



# The Holy See

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LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS POPE BENEDICT XVI

***PRO MULTIS***

TO H.E. MSGR. ROBERT ZOLLITSCH

ARCHBISHOP OF FREIBURG

PRESIDENT OF THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE OF GERMANY

From the Vatican, 14 April 2012

*Your Excellency, Dear Archbishop,*

During your visit on 15 March 2012, you informed me that there is still no unanimity among the bishops of the German-speaking world with regard to the translation of the words “*pro multis*” in the Eucharistic Prayers of the Mass. There seems to be a risk that in the new edition of *Gotteslob* that is due to be published shortly, some parts of the German-speaking world wish to retain the translation “for all”, even if the German Bishops’ Conference should agree to use “for many”, as requested by the Holy See. I promised that I would write to you on this important matter, in order to circumvent a division of this kind at the very heart of our prayer. This letter that I am addressing through you to the members of the German Bishops’ Conference will also be sent to the other bishops of the German-speaking world.

Let me begin with a brief word about how the problem arose. In the 1960s, when the Roman Missal had to be translated into German, under the responsibility of the bishops, there was a consensus among exegetes to the effect that the word “many” in *Is* 53:11f. is a Hebrew expression referring to the totality, “all”. It would follow that the use of the word “many” in the institution narratives of Matthew and Mark is a Semitism and should be translated “all”. This argument was also applied to the Latin text that was being translated directly, and it was claimed that “*pro multis*”

points beyond the Gospel narratives to *Is* 53 and should therefore be translated “for all”. This exegetical consensus has collapsed in the meantime: it no longer exists. In the official German translation of the Scriptures, the account of the Last Supper includes the words: “This is my blood, the blood of the covenant, that is poured out for many” (*Mk* 14:24; cf. *Mt* 26:28). This highlights something very important: the rendering of “*pro multis*” as “for all” was not merely a translation but an interpretation, a well-founded interpretation then as now, but an interpretation nevertheless, something more than a translation.

In a certain sense, this combination of translation and interpretation was one of the principles that governed the translation of liturgical books into modern languages immediately after the Council. It was realized how remote the Bible and liturgical texts were from the linguistic and conceptual world of people today, so that even in translation they were bound to remain largely unintelligible to worshippers. It was a new development that the sacred texts were now being made accessible to worshippers in translation, and yet they would remain remote from their world, indeed that remoteness was made manifest for the first time. So it seemed not only justifiable but even necessary to build interpretation into the translation and in this way to speak more directly to the listeners, whose hearts and minds these words were intended to reach.

Up to a point, the principle of translating the content rather than the literal meaning of key texts is still justified. Since I constantly have to say liturgical prayers in a variety of languages, though, it strikes me that the different translations sometimes have little in common and that often the common text underlying them can scarcely be detected. Some banal elements have also crept in, which are real impoverishments. So over the years it has become increasingly clear to me personally that as an approach to translation, the principle of structural as opposed to literal equivalence has its limits. In accordance with insights of this kind, the instruction for translators [\*Liturgiam Authenticam\*, issued on 28 March 2001](#) by the [Congregation for Divine Worship](#), shifted the focus back onto the principle of literal equivalence, without of course requiring a one-sided verbalism. The important insight underpinning this instruction is the above-mentioned distinction between translation and interpretation. It is necessary both for Scripture and for liturgical texts. On the one hand, the sacred text must appear as itself as far as possible, even if it seems alien and raises questions; on the other hand the Church has the task of explaining it, so that within the limits of our understanding, the message that the Lord intends for us actually reaches us. Not even the most sensitive translation can take away the need for explanation: it is part of the structure of revelation that the word of God is read within the exegetical community of the Church – faithfulness and drawing out the contemporary relevance go together. The word must be presented as it is, with its own shape, however strange it may appear to us; the interpretation must be measured by the criterion of faithfulness to the word itself, while at the same time rendering it accessible to today’s listeners.

In this context, the Holy See has decided that in the new translation of the Missal, the words “*pro multis*” should be translated as they stand, and not presented in the form of an interpretation. In

the place of the interpretative explanation “for all”, the simple rendering “for many” must appear. Let me take the opportunity to point out that neither Matthew nor Mark uses the definite article, so it is not “for the many”, but “for many”. If this decision makes a great deal of sense, as I hope it does, in terms of the fundamental relationship between translation and exegesis, I am also aware that it poses an enormous challenge to those with the task of explaining the word of God in the Church, since to the ordinary church-goer it will almost inevitably seem like a rupture at the heart of the sacred. They will ask: did Christ not die for all? Has the Church changed her teaching? Can she do so? May she do so? Are there reactionary forces at work here to destroy the heritage of the Council? We all know from experience of the last fifty years how deeply the alteration of liturgical forms and texts touches people’s souls. How greatly perturbed people will be, then, by a change in the text at such a key moment. This being so, when the decision was made to opt for the translation “many”, in view of the difference between translation and explanation, it was established at the same time that a thorough catechesis would be needed to prepare the way for this translation in the various language regions: the bishops would have to help the priests, and through them the lay faithful, to understand exactly what this is about. Prior catechesis is the essential condition for adoption of the new translation. As far as I am aware, no such catechesis has yet taken place in the German-speaking world. The purpose of my letter is urgently to ask all of you, my dear Brother Bishops, to develop a catechesis of this kind, to discuss it with the priests and to make it available to the lay faithful.

The first element in such catechesis would have to be a brief explanation as to why the word “many” was rendered as “all” in the translation of the Missal prepared after the Council: in order to express unequivocally, in the sense willed by Jesus, the universality of the salvation that he brought. The question immediately arises: if Jesus died for all, then why did he say “for many” at the Last Supper? And why do we retain these words of Jesus for the institution? Here it must be added straight away that according to Matthew and Mark, Jesus said “for many”, while according to Luke and Paul he said “for you”, which seems to narrow the focus even further. Yet it is precisely this that points towards the solution. The disciples know that Jesus’ mission extends beyond them and their circle, they know that he came to gather together the scattered children of God from all over the world (*Jn* 11:52). Yet this “for you” makes Jesus’ mission quite concrete for those present. They are not simply anonymous elements within some vast whole: each one of them knows that the Lord died precisely for me, for us. “For you” covers the past and the future, it means me, personally; we, who are assembled here, are known and loved by Jesus for ourselves. So this “for you” is not a narrowing down, but a making concrete, and it applies to every eucharistic community, concretely uniting it to the love of Jesus. In the words of consecration, the Roman Canon combined the two biblical formulae, and so it says “for you and for many”. This formula was then adopted for all the Eucharistic Prayers at the time of the liturgical reform.

Once again, though, we ask: why “for many”? Did the Lord not die for all? The fact that Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, is the man for all men, the new Adam, is one of the fundamental convictions of our faith. Let me recall just three Scriptural texts on the subject: God “did not spare

his own Son but gave him up for us all”, as Paul says in the *Letter to the Romans* (8:32). “One has died for all,” as he says in the *Second Letter to the Corinthians* concerning Jesus’ death (5:14). Jesus “gave himself as a ransom for all,” as we read in the *First Letter to Timothy* (2:6). So the question arises once more: if this is so clear, why do we say “for many” in the Eucharistic Prayer? Well, the Church has taken this formula from the institution narratives of the New Testament. She says these words out of deference for Jesus’ own words, in order to remain literally faithful to him. Respect for the words of Jesus himself is the reason for the formulation of the Eucharistic Prayer. But then we ask: why did Jesus say this? The reason is that in this way Jesus enables people to recognize him as the Suffering Servant of *Is 53*, he reveals himself as the figure to whom the prophecy refers. The Church’s respect for the words of Jesus, Jesus’ fidelity to the words of “Scripture”: this double fidelity is the concrete reason for the formulation “for many”. In this chain of respectful fidelity, we too take our place with a literal translation of the words of Scripture.

Just as we saw earlier that the “for you” of the Luke-Paul tradition does not restrict but rather makes concrete, so now we recognize that the dialectic “many” – “all” has a meaning of its own. “All” concerns the ontological plane – the life and ministry of Jesus embraces the whole of humanity: past, present and future. But specifically, historically, in the concrete community of those who celebrate the Eucharist, he comes only to “many”. So here we see a threefold meaning of the relationship between “many” and “all”. Firstly, for us who are invited to sit at his table, it means surprise, joy and thankfulness that he has called me, that I can be with him and come to know him. “Thank the Lord that in his grace he has called me into his Church.” Secondly, this brings with it a certain responsibility. How the Lord in his own way reaches the others – “all” – ultimately remains his mystery. But without doubt it is a responsibility to be directly called to his table, so that I hear the words “for you” – he suffered for me. The many bear responsibility for all. The community of the many must be the lamp on the lamp-stand, a city on the hilltop, yeast for all. This is a vocation that affects each one of us individually, quite personally. The many, that is to say, we ourselves, must be conscious of our mission of responsibility towards the whole. Finally, a third aspect comes into play. In today’s society we often feel that we are not “many”, but rather few – a small remnant becoming smaller all the time. But no – we are “many”: “After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues,” as we read in the *Revelation* of Saint John (7:9). We are many and we stand for all. So the words “many” and “all” go together and are intertwined with responsibility and promise.

Your Excellency, dear Brother Bishops, with these thoughts I have tried to set out the basic content of the catechesis with which priests and laity are to be prepared as soon as possible for the new translation. I hope that all of this can at the same time nourish a deeper participation in the Holy Eucharist and thus take its place within the great task that lies ahead of us in the “Year of Faith”. I hope too that the catechesis will be presented soon and will thus become part of the renewal of worship that the Council strove to achieve from its very first session.

With paschal blessings, I remain  
Yours in the Lord,

**BENEDICTUS PP. XVI**

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