

Revising the Translation, Renewing the Mass

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I don't mean to shock you, but in case you haven't heard, not everyone is looking forward to the new English translation of the mass. In this talk I will explain why we are getting a new translation and what to expect from it. Mainly, I will address some of the principal objections to the project. I hope to help you understand the significance of this moment in the life of our Church, and to sort through the advantages and challenges of the path that lies before us.

The Vatican recently published a revised edition of the Roman Missal; this is the third edition since the Second Vatican Council. All three editions were published first in Latin, intended to be translated into the vernacular. Each new edition became necessary for logical reasons: the rubrics were clarified, and the contents were expanded. In the United States, we have called the first two translations the Sacramentary. It is the book from which the priest reads his prayers, but it is also the place where you find all the responses the people make, as well as the instructions, or rubrics, for how mass is supposed to go. If you were to consult the Latin originals of these three editions, you would find that only a small percentage of the post-Vatican II missal has changed from one book to the next.

There is virtually no controversy over getting a third edition of the missal. It's as sensible as upgrading a computer program from 2.0 to 3.0, or getting the latest revision of a favorite textbook for the classroom. The missal has been updated, and we need the new contents.

However, what has become controversial is that the Vatican has changed its rules for how vernacular translations are to be made. The original guidelines appeared in 1969 under the title *Comme le prévoit*. Paragraph 6 says this:

[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.

This gave translators a free hand to employ language that favored the way we use English. In fact, the English translators did more creative work than translators of many other languages, in harmony with the freedom given them at the time. In the year 2001, the Vatican issued new guidelines for translation under the title *Liturgiam authenticam*. Paragraph 20 says this:

[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, 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.

This change in translation theory is going to make the entire mass sound different. However, let me state this clearly: The words you will hear are still the voice of the Second Vatican Council. It is a new translation of all the work performed after Vatican II. The best liturgists of the 1960s built a revised order of mass and a new sequence of prayers and rubrics. All their work is still with us. They completed their work in Latin. We are expecting a revised translation of that post-Vatican II work.

That is why some of the parts of the mass with which you are most familiar will be changing. From “And also with you” to “And with your spirit.” From “We believe” to “I believe.” From “It is right to give him thanks and praise” to “It is right and just.” And so on. This is also why the prayers that the priest says are changing considerably. They were all translated under a different theory. Some people have said that the new words resemble what they found in their handheld missals back in the days when every mass was in Latin. This is not a return to the pre-Vatican II mass. Those popular personal missals 40 years ago used a different theory of translation than the one that came into force immediately after the Council. So if the forthcoming translation sounds like a very old translation, it has to do with language theory, but not with the content of the missal. This will still

be the same familiar mass of Vatican II that has formed a generation of Catholics praying in their own language for the first time in history.

The changes that the Second Vatican Council introduced were extremely difficult for a small percentage of Catholics. In recent years, Pope Benedict XVI has made the pre-Vatican II mass more available. He did so hoping to reconcile those who were struggling with the revised liturgy. The new English translation is not directly related to that effort. There may be some who preferred the pre-Vatican II mass because they did not like the present English translation, and if so, they will have another chance to discover the beauty of the post-Vatican II mass. But more likely, those who preferred the pre-Vatican II mass had concerns about the authority of the Council, and these individuals will probably remain unaffected by matters of translation. In the end, the revised translation is not about reaching out to people who did not accept the Council, but reaching to those who did, to honor the liturgical tradition that has become a part of their lives, and to enhance it with renewed attention to its words.

Here are twelve concerns I've heard about the work, along with some remarks about each of them:

1. "The sentences are longer." It is true that the Latin language enjoys longer sentences than we do in written English. The first translation broke up these sentences into smaller ones, notably in the opening prayer of the mass. For example, for the past many years, here is a prayer we have heard on the Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time: "God of power and mercy, / protect us from all harm. / Give us freedom of spirit / and health in mind and body / to do your work on earth." The original Latin prayer is all in one sentence. The proposed revision for this prayer goes like this: "Almighty and merciful God, / graciously banish all that would harm us, / so that, unhindered in mind and body alike, / we may pursue with minds set free / the things that are yours." Some people fear that Catholics will not understand such a long sentence, but other language groups, including Spanish, did translate the single Latin sentence into a single vernacular sentence. So if you say that English-speakers cannot understand long sentences, you have to explain how Spanish-speakers have done it for the past 40 years. Some people are objecting that the revised translation is dense and harder to understand. It is harder to understand at first, but I believe that the words have become richer in their allusions to the bible and the tradition of our Church. Even with longer sentences, the prayers will hold up well under repetition, study and meditation.

2. "The vocabulary is strange." Well, the vocabulary is broader, and it will introduce some words we have not heard much in the Sacramentary. To take just

one example, the revised translation of Eucharistic Prayer III includes the word “oblation”. The difficulty is that Latin often uses a variety of words that are nearly synonyms; in this case, *oblatio*, *sacrificium*, *offerenda*, *victima*, and *hostia*, for example. The inclusion of a word such as “oblation” in the English vocabulary aims to give the finished prayer a vocabulary as diverse as it is in Latin. And let’s not forget that for many decades we have been singing these words in the third verse of the hymn “To Jesus Christ Our Sovereign King”: “To you and to your Church, great king, we pledge our heart’s oblation.” It is a word in our vocabulary.

3. “Sentences are incomplete.” I think this refers to the custom of concluding prayers with the words “Through Christ our Lord,” with a capital T on the first word and a period at the end of the previous sentence. You sometimes hear people complain about the translators, “They didn’t even put a verb in there. Don’t they know what a verb is?” Well, yes, they know what a verb is. The rules for capitalization are established by the Vatican, not by ICEL (the International Commission on English in the Liturgy) or the bishops of a conference. The Vatican wanted the capitalization and punctuation in a phrase like this to imitate the centuries-old custom in Latin. The period that concludes the preceding sentence probably served as a musical cue so that the presider knew to sing a cadence before the words “Through Christ our Lord.” Personally, I think it would look better in English if we joined this phrase to the previous sentence with a comma at the end of that one, and a lower case letter at the start of this one, but I understand the desire to honor a long tradition. People are not going to hear a capital letter anyway. The priest can still pronounce the entire prayer as a unit.

4. “There are grammatical errors.” I honestly don’t know what people mean when they say this, but I think they are reacting to the way that the prayers now sound. For example, one postcommunion prayer in Advent has been prepared this way: “O God, who have shown forth your salvation to all the ends of the earth.” I suspect some people think it should be, “O God, who has shown forth,” as if we were describing something God has done, instead of making a direct address to God, “you who have shown forth.” It does sound confusing at first. But ICEL has been meticulous in applying rules of grammar, and if there are any errors in the final product, they probably happened after the text left the hands of ICEL.

5. “The revised texts have never been tested in the pew.” This is true, but the grassroots movement to experiment with the texts in select parishes started rather late in the process. ICEL had finished its work before thousands of people asked for a new preparatory step. In fact, there were opportunities to get feedback from ordinary churchgoers at earlier stages; any bishop could have consulted as broadly as he wished. The most popular suggestion over the past

year or so has been to appoint a couple of parishes in each diocese to use the revised texts for a year, gather feedback, and then revise them again. As a pastor, I love the idea of consultation, but I find this particular proposal impractical. I don't want to change the texts of the mass in my parish for one year, go back to the ones we were using before, and then change again to the revised texts a year or two later. And if we did this, how would we make the experimental texts available to our people? Who would publish them? Which composers would write temporary settings of the Gloria for us to sing? How would our children's religion textbooks be amended? What do we do at weddings and funerals during that year when we have lots of visitors in our churches? There is always merit in getting feedback from people who will use the texts, but I'm not convinced that a one-year experiment is the best idea on the table. It has also been argued that we should give the bishops some credit. They are the ones working on the translation, and it's not like they are unfamiliar with how these sound in actual practice. In fact, nobody celebrates mass in more situations than a bishop does. He visits every parish in the diocese. He celebrates the eucharist at nursing homes, schools, and prisons. He holds an especially competent position to feel the pulse of the people at prayer. Still, it should be acknowledged that the desire to hear from the people in the pew is part of a much larger issue in the Catholic Church, an issue that goes far beyond the Roman Missal; many people, especially women, feel that they are never consulted on issues that affect them deeply. As a Church we need to find better ways to open the mouths of the faithful and the ears of the hierarchy.

6. "Latin is dead." Some are asking why we are so obsessed with this old language. Why is it so important to know what these prayers say in Latin? Almost all the prayers of the mass were composed in Latin, even the brand new ones. Eucharistic Prayer I dates at least to the fourth century; Eucharistic Prayer II has origins even earlier. But all the other eucharistic prayers - all of them - were composed after the council. Now, in truth, a few of them were composed in modern languages such as French or German, and then translated into Latin so that they could be translated back out again. But Latin continues to serve as the source language in which the Catholic Church can say more precisely what we intend to say. Encyclicals from the pope, instructions from the Curia, and even the Catechism of the Catholic Church all have a Latin original where the voice of the Church finds its source. Many of the other prayers you hear the priest at mass say come from the sixth, seventh and eighth centuries. They have been carefully handed down in Latin from one generation to the next. They are like any other treasure in our churches: our statues, our stained-glass windows, our paintings, hymns and frescoes. They deserve to be preserved and polished in translation so that future generations can appreciate them too. Latin is also important for study

in fields such as medicine, art, philosophy, and music. If you know Latin, it opens doors.

7. “We are losing common Christian texts.” Yes, we are, and this is also a concern of mine. Forty years ago, different English-speaking Christian Churches worked together to provide common translations of texts we all use for Sunday worship, such as the Gloria, the Creed, the Sanctus, and even a dialogue such as “The Lord be with you.” The International Consultation on English Texts was formed to achieve this goal, and that is why if you go to another Christian church some Sunday, you may find words identical to those you say or sing in your Catholic Church. Over the past 40 years, almost every Church that signed on to those translations has made some changes, but no one has made as many as the Roman Catholic Church is now poised to do. In ecumenical circles, this has caused dismay, disappointment, and downright anger. Forty years ago, the Catholic Church consulted other Christian Churches before establishing our final translations, but this time we did not. We have gone our own way. We will have to do something else to demonstrate our belief in the one baptism that Christians share. The loss of common texts is serious, but we are gaining more common texts across language groups within our religion. So, the revised translations of the Confiteor and the Creed, for example, will have more uniformity between Catholic English and Spanish speakers than they do right now. This does not eliminate the ecumenical concerns, but it does express another value that the revised translation holds.

8. “Catholic prayers use a gender-exclusive vocabulary.” Many, many improvements have happened for those burdened with this concern. The first English translation raised our consciousness of this matter. Translators at work on the revised text have addressed this concern time and again, case by case. The results are good, but not completely satisfying. There will still be some places where a word will sound gender-exclusive, but from my experience in witnessing the conversation among the bishops on the commission, they handled each case with care. If a gender-exclusive word remained, it was because of some other value, because no other solution resolved the issues needing to be addressed in a particular text. I’ll give you two examples of how the revised translation has addressed gender-exclusive language. The first is the way that we call upon God. It is common now to hear prayers addressed to “Father” or “Lord” - both titles for God that carry masculine imagery. In Latin, the words *Pater* and *Domine* do appear, but not nearly as often as a different word, *Deus*, which is more properly rendered “God”. In the revised translation, the more gender-neutral form of address, “God”, will replace the gender specific form of address in hundreds of cases. Not to sugarcoat this, the masculine pronoun will still be used in reference

to God, but the form of address is changing. A second example is not a retranslation of a specific word, but a retranslation of a phrase in which a gender-exclusive term exists. At the conclusion of the preface dialogue, the people presently say, “It is right to give him thanks and praise.” It’s common to hear some people say, “It is right to give God thanks and praise,” or “It is right to give our thanks and praise.” In this case, though, the word “him” is not there in Latin at all. All it says is *Dignum et iustum est*. This will now be translated as, “It is right and just.” Here, when you just translate what is there, the inclusive language issue evaporates. I cannot tell you how often this has happened throughout the missal not just in reference to God, but in reference to people as well. Many words that sound gender-exclusive were never there in the original, and a closer adherence to the Latin resolves the problem. You will still hear some words that many people find offensive, but many improvements have been made.

9. “We’re losing our musical repertoire.” Yes, in some cases, the acclamations and mass settings that you have come to know and sing so well will no longer be printed in hymnals and participation aids. Your favorite settings of the Gloria and the memorial acclamations, for example, will all have to be changed. This means losing some repertoire. Some of it, to be honest, probably should have been lost a while ago. But some of it has been quite lovely and we will experience some loss. Perhaps we will find some other use for the memorial acclamations - as refrains for other songs, for example. On the upside, the revised translations are opening a door to a new generation of composers. Our composers have had 40 years of experience now, learning what does and does not work with congregations. We can anticipate an explosion of new musical settings, presenting a challenge to discern which settings will work the best with our people today.

10. “The Church has abandoned the principle of subsidiarity.” “Abandoned” is too strong a word, but the process for this translation has raised concerns about the collegiality that marked the period of the Second Vatican Council. With the publication of *Liturgiam authenticam* in the year 2001, the Vatican not only changed its theory of translation, it also changed its theory of authority. At the time of the Council, the responsibility for vernacular texts was handed to the conferences of bishops. So, for example, the Council gave a group such as the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops the authority to translate the mass into English and put it into use with a simple approval from Rome. Now, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments has appropriated more responsibility for itself. It still relies on the work of the conferences in general and ICEL in particular to produce the English translation. But the Congregation now has its own group of advisers, Vox Clara, and together these bodies make the final changes to the text. Even though the Congregation in

Rome assumed this authority in 2001, most observers have been surprised at the aggressive way in which the Congregation has exercised that authority. In recent weeks the blogosphere has been erupting with alarms that the difference between the text the conferences of bishops approved and the ones they are receiving is significant; it is said that 10,000 changes have been made, and that many of these have introduced inconsistencies, mistakes in grammar, infelicitous expressions, and doctrinal errors. These texts have not been made public, but this week an internal critique of the work did become public, and the charges are serious. This will remain controversial, for it is said that the Congregation in Rome has made some improvements, but that it has also sacrificed some of its own translation principles. On the left, the very people who five years ago were denouncing the new translation rules of *Liturgiam authenticam* and ICEL's application of them, now are championing the wisdom of *Liturgiam authenticam* and the proficiency of ICEL's work; they are upset that lesser-skilled, anonymous, and well-positioned laborers have overlooked the beautiful quality of the translation they received and lessened its value. On the right, the people who were happy that the present translation would soon be set aside are now unhappy about the impending results. Those who labored hard on the translation find that many words and phrases are being altered, and they will wonder how much the authorities in Rome truly value the expertise they brought to the project over many years, offering the sacrifice of their considerable gifts and faith. I want to believe that everyone has the best interests of the Church at heart, but the process did not allow good communication among the various bodies. For example, no one on ICEL attends the meetings of Vox Clara, and no one on Vox Clara attends the meetings of ICEL. Some of the best minds of the Church were not speaking to each other in person as the translation progressed, and a project that could have been enriched by better communication and trust stands to be diminished. However, please remember a couple of points. First, the unpublished parts of the translation that are receiving the sharpest criticism right now do make up 97% of the missal, but within any given mass, they represent only about 2 or 3 minutes of prayer. Second, I still think the translation we are receiving will mark an improvement over the one we have. Yet, because we don't know what the final texts are, I could be wrong. I hope not, and I trust not.

11. "The new books will be expensive." Yes, they will. Start budgeting now. Think about how many copies of the Sacramentary you have on hand in the church, the office, or the school. Then think about replacing the participation aids in the pews, and the catechetical texts for children in religious education. It will be an expensive change. I do some prison ministry at home, and for us to get new materials into the prison can take months - many months. The Catholic

volunteers are already alerting the system that statewide we will have to purchase new materials in all our institutions.

12. Finally, “Aren’t there more important matters than this?” Here you can plug in your favorite cause: the slaughter of Syrian Catholics attending mass in Baghdad, the devastating floods in Pakistan that have stretched the reserves of the Church, the abuse of children by clergy in Ireland where the Church is not ready to talk about punctuation, the pro-life movement, justice for immigrants, the end of the death penalty, alleviating poverty in America, alleviating poverty outside America, and so on. All these causes are important, and we must continue our fight for them. But, what do you expect a liturgist to say? Celebrating the eucharist is the single most important thing that Catholics do. If you make time for other issues, but do not make time for the Sunday eucharist, then you have carved the heart out of any apostolic activity you embrace. I back up this belief with this famous quote from the Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy: “The liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the church is directed; it is also the source from which all its power flows. For the goal of apostolic endeavor is that all who are made children of God by faith and Baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of his church, to take part in the sacrifice and to eat the Lord’s Supper” (10). If we can enhance our celebration of the mass, it will have a positive effect on every other cause we pursue. Nothing is more important than the eucharist we share.

The coming of the revised translation has raised many concerns; there are surely more than these twelve. Some concerns are legitimate. Some are not. Some people are misinformed about what to expect. I’ve heard people say that we are going back to communion on the tongue, communion under one species, kneeling for communion, the extensive use of Latin, and an overturning of every liturgical gift bestowed on us from the Second Vatican Council. It’s just not true. This is primarily about words, words that are rich in meaning, and that invite us beyond them to meet the God who came to us as Word made flesh. As we prepare to receive this translation, we will call upon our great reserve of charity and trust. When we gather together at the eucharist, we will find there our source of strength to meet all the challenges we face until we gather again one day with all those we love, and many of those we mistrust at the table of the Lord in heaven.