

In two weeks' time, French-speaking Roman Catholics in Canada will be relearning how to say the Lord's Prayer.

The next-to-last petition of the "Our Father" which in English is "Lead us not into temptation" (in French "Ne nous soumetts pas à la tentation") will officially become "Ne nous laisse pas entrer en tentation." That translates into English as, "Do not let us enter into temptation."

The change at this time anticipates next year's publication of a complete retranslation of all the prayers used at Sunday Mass in the French edition of the Roman Missal.

Several francophone countries have already begun to use the new version of the Lord's Prayer. So the Canadian Bishops decided to change the text of the "Notre Pere" that has been in use in Canada since 1966 on December 2, the first Sunday of Advent.

Why the change? The bishops explain that the earlier version led people to conclude God leads people into temptation and, in effect, leads them to do evil.

The bishops say that other Scriptures indicate God cannot be tempting people to do what is wrong. They quote the epistle of St. James, which says "God tempts no one" (1:13).

Yet the issue of temptation is not that simple, for St. Paul in his first epistle to the Corinthians, says that God does not allow anyone to be tempted beyond their strength and also provides a way to escape (10:13). The gospels also show Jesus being guided by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness where he was tempted by the devil (Luke 4:2).

So, the bishops noted, there were repeated requests for a translation that, while respecting the sense of the original text did not lead people to draw false conclusions. The new translation attempts to dispel the idea that God leads people into temptation.

As one might expect, Pope Francis when asked his opinion said he thought the church should tweak the translation of the “Our Father” to clear up the confusion around the phrase “lead us not into temptation.” “That is not a good translation,” the pope declared last December in an interview with Italian television.

According to the Pope, “The one who leads us into temptation is Satan. That’s Satan’s job. I’m the one who falls. But it’s not (God) who pushes me into temptation to see how I fall. No, a father does not do this. A father helps us up immediately.”

Still, “lead us not into temptation” is a correct literal translation of the Greek original and of the Latin text the Church bases its translation on. The new version is a “dynamic equivalent” translation, one that interprets the text.

Personally, I do not favour changing the wording of a biblical text to fit with a meaning found elsewhere. It is important for readers of the Bible to struggle with the difficulties found in the original text of the New Testament even when they pray the prayer Jesus taught his disciples. In changing this and other texts, we might discover, long term, that we are doing a disservice to the biblical authors’ intentions.

The Bible is full of paradoxes, figurative language, jolting imagery. To soften such language could undermine its literary and even spiritual power. The new translation subverts this. The original text speaks clearly of God leading to, not merely permitting, temptation.

We should translate texts accurately and leave the strangeness as it is, although it’s understandable why people, pastors and the pope want to tidy things up.

I'm pleased that, for now, the English version of the Lord's Prayer is sticking with the literally correct translation "lead us not into temptation". But when I'm praying in French, I'll be using the new formula.

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