

The Vatican's Tahrir Square?

In 1975 in my role as Director of the Upholland Northern Institute (UNI) I was involved in arranging the very first In-Service Training course for the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. It was on the theme, 'The Bishop as Teacher' and was held at the UNI. When the bishops arrived, they all had embargoed copies of the CDF Declaration, *Persona Humana*, on sexual issues which was due to be published during the week. Quite a number of the bishops shared with me their deep unease about the Declaration. They were highly critical of it and made no secret of that to me and to each other. I was given a copy and asked to run a special session on it. When I read it, I could see why they felt so critical. Despite its title, *Persona Humana* was based on a theological approach which failed to do justice to Vatican II's person-centred vision of moral theology. In my talk I suggested to the bishops that, if they were to be faithful to their role of teachers, they should be prepared to voice their criticism of the Declaration, if they were interviewed by the media. I stressed that we owe it to the truth to be honest and authentic in what we say. Positive criticism is intrinsic to good teaching. As far as I know, none of them followed my suggestion in their subsequent TV and Radio interviews.

What disturbed me even more was the text of a telegram I found in an issue of *Documentation Catholique* a few months later. It was sent to the CDF from the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales and thanked them for their excellent Declaration, *Persona Humana*! That left a bad taste in my mouth. It suggested a kind of 'double speak', as though there was a dysfunctionality in communications within the Church.

That seems to be relevant at present with regard to the new translation of the Roman Missal. I may be wrong, but I have the impression that at least some, perhaps many, of the bishops share the unhappiness about the new translation which is felt by many priests and lay Catholics. Yet the new translation is being promoted as a precious gift. Let me quote from a suggested insert for parish newsletters for the coming weeks sent out by Liverpool Archdiocese. "The new translation brings with it a deeper and more profound meaning of the mystery we have gathered to celebrate at Mass." This is because "we have grown as a Church over the last 40 years in terms of understanding how to better translate our Latin texts into the vernacular language of the people". Consequently, "the changes also bring us a wonderful opportunity as a Church to delve more deeply into the mystery of Christ Jesus and the praise and thanksgiving we offer to God, our Father, during Mass".

I love the liturgy, I really do. I find it a rich source for my own devotional life. But I find those quotations deeply disturbing, arousing the same feeling of uneasiness I experienced with the Bishops' telegram to the CDF. I simply cannot identify myself with what is being said. It smacks too much of a 'double-speak', not the straightforward 'Yes' and 'No' that Jesus urged us to follow.

On the Sunday following Mubarak's stepping down as President of Egypt, I made the following point in my homily to the community of Notre Dame Sisters with whom I am privileged to share the Eucharist each day.

"Re-reading the first paragraph of Benedict's 2009 social encyclical, 'Caritas in Veritate, has helped me to see beneath the surface of what has been happening in Tahrir Square. Benedict writes: "Love is an extraordinary force which leads people to opt for courageous and generous engagement in the field of Justice and Peace." He goes on to stress that this force "has its origin in God" and is a "vocation planted by God in the heart and mind of every human person." The crowd in Tahrir Square were mainly Muslims but also included many secularists and Coptic Christians. They showed "courageous and generous engagement in the field of justice and peace" in their peaceful demands for a peaceful, non-violent transition to genuine human freedom and justice. Benedict's amazing words applied to them and made me very conscious that what I was seeing on TV was God's spirit present and active in these people."

I am sure many people felt that same "extraordinary force" was tangible in the crowds during the Benedict XVI's UK visit. I certainly felt that at Evensong in Westminster Abbey.

However, I also feel that this "extraordinary force" is also manifesting itself in the growing unease about the imposition of the new translation of the Roman Missal. A grass-roots resistance seems to be growing among ordinary Catholics who are deeply concerned at the impact this new translation will have on their Sunday Mass. They had no say in what is happening. They feel disempowered. To my mind, their instinct is right. The New Missal imposition is just one instance of the abuse of power in our Church. It is just the tip of the ice-berg. I sense a growing discontent among many very committed Catholics who have a deep love for the church. They feel it is losing touch with the Spirit-inspired vision of Vatican II and its hope for the future. They want to mount a protest against this but there seems no appropriate channel for such protest.

Vatican II placed collegiality at the very heart of church governance. Implied in that teaching is the involvement of all the faithful through collaborative ministry and corresponsibility. The Bishops' Conference of England and Wales made that abundantly clear in *The Sign we Give*, the magnificent 1995 Report from their Working Party on Collaborative Ministry. Sadly, these developments in church governance, so central to the renewal of the Church, have never been properly implemented. That continues to this very day. Until recently most Catholics have felt they had no choice but to tolerate of this abuse of power. Now, however, I suspect that the 'Tahrir Square' syndrome in the church is a sign that the "extraordinary force" of the fire of the Holy Spirit is beginning to disturb us from our complacency.

The flagrant misuse of power involved in the new translation of the Roman Missal is not just about its pastorally disastrous kind of language. It is also about the serious

disregard for Vatican II's teaching on collegiality in the process leading up to the New Missal. The original International Commission for English in the Liturgy (ICEL) was set up after the Council and was a fine example of the implementation of collegiality, since it was answerable to the English-speaking bishops conferences throughout the world. ICEL's only link with the Congregation of Divine Worship (CDW) was the requirement to obtain a 'recognitio' (a kind of 'rubber stamp'!) for its proposed texts and translations. ICEL was also true to Vatican II's ecumenical spirit since it worked with the liturgical agencies of other Christian churches to ensure that the common texts and the cycle of biblical readings would be shared in common by the churches. Moreover, it tried to avoid as far as possible exclusive language which might be offensive to women. These original ICEL texts were carefully vetted and voted upon by all the English-speaking bishops' conferences and are still used today throughout the English-speaking world. However, from the start ICEL had been aware that the need to provide English texts as soon as reasonably possible after the Council inevitably meant that their texts were far from perfect. In fact, Archbishop Denis Hurley, a major figure at Vatican II and first Chair of ICEL, immediately set in motion the work of revising and refining these texts. He gathered together a team of liturgical and literary experts to undertake this task. The guiding principle for their work was based on Vatican II's insistence that the "full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else" (Liturgy Constitution, n.14) Consequently, this team was commissioned to produce texts which, while not being literal word-for-word translations, should be faithful to the meaning of the original, as well as being simple, dignified and easily understandable. In this they were following the guidance enshrined in the Vatican II-inspired 1969 instruction, *Comme le prevoit*, approved by Paul VI.

By 1998 ICEL's revised version of the Roman Missal was complete and had been examined and approved by all the English-speaking bishops' conferences. It was then sent to the Congregation of Divine Worship (CDW) for its formal 'recognitio'. This was refused, completely disregarding the key Vatican II principle of collegiality! Moreover, without any consultation, the CDW brought out an entirely new set of guidelines, *Liturgiam Authenticam*, which insisted on a much more literal fidelity in translating and actually warned against any ecumenical involvement in the process. Moreover, it showed total insensitivity to women by ruling out any use of inclusive language! Archbishop Hurley, by then no longer Chair of ICEL, is reported to have said: "I find the attitude reflected in the proposed change in translation practice a distressing departure from the spirit of collegiality in favour of authoritative imposition". He even wrote to a friend: "At times I find it difficult to understand the attitude of the Roman Curia. It seems to be more concerned with power than with humble service." (both quotations from Paddy Kearney, *Guardian of the Light: Denis Hurley, Renewing the Church, opposing Apartheid*, (New York, London, T & T Clark, 2009), pp.292 & 295)

A radically reconstituted ICEL set out to produce a new Roman Missal following the new guide-lines. In due course this was sent out to the English-speaking bishops' conferences. They could have rejected this new Missal but instead chose to approve it. It looks as though they had given up hope of any genuine collegiality. The earlier

revision of the Missal which all the Bishops' conferences had approved in 1998 was virtually binned, despite being the fruit of years of dedicated expertise and ecumenical cooperation by the commission set up by the original ICEL. A full account of this sad and shameful affair is found in Chapters 4 and 5 of *It's the Eucharist, Thank God* (Decani Books, Brandon, Suffolk, 2009) by Bishop Maurice Taylor who was chair of ICEL during the fateful years of 1997 to 2002.

This new Missal has provoked widespread dismay and disquiet, especially among many clergy, fearful of its negative impact on parishioners. For instance, in January of this year the eminent US liturgical scholar, Anthony Ruff OSB, withdrew from a commission given him by the US bishops to help prepare people for the new translation of the Roman Missal in dioceses across the US. In his letter of withdrawal he wrote:

"...my involvement in that process, as well as my observation of the [Holy See's](#) handling of scandal, has gradually opened my eyes to the deep problems in the structures of authority of our church. The forthcoming missal is but a part of a larger pattern of top-down impositions by a central authority that does not consider itself accountable to the larger church. When I think of how secretive the translation process was, how little consultation was done with priests or laity, ... how unsatisfactory the final text is, how this text was imposed on national conferences of bishops in violation of their legitimate episcopal authority...—and then when I think of Our Lord's teachings on service and love and unity...I weep." (America, 14/2/11)

Anthony Ruff is not a lone voice. On 3 February the Irish Association of Catholic Priests (ACP) issued a press release entitled "New Translation of the Missal Unacceptable". They described the texts as "archaic, elitist and obscure and not in keeping with the natural rhythm, cadence and syntax of the English language" and say: "from the few available samples of the new texts, it is clear that the style of English used throughout the Mass will be so convoluted that it will be difficult to read the prayers in public." Moreover, they continue: "It is ironic that this Latinised, stilted English is being imposed on Irish people who are so blessed with world-renowned poets, playwrights, and novelists." They ask the bishops to follow the German bishops who have objected to similar texts being imposed on them and urge them to defer the Missal's introduction for five years to give them time to "engage with Irish Catholics with a view to developing a new set of texts that will adequately reflect the literary genius and spiritual needs of our Church community in these modern times".

Two years earlier, an article appeared in *America* (14/12/09) entitled *What If We Said, 'Wait'?* The case for a grass-roots review of the new Roman Missal, by Fr Michael G. Ryan. He spoke out of his experience as Pastor of St. James Cathedral, Seattle since 1988 and board member of the national Cathedral Ministry Conference. He tells of the reactions of "disbelief and indignation" of his friends to some of the translations; and of "audible laughter in the room" at a diocesan seminar for priests and lay-leaders. One reaction will strike chords with many:

“with all that the church has on its plate today—global challenges with regard to justice, peace and the environment; nagging scandals; a severe priest shortage; the growing disenchantment of many women; seriously lagging church attendance—it seems almost ludicrous to push ahead with an agenda that will seem at best trivial and at worst hopelessly out-of-touch.”

He also notes that when the new translations were mistakenly introduced ahead of time in South Africa they “were met almost uniformly with opposition bordering on outrage”. Fr Ryan makes a gentle “What if?” challenge to his fellow priests:

“What if we, the parish priests of this country who will be charged with the implementation, were to find our voice and tell our bishops that we want to help them avert an almost certain fiasco? What if we told them that we think it unwise to implement these changes until our people have been consulted in an adult manner that truly honours their intelligence and their baptismal birthright? What if we just said, “Wait, not until our people are ready for the new translations, but until the translations are ready for our people”?”

I recommend Ryan’s article very highly, especially to priests.

Many Catholics seem to have mixed feelings about the church at present. At one level they really do love the church and, in the UK at least, felt boosted by the Pope’s visit. Yet they also agree with Tina Beattie’s comment that the problems have not gone away. A lot of these problems are related to the way the authority of God is being used to shore up teaching which, at the very least, is open to debate and, in some instances, rejected as inadequate by many theologians and most people in the church trying to be faithful to the spirit of Vatican II. I am thinking, for instance, of the rich understanding of human sexuality found in current Catholic and Christian theology, revealing to women and men, gays and lesbians, the depth of their God-given dignity and the ultimate foundation for their sense of self-worth. The same is true of developments in liturgical and Eucharistic theology with its emphasis on full participation, so crucial to the spirit of Vatican II. Using authority to close down these legitimate debates paralyses pastoral imagination from exploring new ways of coping with such down-to-earth issues as the sacraments to the divorced-remarried, Eucharistic hospitality in an ecumenical context, general absolution’s highlighting the social dimension of sin, as well as stifling the much-needed debate on contraception, the ordination of women, and the presence of God’s love in the faithful love lives of gays and lesbians,

It seems to be increasingly recognised that abuse of power is also a key factor lying at the heart of the scandal of clergy sex-abuse and Episcopal cover-up. The eradication of this horrendous abuse of power seems to lie not just in dealing with the actual perpetrators but also in a radical conversion of the organisational pathology of the church itself. I cannot get out of my mind the telling words of Brendan Callaghan SJ: “The faces of this tragedy are always the faces of the hurt and betrayed children, and we must somehow find the courage neither to turn away from those faces nor to diminish what they show us of death and destruction.”

For some readers this article might seem too negative and disturbing, especially as coming from a 77-year old retired priest and emeritus ("past it") moral theologian. I hope and pray that what I have written is empowered by the same "extraordinary force" of God's love referred to by Benedict XVI which I mentioned in my opening paragraph. God alone can judge that. Certainly it is what I pray for each morning with the words, "Come, Holy Spirit, enkindle in us (and in me) the fire of your love".

At the opening of the 2nd Session of Vatican II, Paul VI spoke of the church as "the Bride of Christ looking upon Christ to discern in him her true likeness" and reminded the bishops that: "If in doing so she were to discover some shadow, some defect, some stain upon her wedding garment, what should be her instinctive, courageous reaction? There can be no doubt that her primary duty would be to reform, correct and set herself aright in conformity with her divine model". Yves Congar, Hans Kung & Daniel O'Hanlon, *Council Speeches of Vatican II* (Sheed & Ward, London, 1964) p.51. Paul VI was not encouraging a spirit of negative criticism at the Council. He was inviting the bishops to show their love for the church by facing up to its need for healing and renewal. Positive criticism should be loving, inspiring and life-giving. I believe, with many others, that the church needs this kind of love more than ever at this point in time – not a soft love but a courageous reforming love. Henri DeLubac is reported to have said: "If we do not learn to love the church in its sinfulness, we will not love the church loved by the Lord but, rather, some figment of our romantic imagination." cf. George B Wilson SJ, *Clericalism: The Death of Priesthood*, (Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 2008) p.x. As members of this sinful church, each of us, myself included, needs to ask the Spirit to help us discern how we are part of that sinfulness and especially in this Lenten season ask for forgiveness and healing.

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