

The Forthcoming Revised English Translation of the *Missale Romanum* and Its Implications for Worship.

The Roman Catholic Church is about to authorize a new English translation of the spoken texts of the mass. The project has been controversial within the Catholic Church and among our partners in ecumenical dialogue. In this presentation I will explain what is happening and why, as well as some of the reactions to the work and the future that it portends. For Catholics, the new translation will represent the biggest change to the mass in over 40 years, and many of them seem unaware of what lies ahead.

Most of the words of the Catholic mass are scripted: for example, the dialogues between the priest and the people, acclamations, certain litanies, ancient hymns, and most importantly the prayers that the priest voices on behalf of the entire assembly. Other parts are not scripted – for example, explanatory comments, the homily, the prayer of the faithful, and the choice of hymns to be sung at times such as the entrance and communion. However, the parts that are predetermined represent a considerable corpus of texts. These are found in a volume called the *Missale Romanum*, or the Roman Missal. The book has retained this title ever since texts of this nature were first collected in this format in the year 1474. As the title implies, the texts are all in Latin. Their use in vernacular languages did not become widespread in the Catholic Church until after the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s.

At that time, the Council revised the *Missale Romanum*, most notably making changes to the Order of the Mass, the sequence of events that happen from start to finish. These changes were inspired by a desire to enhance the participation of the people, while making the purpose of the parts of the mass plainer. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council, put it this way: “The rite of the Mass is to be revised in such a way that the intrinsic nature and purpose of its several parts, as well as the connection between them, may be more clearly shown, and that devout and active participation by the faithful may be more easily achieved.”¹ Besides that structural revision, some new prayers were added to the missal. So the missal is a remarkable compilation of texts spanning many centuries. “*Dominus vobiscum*,” the greeting that dates to at least the second century, is still in use today (“The Lord be with you”). But the anaphora we call Eucharistic Prayer III, for example, is just a few decades old.

¹ SC 50.

The first edition of the revised missal appeared in 1970. It was revised again in 1974. Now a third edition of the post-Vatican II *Missale Romanum* has been published in Latin. Pope John Paul II promulgated the text in the year 2000, as part of the jubilee year of the birth of Jesus Christ; however, he promulgated a text that had not yet been published, and that did not see the light of day until the year 2002. Now even that edition has gone through a second printing; just about a year ago some further modifications to the text were made, but it is still known as the third edition of the Roman Missal.

There are some changes to the content, though these will be unrecognizable by all but specialists in the field. For example, the liturgical calendar now includes additional saints' days that affirm a more global and intergenerational witness to the faith. There are some editorial changes to votive masses, some enhancements to the rubrics of Holy Week, and improved sense lines for proclamation of the texts. Most of these emendations will go unnoticed; the changes from the second to the third edition of the missal are small, but there are quite a number of them. One reason, then, that the English-speaking Roman Catholic Church is coming out with a replacement for the missal we have been using is that its contents have undergone a development.

But, the main reason the revised missal will sound so different from the one we have been using is that the Vatican has changed its theory of translation from Latin into the vernacular languages. The original philosophy is no longer being observed. Here is an excerpt from *Comme le prevoit*, the Vatican's guidelines for translations issued in 1969:

[I]t is not sufficient that a liturgical translation merely reproduce the expressions and ideas of the original text. Rather it must faithfully communicate to a given people, and in their own language, that which the Church by means of this given text originally intended to communicate to another people in another time. A faithful translation, therefore, cannot be judged on the basis of individual words: the total context of this specific act of communication must be kept in mind, as well as the literary form proper to the respective language.²

But in 2001, a new set of guidelines went into force calling for a different philosophy. Here is a quote from *Liturgiam authenticam*:

[T]he translation of the liturgical texts of the Roman Liturgy is not so much a work of creative innovation as it is of rendering the original texts faithfully and accurately into the vernacular language. While it is permissible to arrange the wording, the syntax and the style in such a way as to prepare a flowing vernacular text suitable to the rhythm of popular prayer, the original text, insofar as possible,

² *The Liturgy Documents: A Parish Resource*, Volume II (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1999), pp. 235-242, #6.

must be translated integrally and in the most exact manner, without omissions or additions in terms of their content, and without paraphrases or glosses. Any adaptation to the characteristics or the nature of the various vernacular languages is to be sober and discreet.³

The memorial acclamation, which falls during the eucharistic prayer, provides a simple example. About halfway through the prayer, after the priest has recounted the events of the Last Supper and shown the consecrated bread and wine to the assembled faithful, the people sing an acclamation. In Latin, ever since the council, there have been 3 options for the memorial acclamation, but in English there have been four. The first two in English are basically translations of the same one in Latin. The Latin text reads, "*Mortem tuam annuntiamus, Domine, et tuam resurrectionem confitemur, donec venias.*" In English, this has been rendered in two ways: "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." And "Dying you destroyed our death, rising you restored our life. Lord Jesus, come in glory." Both these are fairly free translations of the Latin, but the first is even more so. The forthcoming revised translation adheres much more closely to the Latin. "We proclaim your death, O Lord, and profess your Resurrection until you come again."

This translation seems simple enough, but it is the product of a lengthy series of decisions that have affected the final text. Comparing this to the first English acclamation currently in use, it becomes immediately obvious that the revised text is addressed to Jesus Christ, as the second option in English is. The first option, which is also the most popular, is a proclamation about Jesus: "Christ has died, Christ is risen," and so forth. The distinction is important because this acclamation is new to the post-Vatican II mass, and it was designed as an acclamation to Jesus Christ, who, according to the belief of the gathered worshipers, is now present in the consecrated bread and wine. The idea was to address Jesus, not to make a statement about him. One can also hear more plainly the allusion to 1 Corinthians 11:26, that those who eat the bread and drink the cup proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Here the community is invited to perform liturgically what Paul says the community implies by its communion. The precise text, incidentally, comes from the Antiochene Anaphora of Saint James, the Brother of the Lord.⁴

Attention has also been given to the rhythm of the new acclamation. The two translations current in force proceed mostly with trochees and iambs: "Christ has died, Christ is risen;" "Dying you destroyed our death," and so on. These have been useful for musical settings; the revised translation includes a couple of anapests, which should add some variety for composers. Throughout the missal, the translation has striven to avoid collocations of

³ Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, "*Liturgiam authenticam: On the Use of Vernacular Languages in the Publication of the Books of the Roman Liturgy,*" 20.

⁴ *Prex eucharistia*, p. 249.

three or more stressed or unstressed syllables, which sound unschooled in English. In fact, that is why the word “O” appears before the word “Lord” in the revised translation. It adds lilt to the metrical feet, avoiding a spondee.

The rules for translation have been established by the Vatican’s Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, which has issued its own *Ratio translationis*, an instrument that governs the use of certain words, phrases, and capitalizations. The process for approving translations has become more complex than it was at the time of the council. The council’s *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* envisioned that episcopal conferences would determine the vernacular translation for their own territories. For example, it envisioned that the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops would determine the English and French translations, as well as the languages of the first nation groups, for the entire country. However, the Vatican has now taken this responsibility to itself.

The whole process is a bit byzantine, but this is roughly how it works. The Congregation in Rome empowers a commission of bishops to work on a translation that will be used throughout the English-speaking world. That group is called the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (or ICEL), and its eleven members come from the following episcopal conferences: Canada, the United States, England and Wales, Scotland, Ireland, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, India, the Philippines and Pakistan. Because these bishops have so many responsibilities at home, they staff a secretariat in Washington DC that oversees ICEL’s day-to-day operations. After the new rules for translation were promulgated in 2001 and the missal became available in Latin in 2002, the secretariat divided the book into about 25 sections. Each section has had to pass through a series of stages. A base translator received the text and worked on a usable rendering. Then an ad hoc committee reviewed the work and made improvements. This text was sent to a group of specialists known as the Roman Missal Editorial Committee (or RMEC). They received all the work from all the ad hoc committees and unified the style and vocabulary. This work was presented to the bishops of the commission, who have been meeting as a body twice a year. At the meeting each bishop had before him a section of the missal with all the work laid out prayer by prayer. On one page for each text they would see the previous work in its various stages, together with the Latin original. One member would read the RMEC text aloud, and the chair permitted discussion. During the discussion, alternatives could be proposed. The chair called for a vote on each text, and when a majority approved the text as proposed by the RMEC or as emended by the 11 bishops, it was approved and the next text was read aloud. And so on. Each section then was bound in a volume called the Green Book, and sent to all the members of the conferences of bishops represented by the 11 commissioners. At their meetings, the bishops in each conference discussed the work and voted on the texts. They sent suggested emendations back to ICEL’s secretariat. At the same time the texts were submitted to the

Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments in Rome for its informal review. The Congregation has its own body of consultants, a group known as Vox Clara, which submitted recommendations to ICEL as well. The secretariat took all these suggestions, reworked the texts and presented the changes to the 11 commissioners at their next meeting. Again, each prayer was read aloud, discussion followed, and a vote was taken. When the texts for each section were completed, they were bound in a volume called the Gray Book. This was sent to the members of the episcopal conferences for their final vote. Further recommendations often came with the vote. This work was then presented to the Congregation in Rome. The Congregation has retained the authority for the final voice on the texts, so it may change what it receives before sending it back to the conferences of bishops.

The only part of the missal that has completed this entire circuit is the section known as the Order of Mass, the parts that remain unchanged day by day, from the sign of the cross at the beginning to the dismissal at the end. The Congregation received comments on the Order of Mass from most of the episcopal conferences over a year ago, and in the summer of 2008 it issued its *recognitio*, or approval, of that section of the missal. This surprised most people because some of the conferences had never submitted their emended texts to the Vatican for the *recognitio*, and now they were receiving what they had never requested.

The rest of the missal has reached Gray Book stage and is being voted on by conferences of bishops at this time. Those texts are largely a collection of prayers for certain occasions from the common to the obscure, from the First Sunday of Advent to the Votive Mass of the Mystery of the Holy Cross. Although the conferences requested an additional few years to review all these texts, the Congregation in Rome has asked them all to submit their comments on the work by the end of this calendar year. The Congregation is anxious to have the English texts available, but at this point it is difficult to say if they will be put into use by Advent of 2010 or Advent of 2011. But the work is nearly done.

Several concerns continue to be raised about the project. One is that the new translation rules make it difficult to obtain an English that flows as naturally as the current translation does. The resulting work sounds more formal and in some cases stilted by comparison. The present translation broke up many of the complex Latin sentences into two or three complete sentences, but the new rules call for the grammatical restoration of these sentences, which many find difficult to follow by comparison. For example, the opening prayer for the Fourth Sunday of Lent currently reads like this: "Father of peace, / we are joyful in your Word, / your Son Jesus Christ, / who reconciles us to you. / Let us hasten toward Easter / with the eagerness of faith and love." The revised prayer puts these thoughts in one sentence, its content much closer to the Latin it translates: "O God, / who through your Word / are accomplishing in a wonderful way / the reconciliation of the human race, / give the Christian people strength, we pray, / to hasten with keen devotion and eager faith / towards the

solemn celebrations to come.” It can be understood, but priests and worshipers will have to make some adjustments in the proclamation and hearing of the prayers. Sometimes the prayer seems impossibly complex. On the Monday before Epiphany, for example, this is the proposed text for the prayer that will open that mass: “Grant your people, Lord, we pray, / unshakable strength of faith, / so that all who profess that your Only-begotten Son / is with you for ever in your glory, / and was born of the Virgin Mary / in a body truly like our own / may be freed from present trials / and given a place in abiding glories.” Fortunately, mass on the Monday before Epiphany is not widely attended, and those who come are exceptionally forgiving. Most of the prayers, however, are much easier to hear by comparison.

It remains to be seen if objections to the length of the prayers will hold true. In fact, some of the other vernacular languages have always maintained the more complex Latin style, and there have been no discernible objections from those groups on this matter over the past 40 years.

Parenthetically, it will surely astound some Christians that the Catholic Church is taking such care over the translation of these nonbiblical prayers. Many Christians are quite adept at improvising prayer and quite perplexed by the Catholic Church’s persistence in repeating texts that are centuries old. The Catholic Church recognizes that these texts do not have the same value as scripture, but they were composed in the light of scripture, and their antiquity has made them as valuable to the Church as ancient works of art in other media. The texts are being cleaned, if you will, to restore their original luster.

In the United States as well as in Canada, there is a great desire for a translation that is gender-inclusive. The Congregation in Rome does not explicitly share this value, and discourages the use of techniques that – for example – turn singulars into plurals for the purpose of avoiding a masculine pronoun. However, in spite of themselves, the Congregation has encouraged a more gender-inclusive translation by requesting work that adheres more closely to the Latin. For example, almost all the prayers in the current translation address God as “Father,” but the Latin word is most commonly “Deus,” meaning “God.” According to the new rules, all those masculine images for God will now give way to a more gender-neutral form of address. That is not the Vatican’s intent, but it is the result. There are many examples where the current texts that many believers have found so difficult to hear are being changed just because the new rules call for a closer connection to what the Latin already says in a less offensive way. It can be argued that the issue of inclusive language came to the fore only after the present translation was made. It raised awareness about a difficulty that many had overlooked. The revised translation will have many improvements for those who are sensitive to inclusive language, but there will still be some parts that will earn objections.

Also of great concern is the loss of ecumenical involvement in the revised translation. Much of the current text is the result of an ecumenical team of experts who worked hard on a common translation for multiple Christian bodies to share. Forty years ago, ICEL's dialogue with the Consultation on Common Texts resulted in a shared translation of the Nicene Creed, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and other portions of the order of mass, which were also used in the Sunday gatherings of other Christians. The result strengthened the bond among Christians who recognized their own prayers when they worshiped with one another. However, over the past 40 years, many of the Christian Churches who adopted the common texts have begun to deviate from them, so today the status of uniformity is not the same as it once was. But no group has gone as far from those texts as the Roman Catholic Church is now poised to do. Furthermore, the work on the revised translation of the missal has been done by Catholics alone, not in consultation with other Christians. Such a consultation would have made even more laborious the process that has taken so long, but it surely would have strengthened the results, even if some participants did not agree with all the new rules for translation articulated by the Vatican in 2001.

Today the status of those shared translations is in peril. This has caused wonderment, discouragement and downright anger among those who worked hard at common texts and strive to keep alive the vision for them. It appears, however, that the Vatican had a different value in place. It wanted more uniformity among the vernacular translations within Roman Catholicism, more than uniformity among Christians within one language group.

All this raises questions about what comes next. Much of course will depend on how well English-speaking Catholics receive the new texts that have been prepared for them. A wide range of reactions is expected. Some will welcome the revisions. Others will despise them. In the middle are the great many Catholics who will say whatever they are asked to say, will make the adjustments, and life will go on. On one hand, their loyalty is admirable; but on the other hand, catechesis may help them to understand and embrace the changes with more vigor. Still, change is always hard. Very few people have asked for this change; no one stops me after mass on Sunday to say, "Father I sure wish we had a new translation of Eucharistic Prayer II." Congregations will have to learn new musical settings of texts they have sung cheerfully or begrudgingly in the past. For sure, the new philosophy of translation will be put to the test.

The first weekend, one could expect, will be difficult for everyone. People will be unfamiliar with their responses. Priests will have to consult the missal much more than they now do. In our culture today, people make judgments quickly. Many already have judged the translation. Others will do so after one single mass. But it will take a while for the value of the work to come to light. The problems will surface, but not everything that appears to be wrong at first will sound bad in the end. When mass first went into English 40 years ago,

many people thought the final dialogue would create hilarity: After the priest or deacon says, “The mass is ended, go in peace,” the people respond, “Thanks be to God.” Many detractors said it would never work. It would sound as though people were just glad to get out of there. Well, it does work. People don’t invest the words with the meaning of relief, but of gratitude. The same could happen to many parts of the translation that are under high scrutiny at this time.

If common texts are to be achieved again among English-speaking Christians, much work remains to be done. The work in the Roman Catholic Church will come under scrutiny by other bodies. Some will like the results; others will not. The quest for commonality remains a challenge, and now it is easier to understand why: there is no consensus on the philosophy of translation, and without that, there can be no consensus on the translation.

The same struggle befalls the Bible, and this has been the case for centuries. Wars of words have been exchanged over the best way to translate biblical texts into vernacular languages. There are different philosophies, and hence, different translations. It would be a different situation if English-speaking Christians around the world all quoted the same biblical translation. But they don’t, and they probably won’t. There is too much division over how it can be done.

This is the ever-growing challenge that English-speaking worship faces. Even though we have one language, we speak it in different ways. In Australia, the word “momentarily” means “for a few moments,” but in the United States it means “in a few moments.” So when the flight attendant announces that the plane will be lifting off momentarily, it soothes the Americans on board, but sends the Aussies into a panic as they imagine their plane bouncing along the runway. Perhaps the best lesson we can learn is one of humility. None of us has the right words to use whenever we celebrate the eucharist. There are no words adequate to address God. And even if there were, we would be too consumed by our own inadequacies to know them, to agree to them, or to use them with meaning. Fortunately, the God who made us also loves us, just as we are. And God is probably more concerned with our efforts than with our results. We should use the best skills our Creator gave us, and trust that somehow, because of our intent and our struggles for charitable living, they will complete the trajectory upon which we launch them, and cause delight when they momentarily land upon the divine ear.

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