

Inclusive Language in the Liturgy

In June this year, the Archdiocese of Brisbane published a document called “Inclusive Language in the Liturgy”. This is a sensitive topic because it touches the language we use in our prayer, the language we use to refer to God and the language we use to refer to the people gathered to pray. Over the years, there have been some intense debates about this. What do we mean by inclusive language in relation to God? What do we mean by inclusive language in reference to people?

The document from Brisbane aims to give practical guidance for those involved in the Church’s liturgy, both in parishes and schools. The document does not go into debates about the translation of official liturgical texts, whether of prayers or Scripture passages. The focus is on ways in which we can be inclusive in our language while accepting the official texts as given.

The document was prepared by members of the Brisbane Archdiocesan Ministries team and the Liturgy Brisbane team and reviewed and endorsed by Archbishop Shane Mackinlay. Copies were sent to parishes and schools, and the text is available on the Liturgy Brisbane website.

A letter from Liturgy Brisbane introduced the guidelines in this way. “The practical guidance offered in this document is especially relevant when preparing introductory or concluding words for liturgical celebrations, composing the Prayer of the Faithful, preaching, choosing hymns, or writing prayers for meetings, school liturgies and other prayer gatherings.”

The introduction to the document notes that the way people use words changes over time. This means that some expressions that might have been considered inclusive in an earlier era are no longer heard in the same way. “It is important to recognise that expressions once understood as universally inclusive are no longer always received in that way. For example, the use of “men” to refer to all humanity, while historically normative, is now heard in a more limited sense. This calls the Church to ongoing pastoral attentiveness to how language is received, so that the proclamation of the Gospel may truly be heard as addressed to all.” For communities in the Archdiocese of Brisbane and communities around Australia, it is important that we use language that expresses prayer and communicates the Gospel as well as possible in our place and in our time.

Language relating to God

The first section of the document refers to “Language relating to God”. In this context, inclusive language means language that includes the full range of terms used for God in Scripture and in the Church’s tradition. The document notes the prominent place that the terms “Father” and “Lord” have in the Church’s liturgy when we are referring to God. We see this in the frequent use of the “Our Father” and the numerous references to God as “Lord”. However, we also find many other terms in relation to God, both in Scripture and in the liturgical tradition. The Brisbane document gives various examples: God of Compassion, Loving God, God our Creator, Merciful God, God of All Goodness, Lord of Life, God of Tenderness, Ever-Present God, Source of All Grace, God of Justice and Peace, Gracious God. The document notes that “using such a variety of addresses enriches the assembly’s sense of the inexhaustible mystery of God.” Such a variety of terms can well be used in the Prayer of the Faithful, in preaching, and in preparing prayers for use in school assemblies and other gatherings.

Language relating to Human Beings

The second section of the Brisbane document is headed “Language relating to Human Beings”. The basic principle here is that “language in liturgy should be inclusive and non-discriminatory in its reference to human beings.” This applies, for example, in the introductory remarks at the start of liturgies, in the general intercessions and in preaching. We find some examples in the official prayers, such as the reference to “you, my brothers and sisters” in the “I confess”. The Brisbane document points to other inclusive terms as well, such as “People of God”, “the baptised” and “the faithful”. The document recommends the use of such terms so as to foster the sense that everyone is included in the celebration. “A variety of terms to refer to people should be used throughout the Mass so that as far as possible, everyone present feels acknowledged and included.” This is in tune with the welcoming approach expressed by Pope Francis in his message “The Joy of the Gospel”. Pope Francis invited us all to encounter Jesus and he added, quoting St Paul VI, “No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since ‘no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord’.” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, par 3)

Hymn Texts

The next section of the Brisbane document refers to hymn texts. Here the document notes practical steps that we can take to find wording that is inclusive. “In cases where a hymn proposed for use in the liturgy contains exclusive language, a different hymnal or a more recently revised edition should be consulted to see if inclusive wording has been provided for that hymn. Where only one verse contains exclusive language, it may be possible to omit that verse as long as the theological or narrative integrity of the text is respected. If revised lyrics are not available, or a problematic verse cannot be omitted, an alternative hymn should be chosen.”

Lectionary Texts

The next section takes up the topic of “Lectionary Texts”. Here a basic principle is that only officially approved translations of Scripture should be used in the liturgy. This is what we read in the General Introduction to the Lectionary, paragraph 111. “In the liturgical assembly the word of God must always be read either from the Latin texts prepared by the Holy See or from vernacular translations approved by the conferences of bishops for liturgical use, according to existing norms.” The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference approved several translations of Scripture for liturgical use at their meeting in May 1990. The bishops approved an updated list at their meeting in May 2024. The list includes the Jerusalem Bible (as in the current lectionary), the Revised New Jerusalem Bible, the New Revised Standard Version, and the Contemporary English Version (as found in the *Lectionary for Masses with Children*). This last version gives the Scripture readings in simpler English and so may be more suitable for Masses when many in the congregation are children.

The Australian bishops have provided additional flexibility for choosing a translation when texts are to be sung. In this case, the directive for Australia is as follows. “Scripture texts set to music, by long custom in Australia, may be drawn from a wider selection of available translations to enable use of the worldwide array of quality musical settings, especially of the Psalms and Canticles. This flexibility

would permit, for example, use of the *Abbey Psalms and Canticles* and *By Flowing Waters* (the *Graduale Simplex* in English).”

This is in line with the general provisions that encourage the singing of psalms. In the introduction to the Roman Missal we read, “It is preferable for the Responsorial Psalm to be sung, at least as far as the people’s response is concerned.” The Missal notes further that additional texts are provided to facilitate the congregation’s singing of the psalm. “In order that the people may be able to sing the Psalm response more easily, texts of some responses and Psalms have been chosen for the different times of the year or for the different categories of Saints. These may be used instead of the text corresponding to the reading whenever the Psalm is sung.” (General Instruction of the Roman Missal, par. 61)

The Brisbane document indicates that those preparing liturgies should choose from among the various approved translations of Scripture if the text given in the current lectionary (the Jerusalem Bible version) is problematic, whether because of the use of exclusive language or for some other pastoral reason. “If a Scripture translation in the Australian Lectionary for Mass (Jerusalem Bible) is problematic or pastorally inappropriate, another Scripture translation approved by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference for liturgical proclamation should be substituted.”

Other Liturgical Texts

There are some parts of the Mass in which texts can be freely composed, such as in the Universal Prayer (Prayer of the Faithful) and in Option 3 of the Penitential Rite. There are also occasions for composing prayers in liturgies outside Mass. “Texts composed for the Universal Prayer, the invocations in Option 3 for the Penitential Rite, and for prayers for non-Eucharistic liturgy provide an opportunity for inclusive language to be exercised freely and pastorally.” Such texts “should use accessible and inclusive language.” Under this heading, we might well add the text of the homily – a text that can be freely composed by the homilist. It is certainly desirable that the homily too should use accessible and inclusive language.

The Use of Pronouns

The document touches on the question of being inclusive in the use of pronouns. In view of the use of the terms “Lord” and “Father” in Scripture and the liturgy, it is not surprising that we find the masculine pronouns of “he” and “his” and “him” referring to God. However, we might note that, in liturgical prayers, the most frequently used pronoun for God addresses God directly as “you”.

In relation to human beings, language can be inclusive in the pronouns we use as well as in the nouns. This issue has been part of discussions about inclusive language for many years. In 2003, a group of Canadian bishops met in Rome with officials of the Congregation for Divine Worship to discuss principles for the translation of Scripture. Some of the principles that the meeting agreed on referred to inclusive language. In the work of translating Scripture, the aim is to communicate the meaning of the original texts. The translator needs to consider whether the Hebrew or Greek terms in each particular context were meant to include both males and females or whether they were meant to be

gender-specific. The principle for translation is that “words in the original language meant to include both males and females would be so translated, and those intended to be gender-specific likewise would be so translated.” The meeting between the Canadian bishops and the Roman officials also recognised that the collective pronoun (they/their/them) could sometimes be used to refer to the singular. “Where it would not be confusing to the hearer, nor inelegant, the collective pronoun ‘they/their/them’ could be used to denote the singular (essentially, where it could replace the use of ‘he or she / his or her / him or her’).” I would add that this usage of they/their/them has numerous precedents in English literature.

Inclusive Communication Beyond Words in the Liturgy

The final section of the Brisbane document touches on the question of how we communicate in ways beyond words. The architecture of a church, the images in the stained-glass windows, and the statues of saints will all be more or less inclusive. So too will the way we share the roles in ministry. Do those who read the Scriptures and distribute Communion reflect the worshipping community, women and men, younger and older, locally born and immigrants? “The Word of God is best honoured when it is proclaimed from a diversity of voices that reflect the richness of the gathered Body of Christ.”

Inclusive Language: A Theological and Pastoral Responsibility

The full title of the Brisbane document is “Inclusive Language in the Liturgy: A Theological and Pastoral Responsibility”. This raises the issue of inclusive language beyond a matter of mere preference, as though we might attend to inclusive language or not, depending on our interest in such questions. The document refers to this issue as a *responsibility* based on theological and pastoral foundations. From the theological point of view, we have a responsibility to share the Gospel message as fully as we can. That means including the full range of terms used for God in Scripture and in the Church’s tradition. It also means sharing Christ’s message as widely as we can, in ways that include all people. From the pastoral point of view, we have a responsibility to care for one another in ways that include everyone, following the example of the Good Shepherd.

There will be differences of opinion on particular questions about inclusive language. However, the underlying challenge to be inclusive in liturgy is a challenge that we have in common. The Archdiocese of Brisbane has made a valuable contribution by highlighting inclusive language as an important element in our liturgical celebrations.

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