Inclusive Language

Statement of Principles: Language and the Liturgy
Australian Catholic Bishops Conference
Bishops Commission for Liturgy (rev. May 2024)

Introduction

1. God is both beyond us and close to us, beyond our understanding and yet with us and within us.

2. Our words, our human language in all its varieties, will never adequately capture the mystery of the living God. Our Catholic understanding of sacrament, and our liturgical life which communicates via symbol, ritual and story, acknowledge this deep truth.

3. In this context we appreciate that language is one of God's greatest gifts to humanity. God speaks to us as individuals and as a community, and we hear God's voice in our native languages.

4. We also speak to God using various languages.

5. Vernacular languages, in particular, enable us to understand and express our reality, from the simple to the profound.

6. We also know that language evolves over time giving fresh expression to our understanding of who God is, and of who we are as part of God's creation.

7. In our liturgy, which is sacramental in nature, everything acts to facilitate our personal and communal encounter with the living God who created each one of us in the divine image.

8. Inclusive language in the Church's liturgy is essential. Our words:

    o   demonstrate respect for the dignity of each person as a child of God;
    o   ensure that each person hears the texts as being addressed to them;
    o   facilitate the full, conscious and active participation of all those gathered.

Language Relating to God

9. God is beyond human comprehension and beyond human language.

10. God's revelation to the human race in the Bible is normative for the Christian faith and biblical terms for God are integral to its expression.

11. Because there is one God, the use of a singular personal pronoun for God is inescapable.[1]

12. Calling God Father and Lord must remain in Catholic liturgical prayer, but needs to be balanced with other non-gender-specific forms of address.

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[1] In liturgical texts, the most frequently used pronoun for God is you and yours.

Language Relating to Human Beings

13.   Australian English should be inclusive and non-discriminatory in its reference to human beings.[2]

14.   Good Australian English is to be used in liturgical celebrations in this country.

15.   Consequently, all new and revised liturgical books need to use accurate and inclusive language, though the processes of approval of liturgical books must be respected.

16.   Inclusive language is always to be used in general intercessions, in preaching, and in introductory remarks.

17.   It is important to realise that inclusion extends beyond gender and, indeed, simply referencing male and female is no longer sufficient. We need to aim for terms of reference such as 'People of God', 'the baptised' and 'the faithful', all of which are utterly inclusive and place the initiative of God at the forefront.

HYMN TEXTS

18.   In cases where a hymn proposed for use in the liturgy contains exclusive language, it is necessary to consult a different hymnal or a more recently revised edition to see if inclusive wording has been provided for that hymn.

19.   Where only one verse contains exclusive language, it would be possible to omit that verse.

20.   In some cases, the best option is simply to choose an alternative hymn.

LECTIONARY TEXTS

21.   If a Scripture translation in the Australian Lectionary for Mass (Jerusalem Bible) is problematic, it is advisable to consult other scripture translations approved by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference for liturgical proclamation. In particular, it is recommended that the Revised New Jerusalem Bible (RNJB) or the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) be consulted for an inclusive rendering of the Lectionary text.

22.   The Lectionary for Masses with Children, based on the Contemporary English Version of scripture, is also approved for use in Australia and recommended on occasions when large groups of families are gathered; such occasions would include times of sacramental preparation when many children and their families attend Sunday Mass, school Masses, parish Masses in which classes from the parish school are specifically invited, and Christmas Masses which are predominantly attended by young families.

23.   It is also important to substitute exclusive terms with appropriate inclusive expressions when proclaiming the readings from the Lectionary. For example, replace 'brothers' with 'brothers and sisters' or 'friends' when it is used in the letters of St Paul to address the listeners. When referring to all people, replace 'men' or 'mankind' with 'humanity', 'humankind', 'others' or 'people'.

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[2] See *Style Manual for Authors, Editors and Printers*, 5th edition (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1994) 121-144.

24. Gospel readings need special attention and presiders are encouraged to consult alternative translations where the Lectionary pericope contains exclusive language. For example, on the Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B), the Australian Lectionary (1981) provides "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I in him" (John 6:54). An inclusive alternative is offered by the RNJB which provides: "Anyone who does eat my flesh and drink my blood has eternal life and I shall raise up that person on the last day." The NRSV translation renders the same passage inclusively in the plural: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them."

25. For the purposes of preparing worship aids, it is preferable to print the Scripture reference only, so the people are encouraged to listen to God's Word as it is proclaimed. However, if it is considered pastorally appropriate to print the texts of the readings, such as at a Funeral Mass, any words or phrases which are not in the original copyright text should be placed in square brackets. For example, 'We were still helpless when at his appointed moment Christ died for sinful [people]. It is not easy to die even for a good [person] - though of course for someone really worthy, a [person] might be prepared to die - but what proves that God loves us is that Christ died for us while we were still sinners' (Rom 5:6).

26. Any omitted words or phrases should be indicated by the insertion of an ellipsis. For example, "It is true, God sent his word to the people of Israel, and it was to them that the good news of peace was brought by Jesus Christ - but Jesus Christ is Lord of all…" (Acts 10:36). No changes should be made which alter the meaning of the copyright text. If there is any uncertainty over correct treatment of the copyright text, please contact the copyright holder.

27. Ensuring that inclusive language is used in liturgical celebrations calls for good preparation and due reverence to the Word of God and the gathered People of God.