

Literary Genres of the Mass

Twice the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) advises an understanding of the literary genres used at mass: once when it treats translations, and again when it treats declamation.

“It will also be up to the Conferences of Bishops to prepare, by means of careful study, a translation of the other texts, so that, even though the character of each language is respected, the meaning of the original Latin text is fully and faithfully rendered. In accomplishing this task, it is expedient to take account of the different literary genres used at Mass, such as the presidential prayers, the antiphons, the acclamations, the responses, the litanies of supplication, and so on.”¹

“In texts that are to be spoken in a loud and clear voice, whether by the priest or the deacon, or by the lector, or by all, the tone of voice should correspond to the genre of the text itself, that is, depending upon whether it is a reading, a prayer, a commentary, an acclamation, or a sung text; the tone should also be suited to the form of celebration and to the solemnity of the gathering.”²

Translators, then, should take account of the type of text they are rendering. And all who speak or sing the texts – not just the priest, but other ministers and the entire assembly – should use a tone of voice to correspond to the genre of the text in hand. The notes on translation are new to the 2002 GIRM, but the ones concerning the proper declamation of the texts have remained unchanged since the mass first went into the vernacular languages. One can sense in it a desire to let the words – previously spoken in a silent monotone by the priest – would come alive with dialogic participation of the faithful, all delivering the texts with a natural tone of voice that accentuates their meaning.

Here are some examples of the genre of texts being retranslated for the forthcoming publication of the third edition of the Roman Missal, which will replace the Sacramentary in use in parish churches throughout the English speaking world.

Dialogues. In the genre of a dialogue, two parties exchange texts. The greeting that opens the mass is one of the clearest examples. The priest greets the people, and the people respond to him. This is more than “Good morning.” The participants state the spiritual nature of the gathering. The priest greets the people with a line from the New Testament, such as “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, / and the love of God, / and the communion of the Holy Spirit / be with you all.” These words are a direct quote of 2 Corinthians 13:13.

¹ GIRM 392.

² GIRM 38.

The reply of the people, “And with your spirit,” (“*et cum spiritu tuo*”) is based on the conclusion to four of Paul’s letters,³ and has been in use in liturgical assemblies at least since the 3rd to 4th c. *Apostolic Tradition*. For the past 40 years, the English translation has been more colloquial, “And also with you,” which conveys the overall meaning, but without the spiritual, biblical and historical content. Almost all the other vernacular languages have been using a more literal translation of this phrase than English has.

From the perspective of genre, the dialogue should be a sincere, spiritual greeting between the two parties, made with eye contact and a welcoming face. Even the priest’s gesture can naturally enhance the meaning of the words.

The second form of the Penitential Act presents a related dialogic exchange. This form has not been widely used and many churchgoers are unfamiliar with it. The revised translation will give people another chance to practice it. In this case, however, the priest and the people do not address each other; rather, they both address God, and their lines are divided. [Priest:] “Have mercy on us, O Lord.” [People:] “For we have sinned against you.” [Priest:] “Show us, O Lord, your mercy.” [People:] “And grant us your salvation.” The tone of voice and the eye contact should be different. The priest may raise his eyes to the heavens, or bow his head. All should use a proper tone of voice for addressing God.

A similar exchange of lines happens during the preparation of the gifts. The priest begins, “Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation.” The people acclaim after each of his prayers, “Blessed be God for ever.” All the lines are spoken to God. Here, the tone of voice should demonstrate words of praise, as opposed to prayers of penitence in the previous example.

The preface dialogue becomes a more extended conversation between the priest and the people, where eye contact and gestures regain importance. The revised translation has adjusted the final response of the people. Formerly they said, “It is right to give him thanks and praise,” but now they will say, “It is right and just.” The new translation will seem abrupt to those familiar with the previous text, but it has advantages. The former translation inserted words explaining the meaning of a eucharistic prayer – a text that gives thanks and praise to God. But this was never present in the terse Latin response, “*Dignum et iustum est.*” Today, those sensitive to inclusive language can be heard responding, “It is right to give God thanks and praise,” but such an adjustment will no longer be necessary because a closer translation to the Latin eliminates the difficulty. Even more felicitous, though, is the way that this response will lead into the preface itself. The priest will begin virtually every preface with the words, “It is truly right and just,” following directly upon the cue handed him by the people. The gap between his dialogue with the people and his prayer to God is bridged. Yet, as he begins the preface, the priest engages a different genre: prayer. His tone of voice,

³ 2 Tim 4:22, Gal 6:8, Phil 4:23, Philemon 25.

placement of the head, gesture, and positioning of the eyes should all help show that what follows is different.

Acclamations. A number of acclamations punctuate the mass, each offering a kind of liturgical cheer to the proceedings. “Alleluia” literally means “Praise God.” It is perhaps the simplest example of what an acclamation is: words addressed to the one being praised. Even the word “Amen”, while meaning “Yes,” or “I believe,” or “So be it,” is also an acclamation of the name of Jesus revealed in the Book of Revelation.⁴

The text of the Sanctus will change very little. The words “power and might” are becoming “hosts”. This is closer to the meaning of “*Sabaoth*”, and it draws the link between the angels who first sang this hymn⁵ and the God who rules their hosts. However, translators initially proposed the insertion of a verb into the first line of this acclamation: “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God of hosts.” This is what the source text in Isaiah says, and a declarative sentence is justified by the case of the adjective in Latin.⁶ However, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments approved the text without the verb, which keeps it familiar to worshipers and leaves the meaning somewhat ambiguous – it could be a statement about God, or a statement to God.

This distinction between “statements about” and “statements to” also relate to the new translation of the memorial acclamations. Ever since the Second Vatican Council there have been three memorial acclamations in Latin, but four in English. The first two in English are different translations of the same text. The first one, “Christ has died,” is a statement about Christ, whereas the second, “Dying, you destroyed our death,” is addressed to Christ. The other acclamations in English also address Christ. That was the design of the acclamation, and the revised translations will honor the original intent.

The point the assembly should remember is that they are addressing Christ at this time. Just as they do at the conclusion of the Gospel: “Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.” They are addressing Christ present in the word, and present in the eucharist. The tone of voice and musical settings should enhance the genre of the formulas.

Statements of the assembly. There are times when the entire assembly makes a statement together, “very useful for expressing and fostering the faithful’s active participation.”⁷ These are not dialogues, and they are longer than acclamations. The Gloria is a good example. The first half is addressed to God the Father, and the second half to Jesus Christ. The hymn may be sung in alternation with one or more singers, but usually the common voice of the entire assembly lifts in praise. Within this text there are moments of

⁴ Revelation 3:14.

⁵ Isaiah 6:3.

⁶ “Sanctus” is nominative; “Sancte” would be vocative.

⁷ GIRM 36.

praise (“we glorify you”) and moments of contrition (“have mercy on us”). Musical settings can help with this contrast; most assemblies lack the skills to make tonal changes in the communally spoken text.

Two other statements of the assembly are not addressed to God, so much as they are expressed to anyone who will listen: the Confiteor and the Creed. The Confiteor is a mutual confession of sinfulness. Although it appeared in the mass before the Council as a prayer repeated by the priest and then by the ministers, it is now assigned to all together, while the priest gives words of nonsacramental absolution to conclude. The Confiteor is unique in its invitation that everyone begin mass with a common voice to acknowledge sin and beg pardon. The text should be said with a contrite heart.

The Creed, similarly, seems to be addressed to anyone who has ears to hear. The present English translation puts the Creed in the plural, making it a statement of commonly held belief. The practice has a firm historical basis, but the Roman Church has customarily professed the Creed in the first person singular. English was one of only a few vernacular languages that changed the first word from “I” to “We” after the Council. However, the missal envisions that the priest will begin the Creed. Practically, he probably needs to do so, but linguistically he runs the risk of having everyone state together what his faith is. The first English translation repeated the phrase “we believe” at intervals, but because this iteration did not exist in Latin, it will not in the revised translation. The entire Creed is one solid statement of faith, hanging on the first two words. Pastorally, it would render the Creed more effective if somehow the entire community spoke the first two words together. That would respect its genre.

Presidential prayers. Although there are occasions when the entire assembly prays to God aloud, the priest is especially entrusted with this responsibility. By nature of his office and his pastoral ministry, he voices aloud the prayer that the entire community holds in its heart. The collects, the prayers over the offerings, and the postcommunion prayers all share a similar structure. Each addresses God by name, makes a petition, and concludes with a formula that cues an “Amen” from the people. The collect is especially dense in its ability to use a few words to name God, acclaim God’s mighty deeds, make a request, and acknowledge the benefit it will bring. The revised translation will restore the Latin practice of embedding within many of the prayers the phrase, “we pray”. These prayers will sound more humble than they now do, and a gifted priest will be able to adjust his voice to capture the spirit of the prayer: how bold we are to make this petition to the God who made us and works such mighty deeds.

For example, this translation has been proposed for the prayer over the offerings on the First Sunday of Advent: “Accept, we pray, O Lord, the gifts we offer, / gathered from among your blessings, / and as the effect of our present offering / grant us the reward of your

eternal redemption. / Through Christ our Lord.” One can imagine the humility required to ask for “the reward of eternal redemption,” while acknowledging that the very gifts being offered in this merely temporal setting have after all been gathered from the blessings that the Lord has provided.

Chief among the presidential prayers is the eucharistic prayer. Prior to 1969, the Roman Rite used only the Roman Canon, a prayer with a long history, and a text that had been emended, expanded, and altered with slight improvements and variations from one century to the next. By the time of the Second Vatican Council, its respect had been well earned, but its shortcomings had been well noted, and the proposal for adding eucharistic prayers to the repertoire of the Roman Rite reached a quick and broad consensus. All the new eucharistic prayers follow a cleaner structure than the one in the Roman Canon, making it easier to detect the parts: thanksgiving, acclamation, epiclesis, institution narrative and consecration, anamnesis, offering, intercessions, and final doxology.⁸

The presider has the opportunity to adjust his voice while weaving through these various sections of the eucharistic prayer. He may sound filled with praise during the thanksgiving, but wrapped in humble prayer for the intercessions. He may borrow the subtle gifts of a good story-teller while narrating the events of the Last Supper. And his voice may be filled with awe as he offers the holy and living sacrifice to God, the Father of all. It is difficult to note all these different sections of a eucharistic prayer with the voice, while forming all these diverse parts into a coherent whole. Still, a sensitive presider will grasp the significance of the sections and help the entire community pray them in the proper spirit, according to the genres of the prayer.

Finally, it is worth noting that the priest and deacon have some private devotional prayers as well. These are not said aloud, but they exist in the Order of Mass to help the clergy keep a spirit of prayer throughout the celebration. Some are penitential, as when the deacon kisses the book of the gospels or the priest washes his hands. Some reflect the wonders of the sacred mysteries, as the prayer that accompanies the cleansing of the vessels. In any case, the private prayers are meant to keep the ministers in the proper spirit, and they should be offered with sincere devotion.

Not everyone who participates at the liturgy has the same skills at declamation. But everyone should strive to make the parts of the mass authentic. By taking into account the different literary genres used at mass, ministers and all the faithful can bring new life to the liturgy and enhance their participation. To be avoided is the rote recitation of all the texts, especially those that repeat from day to day. The revised translation will demand a lot of the faithful who speak the texts it gives. It will take time to adjust to the new style and

⁸ GIRM 79.

vocabulary. It will be all the more important for those who participate at mass to reach a deeper understanding of the eucharist they share, its parts, and the roles of its participants. When people work at this task, the genres will enhance the full, conscious and active participation of all who gather at the table of the Lord.

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