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'For you and for many'

By Msgr. Richard Antall *

I have written all of these essays not as an expert but as one inevitably involved in the process of the change of the translation we use of the Latin Rite.

The Mass is the most important part of my work. Any change of the words is something that is bound to affect me. But perhaps the piece of the new translation that I will feel the most is the change in the words of consecration. For 30 years I have said those words and there will be a hurdle for me to adapt, just because of habit.

The first change is in the consecration of the bread. The prayer will read (starting in Advent): "Take this, all of you, and eat of it, for this is my body, which will be given up for you." It is a very small, very logical change in language. The preposition "of" is found in the Latin and fits here, too. This is, for me, an improvement on various levels.

The consecration of the wine has three changes in wording; one is key and the others not so much. The new prayer will be heard as follows: "Take this, all of you, and drink from it, for this is the chalice of my blood, the blood of the new and eternal covenant, which will be poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in memory of me."

The word "chalice" will replace cup. An obvious reason for the change is that the mystery we celebrate is so great that we are unable to express what really happens in ordinary words.

I remember once that I went to celebrate a Mass in a parish in Galway, Ireland. Before the Mass, the altar boy changed his shoes. I

asked why and he said, “Well, it’s not as if I could be in ordinary shoes on the altar, is it?”

The kid made me laugh, but the point is certainly worth attending. When we are engaged in extraordinary things, we speak a special language, too. Just think about doctors and other specialists with their particular vocabularies.

In the vocabulary of faith, it is not just an ordinary cup we take up, it is a chalice. There is a poetic resonance that some words have that makes them especially useful in special circumstances. That is the case with “chalice” and this also applies to the change from “shed” to “poured out.”

These last words carry with them the echo of ancient sacrifices.

We remember St. Paul saying that his life was “poured out like a libation” (2 Tim. 4:6). St. Paul compared his life, with its daily sacrifices and problems, to a ritual action, the priest pouring out a libation on the altar. Not all bloodshed is sacrificial, but Christ’s blood, his life’s blood as the Incarnate Deity, was poured out for us. The blood of our Redeemer was not just “shed” but offered in sacrifice for us.

These changes seem to be just tweaking, however, compared with the difference between “for many” and “for all.” Naturally, these words have caused controversy for a long time. Those who prefer the Tridentine rite of the Mass have always been upset about the translation “pro multis” into “for all.” For some, this was so decisive that they began to say that the vernacular English Mass was not even valid, an exaggeration that had little respect for the authority of the Church.

The New American Bible has Jesus say at the Last Supper, “This is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed for many” (Mark

14:24). The new translation from the Latin will adhere to a literal translation of the words Jesus uses in both Matthew (Matt. 26:28) and Mark. St. John does not have the words of institution, and St. Luke only says, “for you” (Luke 22:20).

We should remember that these words have been translated first from the original Aramaic our Lord spoke, then from Greek to Latin and from Latin to English. The Latin phrase “pro multis” never changed when the “novus ordo,” or new order of Mass appeared after the Council. What changed was the translation of the Latin.

Why did the translators into the vernacular decide to change “for many” into “for all”? Partly, this was based upon biblical studies that said that, for all practical purposes, the two phrases had equivalence in meaning. Apparently, Aramaic did not have a specific word for “all.”

This was translation and interpretation at the same time. The problem with it was that the Greek preserved the distinction between “for many” and “for all.” The Greek of the New Testament did not express the equivalence that the liturgical translators insisted upon.

The official Latin version was still “pro multis” and the exact rendering “for many” as was its equivalent in the Greek, Syriac, Armenian and Slavic Oriental Rites of the Eucharist. Now the English will be in line with the official version. The other languages that opted for the interpretive “for all” must also change.

But wasn't Christ's sacrifice “for all”? That is the objection that some have raised to the correction of the translation. Certainly, some of the people in the pews will wonder about this. There is in fact a traditional interpretation about this.

One of the examples is from St. Thomas Aquinas in his Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard.

St. Thomas comments on why the Gospels and the Mass say “for the many” and not “for all.” He makes distinctions, which is what Thomism is all about, after all. “The blood of Christ has been shed for all concerning its sufficient power (quem ad sufficientiam), but only for the elect as regards to its efficacy (quo ad efficiam).”

This is very far from the “double predestination” taught by John Calvin, who said that Jesus’ blood was the redemption of only an elect group, with the rest of the people basically created to go to hell.

St. Thomas clearly says that “for many” does not imply that God does not desire salvation for all. It just recognizes that it is possible that some will not be saved. This rubs many moderns the wrong way, even some people who are religious. In the back of their head lurks the idea that-- no matter what-- everyone is going to end up in heaven. Among these optimists (I guess you could call them, using the language loosely) was a professor I heard in Rome just a few months ago.

This is the other extreme from “double predestination” (which, by the way, was only eliminated from the Presbyterian catechism in the early 20th century).

If hell doesn’t exist (something Jesus contradicts rather vividly when he talks about wailing and gnashing teeth for eternity and fires that will never stop burning as he does in Luke 13:28 and Mark 9:48) then what does human freedom mean? The objection to the change to “for many” is probably the best argument for its validity. We should not think that there are only happy endings in the universe. Our human freedom is a wonderful and a terrible thing, because we can lose our souls.

An old catechist who worked in my mission had a good example to explain this. He said that everyone had been given a time card and

has been guaranteed a job. However, if you never punch in at work, you should not expect a pay check.

Like the poet Horace said, all metaphors limp a bit. This one is not completely exact in that it could be taken to imply that our salvation is not a total gift from God. In other words, getting up in the morning and being there to punch in depends on God's help. All is grace, but we have the capacity even to reject God's free gifts

Heaven could be the party you are invited to, but never make. That is quite a somber thought, and one that ought to inspire in us much more care about our salvation. As St. Paul said, "Let he who is standing take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12).

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