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'Lord God of hosts'

By Msgr. Richard Antall *

One of the oldest prayers of the Mass is the “Sanctus,” or, as most American Catholics say, the “Holy Holy Holy.” It is composed of two parts, the first of which is based on the hymn Isaiah heard the angels singing when he had a vision God in the Temple (Isa. 6:3) and the second contains the greeting of the crowds when Jesus entered Jerusalem before his passion (Matt. 21:9). This latter contains a citation of Psalm 118:25-26: “Hosanna ... Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”

The Mass is an intensely biblical prayer, as Scott Hahn has taught us by example and writings.

Hahn, an ex-Presbyterian minister has attributed his conversion to his discovery of the biblical nature of our liturgy. As someone with prejudices against the Catholic faith, visiting our churches for Mass almost in a clandestine manner, he became enamored of our liturgy because he appreciated its deeply biblical resonance. This is something about which many Catholics are not so sensitive, unfortunately, and this can only be blamed on ignorance of the Scriptures.

It is to be hoped, however, that the new translation of the Mass in English will help believers to learn more about the Bible and to ponder its words and its mysteries. The aim of the new translation has been to render the original Latin more literally. This means in the great majority of cases a more literal congruence to the words in Sacred Scripture. We have already seen this in the new translation of the words of consecration.

The rendering of the Sanctus that will change had an interpretive translation of the Hebrew that Isaiah heard chanted in his epiphany in the Temple of Jerusalem.

Specifically, one of the chief prophetic titles of God in the Old Testament, “Lord God Sabaoth” was translated as “Lord God of power and might.” Now the English translation of the liturgy will say, “Lord God of hosts,” which is a literal translation of the Hebrew. It is interesting to note that in the original and official Latin the phrase “of hosts” was transliterated from the Hebrew and not translated, and so is rendered “Dominus Deus Sabaoth.”

I think that “Lord God of hosts” is an improvement for three reasons. First, the translation points us back to the biblical source of the words of our prayer. The word “Sabaoth” is the plural form of the word for army.

There is much discussion about the meaning of the phrase and it is noteworthy that this title of God is not used in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. The consensus seems to be that it refers to the heavenly hosts of angels. The title is used literally hundreds of times in the Bible, mostly in the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah.

If for no other reason than that, the new translation should be welcomed. When we can worship in the words of Scripture the congruence of our faith with God’s plan of salvation in history is better expressed. If we don’t know what the Scripture means, this affords us an opportunity for reflection and real education.

The second reason is that the mysterious biblical phrase, referring to the cosmic and supernatural power of God stresses the otherness of God, His transcendence. This God of hosts, Lord of heavenly power and glory was invoked precisely at the moments the earthly power

and glory of Israel was being tested and found wanting.

Getting closer to the biblical language we can perhaps get nearer to the mystery we are celebrating. When I was a seminarian we read a book by Rudolf Otto called "The Idea of the Holy." This dealt with the key concept of God as the totally Other.

In the Sanctus the Church is acknowledging the Other-ness of God, His supernatural power and glory, to prepare us for a moment of epiphany, the miracle of the Mass when God comes near to us in the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

Like Isaiah in the Temple, we are being granted an experience of the living God and we hear a heavenly song. Unlike him, we also sing that song, "Holy, Holy, Holy," because we are much more connected to the Almighty by means of our sacramental initiation.

The caution of the Church with regards to the language of worship has to do with a humble awareness that we celebrate mysteries much beyond our comprehension. The Mass is a miracle that cannot be expressed in ordinary words.

There is a humility in using words that come from the Bible and this promotes a greater sense of reverence. As Pope Benedict XVI expressed it in his brilliant and sadly neglected or ignored apostolic exhortation, "Sacramentum Caritatis": "The Lord meets us ... and becomes our companion along the way."

One spiritual writer said that to prepare ourselves to receive the Body and Blood of Christ we should remember the question, "Who comes to whom?" The Lord of the universe comes to our nothingness. That encounter requires the deepest sense of reverence and the Church attempts to capture that respect and devotion using mere words. Better the words be biblical.

And that brings me to the third reason to prefer “Lord God of hosts” to “Lord God of power and might.” The words “power and might” are not exactly free of connotations that are not helpful for our recognition of the mystery of God’s coming to us. “Lord God of power and might” is an interpretative translation that tries to capture the transcendence of God but is not entirely successful. Power is conceived narrowly sometimes. We talk about “nuclear power” and “power lines.” Then there is the figurative use of the word. The United States is described as the only superpower in the world. Might has some of the same problems, as reflected in phrases like “might without right” or talk of “military might.”

Power has been distinguished from authority in a long tradition of philosophic and political thought. Authority without power is a formula for chaos. Likewise, someone can have the power to do something without authority: a terrorist or a tyrant can be very powerful. “Lord God of hosts” refers to the supernatural and transcendent divine power by means of an ancient metaphor that preserves a sense of mystery.

It is not only in English that there has been a problem with translation with regards to “Deus Dominus Sabaoth.” In Spanish, “Lord God of hosts” was translated, “Dios del universo” (God of the universe). This reflected one aspect of “Sabaoth,” the relationship between God and creation. It evokes the majesty of God’s power like a starry night when you can seem to see eternity painted in light on the darkness. However, this translation is to change also, because it fails to reflect all the biblical resonance of “Senor Dios de los ejercitos” (“Lord God of hosts”).

The new translation of the Mass is seen as a nuisance by some people. Why this endless tinkering with language, some people wonder. Perhaps it is because the language had ceased to puzzle

US.

The sense of surprise many people will feel singing or saying “Lord God of hosts,” will make the Mass seem more difficult to understand. That will be a good thing, because the more it makes us think, the more the language will help us in our ineffable relationship to God, which will always beggar our vocabulary.

** Msgr. Antall, a missionary priest from Cleveland, served for nearly a decade as moderator of the curia for the Archdiocese of San Salvador.*

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