

Fr. Z's Blog

Once named: What Does The Prayer
Really Say? – Commentary on Catholic
issues & slavishly accurate liturgical
translations – by Fr. John Zuhlsdorf
of{:~)

GIRM 299 has been mistranslated

Posted on 28 April 2006 by Fr. John Zuhlsdorf

I had some mail and comments about my entry on the Latin of GIRM 299 and the English translation.

In one case I was asked by Paul B: "Just to play the devil's advocate, ... (c)ouldn't the 'quod' be taken, not as a neuter relative pronoun, 'which'..., but as the conjunction 'because'.... This would lend weight to the bishop's BLS translation and give it more force for their 'facing the people' agenda."

While I was pretty sure I had rendered it correctly (namely, that the *quod* referred to the whole thing that went before) I consulted Fr. Reginald Foster, OCD (Latin secretary to His Holiness in the Secretariat of State) about 299. As I supposed, the *quod* refers to what goes before. It is *not* "because". Look at the Latin again.

The Latin:

Altare maius exstruatur a pariete seiunctum, ut facile circumiri et in eo celebratio versus populum peragi possit, quod expedit ubicumque possibile sit.

The **BLS** translation (which is now the **GIRM** translation):

The altar should be built apart from the wall, in such a way that it is possible to walk around it easily and that Mass can be celebrated at it facing the people, which is desirable wherever possible. (Emphases added)

The problem with the GIRM translation is that it gives the impression that it is celebration *versus populum* which is desirable, rather than the separation of the altar from the wall.

My version:

The main altar should be built separated from the wall, which is useful wherever it is possible, so that it can be easily walked around and a celebration toward the people can be carried out. (Emphases added)

The Latin does not say that celebrations *versus populum* are desirable. It says that separation of the altar from the wall is desirable (or useful or fitting) wherever possible. The *ut* clause explains how far the altar should be from the wall *by way of explaining the reason for a separation from the wall*. It should be far enough from the wall so that someone can walk around the altar *so that if* there should be celebration for Mass *versus populum* the priest will have room.

In other words, since "separated" could technically be only a single centimeter, the paragraph makes the distance a little more specific: far enough so that Mass can be celebrated *versus populum*. Furthermore, this separation from the wall is not obligatory. It is fitting or useful or desirable wherever it is possible. It is not obligatory. (Neither is celebration of Mass *versus populum*, obviously.)

There are any number of reasons why it might not be possible to separate an altar from the wall. For example, it might be that the altar is of historic importance. Maybe the architecture of the church is such that to change the altar would ruin the focus. It might be that there would not be adequate room in the sanctuary if the *mensa* (or table) of the altar was moved forward. Maybe in that place the decision was made to have celebrations of Mass *ad orientem versus* and not *versus populum*. All of these would be entirely adequate reasons. You can probably think of more reasons yourself. Furthermore, there is no obligation to change an existing altar. This would apply more to new construction.

The official translation gives the impression that what 299 is asking for is celebration *versus populum* rather than separation of the altar "wherever it is possible". Read the GIRM translation again: [The altar should be built apart from the wall, in such a way that it is possible to walk around it easily and that Mass can be celebrated at it facing the people, which is desirable wherever possible.](#) (Emphases added)

Does the GIRM translation of 299 it not give you that impression as well?

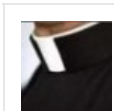
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About Fr. John Zuhlsdorf

Fr. Z is the guy who runs this blog. o{[]:-)

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One Response to *GIRM 299 has been mistranslated*

Aussie Paul says:

30 April 2006 at 4:22 pm

I am the Paul B who asked you this question (now Aussie Paul since your software adjustments). Please have no doubt that I favour your translation, from a liturgical perspective and in its whole context. Also, I would not like to gainsay the famous Fr Reggie Foster. However, my interest continues mainly from a Latin language perspective.

You do not give your reasons, or Fr Foster's, as to why my query is incorrect and why the "quod" must refer to what goes before about the position of the altar. You simply state "It is not "because". Look at the Latin again".

I've looked at the Latin again and can't see, in light of my previous post, why it cannot equally be the conjunction "because".

Can you help me with this?

It seems to me that if “quod” is the relative pronoun “which” then it is separated from its antecedent in such a way that the Latin becomes ambiguous and the alternative translation of “because” is permissible. **[It seems to me that your difficulty could rest in a tendency to read Latin word for word, one after another, linearly, rather than taking in the whole sentence. Think of an onion, with layers that match on either side. That "ut clause" is stuck in as a comment. The separation of the first part and that *quod* is only an apparent separation.]**

Hence, my previous comment that we not only have difficulties today with errors in translation from the Latin but also ambiguous Latin in documents which should be more carefully constructed in matters of liturgical law.

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