, observing the requirements of n. 7 and n. 10.

19. Words such as 'adam, anthropos, and homo have often been translated in many English biblical and liturgical texts by the collective terms "man," and "family of man." Since in the original languages these words actually denote human beings rather than only males, English terms which are not gender-specific, such as "person," "people," "human family," and "humans," should be used in translating these words.

20. In narratives and parables the sex of individual persons should be retained. Sometimes, in the Synoptic tradition, the gospel writers select examples or metaphors from a specific gender. Persons of the other sex should not be added merely in a desire for balance. The original references of the narrative or images of the parable should be retained.

Part Three: The Preparation of Texts for Use in the Lectionary

21. The liturgical adaptation of readings for use in the lectionary should be made in light of the norms of the Introduction to the Ordo Lectionum Missae (1981). Incipits should present the context of the various pericopes. At times, transitions may need to be added when verses have been omitted from pericopes. Nouns may replace pronouns or be added to participial constructions for clarity in proclamation and aural comprehension. Translation should not expand upon the text, but the Church recognizes that in certain circumstances a particular text may be expanded to reflect adequately the intended meaning of the pericope.⁷ In all cases, these adaptations must remain faithful to the intent of the original text.⁸

22. Inclusive language adaptations of lectionary texts must be made in light of exegetical and linguistic attention to the individual text within its proper context. Blanket substitutions are inappropriate.

23. Many biblical passages are inconsistent in grammatical person, that is, alternating between second person singular or plural ("you") and third person singular ("he"). In order to give such passages a more intelligible consistency, some biblical readings may be translated so as to use either the second person plural ("you") throughout or the third person plural ("they") throughout. Changes from the third person singular to the third person plural are allowed in individual cases where the sense of the original text is universal. It should be noted that, at times, either the sense or the poetic structure of a passage may require that the alternation be preserved in the translation.

24. Psalms and canticles have habitually been appropriated by the Church for use in the liturgy, not as readings for proclamation, but as the responsive prayer of the liturgical assembly. Accordingly, adaptations have justifiably been made, principally by the omission of verses which were judged to be inappropriate in a given culture or liturgical context. Thus, the liturgical books allow the adaptation of psalm texts to encourage the full participation of the liturgical assembly.

Part Four: Special Questions

25. Several specific issues must be addressed in regard to the naming of God, the persons of the Trinity, and the Church, since changes in language can have important doctrinal and theological implications.

I. Naming God in Biblical Translations

26. Great care should be taken in translations of the names of God and in the use of pronouns referring to God. While it would be inappropriate to attribute gender to God as such, the revealed word of God consistently uses a masculine reference for God. It may sometimes be useful, however, to repeat the name of God, as used earlier in the text, rather than to use the masculine pronoun in every case. But care must be taken that the repetition not become tiresome.

27. The classic translation of the Tetragrammaton (YHWH) as "LORD" and the translation of Kyrios as "Lord" should be used in lectionaries.

28. Feminine imagery in the original language of the biblical texts should not be obscured or replaced by the use of masculine imagery in English translations, e.g., Wisdom literature.

II. Naming Christ in Biblical Translations

29. Christ is the center and focus of all scripture.⁹ The New Testament has interpreted certain texts of the Old Testament in an explicitly christological fashion. Special care should be observed in the translation of these texts so that the christological meaning is not lost. Some examples include the Servant Songs of Isaiah 42 and 53, Psalms 2 and 110, and the Son of Man passage in Daniel 7.

III. Naming the Trinity in Biblical Translations

30. In fidelity to the inspired Word of God, the traditional biblical usage for naming the Persons of the Trinity as "Father," "Son," and "Holy Spirit" is to be retained. Similarly, in keeping with New Testament usage and the Church's tradition, the feminine pronoun is not to be used to refer to the Person of the Holy Spirit.

IV. Naming the Church in Biblical Translations

31. Normally the neuter third person singular or the third person plural pronoun is used when referring to the People of God, Israel, the Church, the Body of Christ, etc., unless their antecedents clearly are a masculine or feminine metaphor, for instance, the reference to the Church as the "Bride of Christ" or "Mother" (cf. Rev 12).

Conclusion

32. These criteria for judging the appropriateness of inclusive language translations of sacred scripture are presented while acknowledging that the English language is continually changing. Contemporary translations must reflect developments in American English grammar, syntax, usage, vocabulary, and style. The perceived need for a more inclusive language is part of this development. Such language must not distract hearers from prayer and God's revelation. It must manifest a sense of linguistic refinement. It should not draw attention to itself.

33. While English translations of the Bible have influenced the liturgical and devotional language of Christians, such translations have also shaped and formed the English language itself. This should be true today as it was in the age of the King James and Douay-Rheims translations. Thus, the Church expects for its translations not only accuracy but facility and beauty of expression.

34. Principles of translation when applied to lectionary readings and psalm texts differ in certain respects from those applied to translations of the Bible destined for study or reading (see nos. 22-25 above). Thus, when submitting a new or revised translation of the Bible, an edition of the lectionary or a liturgical psalter for approval by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, editors must supply a complete statement of the principles used in the preparation of the submitted text.

35. The authority to adapt the biblical text for use in the lectionary remains with the conference of bishops. These criteria for the evaluation of scripture translations proposed for use in the liturgy have been developed to assist the members of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops to exercise their responsibility so that all the People of God may be assisted in hearing God's Word and keeping it.

Notes

1. Cf. Bishop Members of the Pastoral Team, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, *To Speak as a Christian Community*, (August 16, 1989), p. 2.
2. Code of Canon Law [hereafter CIC], 825.1.
3. CIC 213.
4. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, no. 12.
5. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. n. 14. English translation is from *Documents on the Liturgy 1965-1979: Conciliar, Papal and Curial Texts* [thereafter DOL], (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1982), 1, no. 14.
6. *Ibid.*, no. 7.
7. Secretariat for Christian Unity (Commission for Religious Relations with Judaism), *Guidelines and Suggestions for the application of no. 4 of the conciliar declaration *Nostra aetate**, December 1, 1974 [AAS 67 (1975) 73-79].
8. Sacred Congregation of Rites (Consilium), *Instruction Comme le Prevoit on the translation of liturgical texts for celebrations with a congregation* (January 25, 1969) [DOL 123], nos. 30-32.
9. Cf. *Dei Verbum*, no. 16.

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Principles for Preparing NAB Pericopes

The National Conference of Catholic Bishops, meeting in plenary assembly on November 11-15, 1990, approved the Principles for Preparing Pericopes from the New American Bible for Use in the Second Edition of the Lectionary for Mass. These nine principles are designed solely to assist the Lectionary Subcommittee in preparing the biblical texts for inclusion in the Lectionary for Mass in conformity to the liturgical requirements of the editio typica altera of the Ordo Lectionum Missae (1981). The approved introduction and principles follow:

Nine Principles for Preparing Pericopes from the *New American Bible for Use in the*

Lectionary for Mass

The following principles have been formulated to assist the Lectionary Subcommittee of the Committee on the Liturgy in the preparation of the pericopes from the New American Bible with the Revised New Testament which will be used in the second edition of the Lectionary for Mass. It is understood that these principles are to be applied with great care and that the adapted texts never alter the meaning of the biblical text.

Principle A: An incipit is supplied, expressing the context of the reading in accord with lectionary tradition.

Principle B: A pronoun is replaced by a noun for purposes of clarity or facility in public reading.

Principle C: A clause is put into the plural so as to be inclusive in language, without affecting the meaning of the clause.

Principle D: A clause is changed from the third person singular to the second person so as to be inclusive in language, only when it does not affect the meaning of the clause.

Principle E: The expression "the Jews" in the Fourth Gospel is translated as "the Jewish authorities" or "the Jewish religious leaders" or "the Jewish leaders" or the "Jewish people," etc., in accord with the Guidelines on Religious Relations with the Jews (December 1, 1974), Part II: Liturgy, of the Apostolic See's Council on Religious Relations with the Jews.

Principle F: The Greek word adelphoi is translated as "brothers and sisters" in a context which, in the judgment of Scripture scholars, includes women as well as men.

Principle G: In those instances where the meaning of the text would not be altered, a word which is exclusive in meaning is replaced by an inclusive word or words when the context includes women as well as men.

Principle H: Individuals are not described by their disability ("a paralytic," "a leper," etc.), but as a man (woman) who is paralyzed, a man (woman) with leprosy, etc.

Principle I: In occasional instances a word which is difficult to read publicly or to understand is replaced by a simpler or easier word, without affecting the meaning of the sentence.

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