

Magnum principium: Now What?

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With his *motu proprio Magnum principium*, Pope Francis has changed the future direction of vernacular translations for the Roman Catholic liturgy. Over the past 15 years, the Vatican held the center of gravity for approvals. Now the holy father has restored the vision of the Second Vatican Council, which placed the authority for translations from the Latin originals into the hands of conferences of bishops.

For the English language, eleven conferences form the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL). Over more than fifty years of work, ICEL has proposed translations for approval by the conferences and by the Vatican. The commission staffs a secretariat in Washington DC, which in turn contracts with specialists to work on the translations. These pass review by an editorial committee, consultants and the staff. Then they go to the eleven bishops who constitute the commission itself - each one representing a different conference. When these bishops vote on a word, a phrase, or on the entire order of service, the vote of the bishop from Pakistan carries as much weight as the vote of the bishop from the United States. Once approved by ICEL, these translations go to the eleven conferences first for their advice, which produces additional changes, and then for their final vote.

Since the year 2006, it has been my privilege to attend the biannual meetings of the commission to keep a record of comments and to remind the members, when appropriate, of decisions they have already reached. Since I began this work, a great many participants have rotated off, and very few who labored on the Roman Missal remain.

The change that Pope Francis has introduced affects lines of authority, not principles of translation. The distinction matters because much of the controversy over the missal derived from concerns over the locus of authority. Consultation was broad - every bishop in every English-speaking conference could consult whomever he wished and bring suggestions to the table. Part of the problem was not that there were too few fingerprints on the missal, but that there were too many.

However, unquestionably, the final authority resided with the Vatican. As has been widely reported, the differences between the missal that the conferences approved and the missal that they received were numerous. Now the process has changed. Pope Francis expects that by and large the Vatican will approve the translation that the conferences submit.

The *motu proprio* does not change the principles of translation. However, it gives conferences a freer hand in adjustments, which could lead to variances from the principles that ICEL has lately observed.

These principles derive from the Vatican's 2001 instruction *Liturgiam authenticam*. Its controversial changes in translation theory and process

influenced the work on the missal. Several gains are evident: theological richness, increased biblical allusions, and renewed appreciation for the archive of Christian prayer.

However, these came at a cost. Fidelity to the Latin entered the realm of grammatical style, vocabulary, punctuation and capitalization. These have adversely affected ease of proclamation and comprehension, as well as curious divergences from common written style in languages such as English. The pope has now opened a way for conferences of bishops to address these concerns.

How this will look remains to be seen, but insights can be gleaned from the past. For example, many have objected to the missal's frequent use of the word "merit," as in the closing lines of Eucharistic Prayer II, which ask God "that we may merit to be coheirs to eternal life." It sounds as though we obtain salvation by our merits and not by those of Christ. The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains, "the merit of good works is to be attributed in the first place to the grace of God, then to the faithful" (2008). But this is difficult to discern in the missal's many prayers. Under the direction of Msgr. Bruce Harbert, ICEL worked to present a faithful translation that avoided such misunderstandings. He explained to the commission that a proper sense of the Latin word *mereor* is well rendered in English as "get": We get some gifts that we do not deserve. The English word "merit" does not capture this nuance. In some cases "obtain" worked as a good substitution for "merit." In prayer after prayer, ICEL carefully fashioned a solution for that difficult Latin word, and eleven conferences of bishops approved the work. However, when the missal came back from the Vatican, the word "merit" populated the prayers as never before. It is likely that such widespread changes would not happen again because of *Magnum principium*.

Regarding gender-inclusive language, many have objected to the masculine pronouns in the section of Eucharistic Prayer IV following the Sanctus. ICEL had proposed adding to the words about the creation of "man" the phrase "male and female he created them." That phrase, from the same biblical verse in the Book of Genesis, would have freed the translators to use the plural pronouns "their" and "they" instead of "his" and "he" for the rest of the sentence. Cardinal Francis Arinze of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments (CDWDS) expressly forbade such a modification to the typical edition of the missal. Today, one has to wonder if such a suggestion would not rather win approval.

Those familiar with the long development of the second edition of the *Order of Celebrating Matrimony* may know that the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops requested several permissions. They wanted to include the hispanic and filipino customs of the *arras* and *lazo*, which the Vatican approved. But they also requested an optional insertion of the Litany of the Saints, as well as the optional transposition of the nuptial blessing to the end of mass. Neither of these requests was permitted, even though the former is in use in Italy and the latter in French-speaking Canada. Again, today, one has to wonder, would such a request from a conference meet a more agreeable conclusion?

More difficult are the translations of “for many” in the words of institution, which sounds as though Christ did not shed his blood for all, and “consubstantial” in the creed, which has some Catholics stating a belief with a word they do not understand. The translation of these words, however, confronts biblical accuracy and theological precision. They may not be lightly changed.

Now that the conferences have regained their authority, what will they do with it, and how will they use it? ICEL possesses deep access to translators and a staff skilled at everything from page layout to copyright permissions. The conferences can still depend on ICEL’s careful work.

A given conference now has more authority to go its own way. However, the eleven bishops on the commission work well together and value proceeding with a unified front. Even so, when these bishops go home, they become just one voice among many in their own conference. They may plead for unity, but they may not get it.

Also unknown is how the *motu proprio* will affect other language groups. German bishops have proceeded cautiously with any revised translation, on the belief that the current one satisfies. Now they will probably face less pressure to change. Japanese and South Korean bishops have struggled because the CDWDS lacks expertise in their languages.

India alone needs translations into languages of which many people have never even heard: Malayalam, Tamil, Hindi, Kannada, Telugu, Konkani, Gujarati, Marathi, Punjabi, and Odiya, for example. Not every language group around the world has experts in Latin to make a faithful translation, nor does the Vatican have experts to approve their work. Now more than ever conferences need to develop specialists to provide translations suitable for their approval.

The ICEL bishops have been testing their sea legs. In recent meetings reviewing such work as the *Order of Celebrating Matrimony* and the *Order of Confirmation*, whenever they encountered a text already existing in the Roman Missal, they passed over it. Their understanding has been that the missal has the final word. Now they aren’t so sure. They have begun to review such repeated prayers in the light of *Magnum principium* to see if any can be improved. This could mark the beginning of how the missal translation is revised.

A number of projects are already well under development: The *Order of Baptism for Children*, the *Order of Christian Initiation of Adults*, and the *Liturgy of the Hours*, for example. Even the *Order of Penance* and the *Order of Anointing the Sick and of their Pastoral Care* have left the starting blocks. ICEL will surely aim to preserve the gains achieved in recent translations, but the conferences will need to direct the secretariat how to steer translators on desired stylistic changes. This will take time.

How quickly will we see a revised Roman Missal? Some have proposed a fast approval of the 1998 translation, lovingly elaborated by experts and approved by the conferences. But even this is not so simple. The missal has more content now than it did then. The translations can probably be enriched further. Any door to a revised missal translation will open onto the obstacles and controversies

that the current missal faced. Any quick fix may be regarded with suspicion by those who were not consulted.

It will be a long road. And a controversial one. But the controversies will be more local than ever before.

“With *Motu Proprio*, Discussions on Translation to Be More Local.” *Pastoral Liturgy*
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