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An Open Letter to Pope Francis: Please Change the Word “Many” Back to “All” in the Eucharistic Prayer

July 9, 2018

His Holiness, Pope Francis
Apostolic Palace
00120 Vatican City

Dear Holy Father,

Thank you for everything you are doing to promote generosity of spirit, inclusion, and devotion to meeting human needs within the Catholic Church and beyond. Congratulations on your fifth anniversary as Pope; I pray that you will serve in that capacity for many more years to come. It is because of my deep admiration for your teachings and values that I write this letter with some hope that you will read it and consider the position it presents.

The Problem: When the English Catholic Mass was re-translated a few years ago, there was a change to the Eucharistic Prayer that I believe undermines Christ's (and, one would hope, the Church's) message of universal love and inclusion. That change involved Jesus's words during the Last Supper. Specifically, the previous translation said (all-caps are mine):

Take this, all of you, and drink from it;
this is the cup of my blood,
the blood of the new and everlasting covenant.
It will be shed for you and for ALL
so that sins may be forgiven.
Do this in memory of me.

The current translation quotes Jesus as saying:

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.

After a lot of prayer, I come before you to ask that you **please change the word “many” back to “all”** in this section of the Eucharistic Prayer. Admittedly, I am not a member of the clergy or any religious order. I am not a theologian or Latin scholar or noted expert on Catholicism.

However, as a Catholic layperson, I offer the perspective of how the substitution of “many” for “all” sounds to those on its “receiving end,” and the profoundly negative impact that could have on our identity and behavior as Catholics. While this change has been in place for a few years now, it is never too late to correct this mistake. In fact, **we are at a point in human history where it has never been more important for the Mass to unequivocally state that God loves ALL people** – every single person on this planet. **Substituting the word “many” for “all” muddies that message**, both unnecessarily and dangerously. There are many reasons for reinstituting the word “all;” I will do my best to articulate some of them.

“Many” Conveys that God Loves A Lot of People – But Not Everybody

From our earliest religious education, Catholics are taught that the Eucharist is an expression of God’s love for us. In fact, a common explanation of another change in this section of the Eucharistic Prayer states that the verb “shed” was replaced with “poured out” because the latter term “accentuates that Jesus entirely emptied Himself (Phil 2:7) out of love for us.” (1) If the Mass now says that Jesus “emptied himself out of love” for “many” people, what does that imply? When we use exclusionary language while consecrating the Eucharist, the subtext is inescapable. The underlying message is that God loves a lot of people – but not everybody.

Think of how this translates into our experience as Catholics.

Week in and week out, Catholics are attending Mass, seeking a relationship with God, and the clarity and comfort that relationship can bring. The crowd at any given Mass brings to it a diversity of struggles, desires, fears, and questions while each person tries to survive in a difficult world. As part of that survival, Mass attendants must determine how to balance their own self-interests with the needs of the humanity around them, including people they might not like and many they don’t even know. People all along the lifespan – young children, older children, adolescents, young adults, middle-aged adults, older adults – are learning and struggling with how to achieve this balance in their own lives and within the range of situations they encounter. Then, as they are grappling with these issues during Mass, they hear the priest say that God loves a lot of people—but not everybody.

It doesn’t take much imagination to envision the negative consequences of such a message being repeated over and over and over again, year in and year out, to millions of people.

Language matters. The words we choose, and how and when we use them, can have a profound impact on the listener’s thoughts, feelings, and behavior. This is why companies spend millions of dollars to craft advertising slogans for their products; it’s why politicians devote considerable time and resources to honing their messages for the campaign trail. Words are powerful, not just in what they convey directly, but also – sometimes especially – in what they convey indirectly. In its current context, the word “many” conveys that while God has enough love to “pour onto” a large number of people, there just isn’t enough to cover everyone. This is a terrible message on many levels, and one that is inconsistent with what Jesus Christ represented.

“Many” Promotes Division, Not Unity

From defenders of this language change, a common explanation goes like this:

This does not mean that Christ did not die for the sake of all humanity, for that is also clear from Scripture (2 Cor 5:15 - “He indeed died for all”). Rather, “for many” upholds the reality that each individual must also accept and abide in the grace won by Christ in order to attain eternal life. The recovery of this wording affirms that salvation is not completely automatic. (2)

No doubt the intentions of people making this argument are good, as they struggle to find a way to claim that this language can still be read as saying that God loves everyone. Nonetheless, there are a number of problems with this interpretation, the most obvious one being that it doesn’t apply to the Mass text under discussion. That narrative, in fact, contains no reference to human choice or “acceptance” of God’s grace. To the contrary, Jesus is the sole actor and speaker. He is the one deciding who to “pour himself out” for, i.e., who to shower with God’s love and grace. In other words, Jesus is the only one making a choice—and according to the current Mass translation, he’s not choosing everyone. Thus, at the height of the Mass, we have a sentence that conveys a theology more Calvinist than Catholic.

However, this explanation does touch upon a deeper truth. It admits that by changing the word “all” to “many,” we are now using Jesus’s words in the Eucharistic Prayer to emphasize that “salvation is not completely automatic”—in other words, that some people are (or will be) condemned. “Many” divides the world into salvation haves and have-nots, with a question mark over who belongs in each camp.

Consequently, the question “If God doesn’t love everyone, who *does* God love?” is not only being posed at every Mass, but during the most sacred part of the Mass. A natural, human response to such a question goes something like this: “Well, the ‘non-many’ certainly can’t include me, or people like me. I’m a good person, after all. So the ‘non-many’ must refer to those other people, over there: people I don’t know, or don’t like, or don’t understand.” **Like a Trojan Horse, the word “many” inserts the concept of “the other” into the heart of the Mass.**

“The other” – also known as the “stranger,” the “alien,” the “them” in “us versus them.” People whose religious beliefs/lack of religious beliefs/skin color/cultural background/country of origin/primary language/sexual orientation/gender identity/income level/political party/fill in the blank are different from mine, making them at least a little less deserving of God’s love than I am, if they are deserving at all.

If we are honest with ourselves, we all have our own ideas of who the “non-many” might be. But Jesus taught us that those ideas are wrong – very, very wrong – and that ruminating on such a question can only lead to our own spiritual downfall. To be sure, the world tempts us to identify and vilify “the other” on a daily basis, and has done so since the beginning of time. However, such thinking has brought humankind nothing but sorrow and destruction; it has fueled the very worst behavior of religious people, most certainly including Catholics, throughout the centuries.

Is there any better time for the Catholic Church to transcend the false construct of a divided humanity, and to do so completely and unequivocally? For it to promote the vision of human unity through its language and behavior at every turn, and most certainly during the Mass?

Catholic theology promotes a vision of unity for humankind, rather than division. Is that something we truly believe and want to live out in our daily lives? Or is it a concept “on paper,” relegated to some dusty tome in the Vatican library? The word “all” answers “yes” to the former question; the word “many” assents to the latter.

“Many” Contradicts Jesus’s Message of Spiritual Generosity and Inclusion

Even worse than inserting exclusionary language into the Eucharistic Prayer is to attribute that language to—of all people—Jesus Christ. This is profoundly unfair to Jesus, who consistently showed love for all manner of people, not just those who shared his religion, or lived flawless lives, or were accepted by others. Through his teachings and actions, Jesus repeatedly showed that everyone is loved by God – be they pious Jews like himself, less-than-pious Jews, Samaritans, Canaanites, Romans, tax collectors, “demoniacs,” people with contagious diseases, people in poverty, people with disabilities, adulterers, criminals, or anyone else.

In addition, showing love for the social and spiritual outcasts of his day was at the very core of Jesus’s mission. While doing so, he also demonstrated that his society’s “outsiders” were often more spiritually advanced than the “insiders.” Those that others rejected, Jesus embraced; those considered unforgivable, he forgave; those exiled to the outskirts of society, he drew in and enfolded. As you said in one of your homilies, “Jesus is able to turn a mentality which discards others into a mindset of communion, a mindset of community.” (3)

No one fell outside of Jesus’s capacity for love. To assign exclusionary language to Jesus Christ is a betrayal of a deity and man who repeatedly embraced the “non-many” of his time, and who sacrificed everything to do so.

“Many” Cannot Be Explained Away by Scholarship

In response to criticism about this language change, there have been many complex scholarly writings in its defense. These pieces typically cite and analyze Biblical text and other sources in an attempt to prove that while Jesus did “pour out” his love for all, it is somehow consistent for the Mass to claim that Jesus said otherwise.

The Church’s intellectual tradition, and its respect for scholarship, is part of what has made it a great and enduring religion. At the same time, the Mass is a prayer and a participatory ritual, not an academic text. A clear understanding of its core messages – such as who God loves – should not require footnotes, a degree in Latin or theology, or an understanding of the process (which in itself was highly controversial) that led to the current translation. The very fact that so much has

been written to try to explain the “many” language is a testament to what that language communicates on its own.

“All” Calls Us to Be Our Best Selves

If we want Catholics to live their lives with “a mindset of communion and community,” the words “this is the chalice of my Blood...which will be poured out for you and for all” are essential. Without that message of God’s universal love, the Catholic Church cannot live up to its own name, let alone fully serve as Christ’s “hands and feet” in this life.

If Jesus’s behavior taught us anything, it’s that when difficult choices have to be made, we should err on the side of generosity and inclusion. In daily life, this is a standard that most of us meet with extraordinary imperfection. We reach out to Christ – we try to be like him – but so often, we fail. And that is why the Mass should hold out that standard unequivocally. The language of the Mass should be a light toward which we are always moving, even if we never fully get there. It should illuminate our path in the murky confusion of everyday life, not reinforce our prejudices and limited thinking as we walk that path. The word “all” reminds us of God’s boundless love for all people, and the importance of our striving to emulate it. In the end, this is the only real hope for humankind.

For these reasons and many more, I ask that you please restore the word “all” to the Eucharistic Prayer.

Thank you for listening to my plea, and for all you are doing to heal and strengthen the Catholic Church at this crucial time in its history. I pray that you continue your vital work as Pope long into the future. May God Bless You always.

Sincerely,

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Footnotes:

(1) MacMichael, Brian. The New Translation of the Holy Mass: Eucharistic Prayer, Part 2. *Today’s Catholic*. Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend. February 20, 2011.

(2) *Proposals for Catechetical Homilies on the New Translation of the Roman Missal in the Fall of 2011*. Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend. Undated.

(3) *Homily of the Holy Father, Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia*. July 9, 2015.