

Forum

Dear Great Big Out There Somewhere

By William F. Willoughby

Washington — Leave it to the National Council of Churches! I knew they'd get around to God some day. Just give them enough time.

Or, as they say, give a fool enough rope and he'll hang himself.

The English-language Bible — particularly the Revised Standard Version for which the council holds the copyright — is about to be emasculated. Literally.

If God is half the man I have been led to believe He is, He's not going to like it. Possibly when the NCC's team of theologians, feminists and translators gets done doing the sex change on the Bible, God won't even recognize Himself as the one written about.

Of course there is some good that might come out of it if we can successfully emasculate our references to God. At least we might not see as many of those lame-brained bumper stickers that some equally lame-brained charismatics paste on their cars: God is Dad. Might I add here that most charismatics are anything but lame-brained. Most, too, don't have those particularly offensive bumper stickers.

In the above paragraph I said something very pointedly. I referred to efforts to "emasculate our references to God." That is where the problem lies, and that is what the NCC is trying to get at. How do we any longer refer to God in masculine terms when we live in an age of aspiring egalite between the sexes?

No person worth his or her academic salt believes God to be masculine per se. Hopefully there's not a feminist alive who believes God is feminine per se, either. To actually conceive of God in concrete terms as either gender is folly.

But we do have to refer to God. We just can't refer to Him as the Great Big Out There Somewhere and be done with it.

That's where the problem comes in. It used to be all right to refer to God as the Father, the very way Jesus did. But there are some who feel Jesus (and this is very hard for me to see) was conditioned by the time and the place in which He lived — not by the place He came from or ascended to.

If we ever develop a matriarchal system in the country and should Jesus return at that time, following the

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argument of those who think He was conditioned by the culture of His times, then we logically could expect Him not to refer to God the Father, but God the Mother in that matriarchal culture. That would make us men feel utterly second-class (so the modern script says).

Frankly, I love nature dearly and I think I love wisdom even more dearly. But believe me, and possibly it's because I have absorbed a fair share of the latter, I never have felt second-class because it is Mother Nature which is referred to or that Wisdom answers to the name Sophia. A most happy arrangement.

Why, then, are people making a case out of having to refer to God in the masculine gender? Could it be that they have not absorbed enough of God that it doesn't really make a difference just so long as God is God? Or perhaps they have not allowed God to absorb enough of them.

Of course, this revisionist movement which is in the NCC concerning the language of the Bible, hasn't won the battle of words yet. So far, it has been only that a task force on biblical translation has urged the NCC to prepare a new lectionary of biblical texts to be used in public worship — with an emphasis on inclusive (everyone, that is) and non-sexist language.

The council's RSV Bible Committee is working on an updated version of their Bible for publication about mid-decade. Since the RSV Bible Committee might turn macho at the very thought of emasculating the Bible, the

revisionists want to come up with Scripture texts of their own.

There is admission by the NCC that they might be tampering with the, if not sacred, at least sacrosanct RSV text.

Here is the NCC's dilemma. God, please take note.

"On the one hand, the RSV has become standard and normative to an extent that no other English translation has since the King James Version.

"This, of all translations, must not lend aid and comfort to sexist attitudes and interpretations. It should not disenfranchise half of humanity by being addressed to 'the brethren' alone. It should not speak of God or Christ in a manner that could make males feel superior and closer to God and Christ.

"On the other hand, many of us hesitate when it comes to such revisions of the RSV which would make it lose its character of being the standard translation by which our churches, seminaries, colleges, universities and our total culture do have reasonable access to the language and conceptuality of the ages in which the biblical texts took shape."

Can't have it both ways, boys and girls?

They may want to do a job on Jesus. His maleness is a real bugaboo, because that manifestation of God in the flesh can't be relegated to femaleness. The important thing, of course, is that the Word became flesh, not that it became a male or a female.

I, for one, think I side in with Dr. Bruce M. Metzger of Princeton Theological Seminary, chairman of the RSV Bible Committee, who, with plenty of editorial emphasis, said he refuses "to cut (himself) off from the coined Judeo-Christian tradition and cease calling God Father." Where the people of the Bible perceived of God as male; do we today have a right to "wash away" that perception by new language?

Others, of course, want the Bible to be read not in the context in which it was written, but in the context in which it is heard. And thus rages the battle of words.

Excuse me for a moment, folks. I have just felt a sudden compulsion to pray the Lord's Prayer.

New NCC version, of course.

"Our Parent, which art in Heaven . . ."

Fr. John Reedy



Looking for the Lord

Laicization: Values in Conflict

NC News reports that the Holy Father has again begun processing requests of priests for laicization; it is not yet clear what norms will be used for granting or refusing these petitions.

Some of the requests must be granted out of respect for serious decisions of conscience. I have spoken to bishops and religious superiors — some quite conservative in church matters — who have shared the painful struggles of priests who finally came to the decision that they should leave the life of the priesthood.

These bishops and superiors don't always agree with the wisdom of a particular request, but I've never talked to one of them who didn't feel that some of these decisions are right for the man and for the church.

Nor have I found a single one of these authorities who could accept the notion that

all priests acting on such a decision should be cut off from the community of the church, from the life of the sacraments.

But there is the other value, represented by the Holy Father's two-year refusal to grant laicizations. There is a value for the church and for those who seek ordination in seeing the priestly commitment as a permanent one, a total dedication of one's life and resources to God in ministry to the church.

Also, no matter how many explanations are given, many Catholics see a relationship between the fidelity of the priest to his commitment and that of the spouse to his or her marriage. Emotionally, if not logically, these people feel that if changes in the life of the priest can justify a dispensation from the commitment he has made, similar changes in a

marriage should allow a dispensation from that commitment.

Up until the time of Pope John, very few dispensations from the obligations of the priesthood were granted. Those who did leave were simply cut off from the life of the church. The only means of reconciliation available to them was a return to the commitments they had made.

This unyielding stance probably did force some priests to suppress doubts about whether they should remain; it probably helped

some to struggle harder with the difficulties they faced. These struggles, for some, were successful.

But for others, they left men with severe psychological problems, men whose sourness did harm to the people to whom they ministered; men who drank too much or who gave minimal service to their people while seeking satisfaction in other activities.

Compassion for the individual and concern for the harm that can be done by unhappy priests prompted

Pope John and Pope Paul to moderate the rigid policies of their predecessors. The great wave of departures during the past 10 or 15 years, along with his own respect for the priestly commitment, caused John Paul to delay the requests that came during the first two years of his pontificate.

The processing now begun will probably take longer (under Pope Paul, it got down to a period of about six months). It will probably be more demeaning. It will probably involve a greater number of refusals.

Even so, it is a relief to see that the church is again offering hope to those priests who seriously and conscientiously believe that they are called to serve God in some way other than the priestly ministry.

And it would be well for all of us to recognize the complexity of the issues involved, to assume that those who seek the church's approval are doing so conscientiously, and to assume that those who must judge these requests are trying to do their best for the individuals and for the community of the church.

Sunday Scripture Quiz

I. Gospel Reading: Lk 10, 38-42 — The quiet Mary responds to Christ's contemplative need.

Below is a key passage from Scripture. You can determine what this passage is by finding the answers to the questions below the puzzle and then putting the letters in their appropriate box. The first one is done for you.

Word search puzzle grid with letters and numbers. The first row contains the letters M, A, R, T, H, A.

- 1. Listened to Jesus: M A R T H A
2. Martha's sister: 32 2 15 58
3. Jesus is this: 57 46 3 72
4. Fraternal concern: 18 41 20 51 71 38 9
5. Young of age: 35 22 11 49 39
6. Boxing match: 26 55 23 4

Answers on Page 13

Following are key passages from 2 scripture readings. Fill in the missing words.

II. First Reading: Gn 18, 1-10 — The activist Sarah responds to an action need.

Phrase: "Where is your wife?" they _____ him. "There in the _____," he replied. _____ of them said, "_____ will surely _____ to you about this _____ next _____ and Sarah will then have a _____."

- 7. Make music: 24 69 56 42
8. Gaseous light: 52 16 27 47
9. Royalty: 67 28 48 66 19
10. Dried grapes: 70 6 61 43 40 34
11. Large cut: 53 14 62 50
12. Debt note: 21 10 68

III. Second Reading: Col 1, 24-28 — Paul's contemplative view penetrates the mystery of the Cross.

Phrase: Even _____ I find my _____ in the _____ I endure for you. In my own _____ I fill up what is _____ in the sufferings of _____ for the sake of his _____ the _____ I became a _____ of this church through the commission _____ gave me to preach among you.

Passage I words: Lord, IOU, neon, Martha, queen, sing, Mary, anxiety, gash, bout, youth, raisin.
Passage II words: One, year, Sarah, return, tent, I, son, time, asked.
Passage III words: Christ, God, suffering, body, joy, church, minister, flesh, now, lacking.