

Parishes to Prepare for a New Translation for Adult Initiation

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INTRODUCTION

Parishes will soon be receiving a revised English translation of the ceremonies pertaining to the initiation of adults. Compared to other revised rituals, the changes are anticipated to be minor, but the anticipation of a new book will cause some anxiety. The revision invites a review of how and why translations happen and the benefits that they bring the Church.

In 2011, the revised translation of the Roman Missal was a more consequential project for two reasons: the Vatican had just changed the rules for translation, and it had released a third edition of the Missal, enhancing its content. In the case of adult initiation, the new translation rules are being applied, but there has been no new edition. The original 1972 edition in Latin has never been updated, showing the unusual strength of its conception, as well as an inner flexibility suitable for various cultures of the world. In English, we received a provisional translation in 1974 and an official translation in 1988, which has remained in force ever since.

The 1988 book included some concessions to the United States. Some of these may remain while others may change. This article pertains mainly to issues of translation, not inculturation. The 1988 book rearranged paragraphs of the Latin original; the examples that follow cite both numbering systems.

GENERAL TRANSLATION ISSUES

The translation of the Roman Missal received mixed reviews. Many people praised the theological depth of the prayers, the greater consistency in terminology, and the increased allusions to the bible that came to light. However, others complained of the length and word order of its sentences, and the specific choice of certain words. Since that time the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL) has worked on translations that smoothed the syntax while preserving richness. Examples can be seen in the commission's work on the revised ritual for the initiation of adults.

Regarding sentence length, one example is the Prayer over the Elect near the end of the Rite of Election. The prayer in the present translation (135A) spans three sentences.

Lord God,
you created the human race
and are the author of its renewal.
Bless all your adopted children
and add these chosen ones

Pastoral Liturgy

to the harvest of your new covenant.

As true children of the promise,
may they rejoice in eternal life,
won, not by the power of nature,
but through the mystery of your grace.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

In Latin, the same paragraph (149) is all a single sentence. The proposed revision splits it into two.

O God, Creator of the human race,
who fashion it anew,
show mercy to the children of adoption
and enroll them in the New Covenant
as offspring of a new people.

Made children of the promise,
may they rejoice that,
what they could not obtain by nature,
they have received by grace.

Through Christ our Lord.

Just before the second sentence, beginning with the word “Made,” the Latin original has a word meaning “so that,” making the second half dependent on the first. The translators deemed that nuance unnecessary. Splitting the sentence keeps the sense of the prayer, preserves its basic structure, and makes it more comprehensible.

An improved word order can be seen in the prayer of exorcism during the penitential rite (scrutiny) for children. The present translation says in part, “Look with love on these young people and fulfill their hopes; they have already experienced temptation and they acknowledge their faults” (300). A more literal translation of the Latin word order (339) would have gone something like this: “Upon these your servants, who have already known temptation and recognized their faults, look with mercy and be mindful of their hope.” But the revised translation proposes this: “Look with mercy on these your servants, who have already known temptation and recognized their faults, and be mindful of their hope.”

Inclusive language issues were squarely addressed. For example, in the ceremony that makes a person a catechumen, the celebrant asks for one’s first commitment to the gospel. During one option, he tells the individual, “In laying down solid foundations, may you acknowledge the living God who truly speaks to human beings” (76 in Latin). The present translation chose a different solution: “Set your feet firmly on that path and acknowledge the living God, who truly

Pastoral Liturgy

speaks to everyone” (52A). Both avoided translating *homines* as “men”, so frequently inserted in the past.

One rare place where ICEL kept the word “man” is in an exorcism for the third scrutiny. The proposed translation reads, “Father, source of life, who seek your glory in man fully alive” (387 in Latin). The original text makes an allusion to a famous dictum of Irenaeus of Lyon, often retold as, “The glory of God is man fully alive.” Of course, this could have been rendered as “human being,” but the commission thought that the allusion would resonate more readily with the traditional word. The present translation reads this way: “Father, source of all life, in giving life to the living you seek out the image of your glory” (175B). The allusion to Irenaeus is obscured.

Often a more literal translation creates images that the first translation did not capture. One example comes from the prayers of blessing that may take place during the period of the catechumenate (123 in Latin, 97C in the present translation). The present translation is good, serviceable and inspiring:

God of power,
look upon these your servants
as they deepen their understanding of the Gospel.
Grant that they may come to know and love you
and always heed your will
with receptive minds and generous hearts.
Teach them through this time of preparation
and enfold them within your Church,
so that they may share your holy mysteries both on earth and in heaven.
We ask this through Christ our Lord.

But notice the nuances in the proposed revision:

Lord God almighty,
look upon your servants
who are being instructed in the Gospel of your Christ:
grant that, knowing and loving you,
they may always do your will wholeheartedly and eagerly.
Graciously teach them through the holy rites of Initiation;
join them to your Church,
that they may become partakers of the divine mysteries
and of an inheritance
both on earth and in heaven.
Through Christ our Lord.

The revision names the instruction of the Gospel, mentions Christ by title, and affirms that the catechumens already know and love God. It prays that they

Pastoral Liturgy

will learn through the rites, not just through catechetical preparation, and not that they be merely enfolded into the Church, but that they may join the Church. They hope not only to share the mysteries in earth and in heaven, but to partake also of an inheritance.

Translation rules now prompt changes to headings and rubrics. Most importantly, the name of the ritual book will change from the “Rite” of Christian Initiation of Adults to the “Order” of Christian Initiation of Adults. Latin uses two different words, *ordo* and *ritus*. In general, an *ordo* is a collection of ceremonies, each of which may be called a *ritus*. But the usages are not consistent. Still, it explains why several ritual books formerly called “rites” are now called “orders”.

In another example, those preparing for baptism formally receive the creed. In the present translation, this is called the “presentation” of the creed (157), but the revision proposes the “handing on” of the creed (183). In Latin, the word is *traditio*.

There will also be changes in some rubrics where the present translation made adjustments. For example, in the same ceremony concerning the profession of faith, in the past the celebrant declared the first words of the creed, and the assembly of the faithful joined him for the rest (160). The revised translation restores another option from the original: the priest himself may recite the creed alone, thus handing it on to the elect (186 in Latin). The present English translation probably found that option too clerical, so it offered only the alternative that involves the entire community. However, there is a tradition for the celebrant alone to present the creed. After all, he is the presider of the entire service, so he presides over the moment when the creed is handed on. Something similar happens in the handing on of the Lord’s Prayer. Even in the present translation, this happens while the priest—not a deacon—proclaims the gospel of this ceremony. As the presider, the priest makes the presentation, which takes place as he proclaims the gospel, so that the elect hear the Lord’s Prayer directly from the Lord. So in the handing on of the creed, the priest as the celebrant may perform the ritual action and recite the creed to the elect. The option for the assembly to join him remains.

At times the revised translation borrows from those already in force. For example, the renunciation of sin within the sacraments of initiation (217 in Latin, 224 in the present translation) borrows from the translations of the Order of Confirmation and the Roman Missal. In becoming catechumens, the individuals may hear the celebrant call their name (75 in Latin). Their response repeats the one from the present translation (50), also found in the rites of institution into the ministries of catechist, lector and acolyte, and of ordination. The person responds “Present.”

SPECIFIC WORD CHOICES

Many worshipers disapprove of the verb “merit” in some prayers of the missal. It seems to imply a Pelagianism that Catholics do not believe: we do not merit our own redemption. Christ alone redeems us. The Catechism of the Catholic Church treats the theme in paragraphs 2006-2011, where it stresses that

humans merit nothing of God—all that we receive comes unearned. The English word “merit” does not fairly translate the Latin word *mereor*. A Latin verb in the passive form, it means freely receiving a benefit, not earning one. In the proposed revision of the adult initiation rites, the word “merit” appears in only one prayer, the one that concludes the signings when a person becomes a catechumen. The priest or deacon prays that the new catechumens “may, by keeping your commandments, merit to attain the glory of rebirth” (87 in Latin). The present translation has him pray that “they may keep your commandments and come to the glory of rebirth in baptism” (57A). The present translation more clearly expresses Catholic understanding of the mystery of redemption. The problem lies partly with the Latin original, which seems to state that Christians receive eternal glory by keeping the commandments. Those troubled by this revised prayer will find comfort that the book provides an optional prayer to replace it.

Several word choices deal with the persons involved in the process. As they begin their formation, the present translation calls them “inquirers” or “sympathizers” (39). In practice, the former word is more common. The revised translation instead proposes “inquirers” or “the well-disposed” (12 in Latin). The second term is more descriptive, but the word “inquirers” will probably remain more common.

There has always been some puzzlement over the use of the word “candidate” in the present translation, and even the word “catechumen”. In parishes, we commonly divide our catechetical groups into unbaptized “catechumens” and validly baptized “candidates” for reception into the full communion of the Catholic Church. However, the present translation speaks of those who are seeking to become catechumens as “candidates” too (48), a term that recurs in the proposed translation (73 in Latin). The word simply means someone in preparation for something. It also appears in the Order of Confirmation and among the rites preliminary to the ordination of a deacon or priest.

The title “catechumen” is generally set aside after the Rite of Election. Those who were catechumens are then called “elect”. Yet the intercessions for the elect in the very Rite of Election calls them “catechumens” (148 in Latin), as in the present translation (134A). The rubrics in the Roman Missal’s Mass For the Celebration of the Scrutinies says that the ceremonies pertain to “catechumens”.

The word “elect” is more proper for this next stage. However, at times the revised translation uses the word “chosen”. Near the end of the Rite of Election, the rubrics call them “candidates”, the bishop calls them “chosen”, and the next heading calls them the “elect” (147-148). The present translation has done the same (133-134).

Throughout, the proposed revision retains the term “neophytes” for the newly baptized (232-234 in Latin, for example, and 241-243 in the present translation). Another inconsistency appears in the missal, which uses the words “newly baptized” in the eucharistic prayer of its Mass For the Conferral of Baptism.

Pastoral Liturgy

The word “judge” gives some pause. It refers to the discernment made to advance catechumens through stages. Even the present translation says of the catechumens that before the Rite of Election, “the Church judges their state of readiness and decides on their advancement toward the sacraments of initiation” (119). The proposed revision softens it: “the Church discerns their state of preparation and decides whether they may proceed to the Paschal Sacraments” (133 in Latin). Still, at the Rite of Election, the proposed translation has the bishop say, “Those who know them have judged that they are sincere in their desire” (145 in Latin), which is virtually the same as the present translation (131A). Although the word “judge” can sound strong, it demonstrates the seriousness of the discernment at hand.

Sometimes the right word depends on social conventions. For example, during the signings in the ceremony that makes a person a catechumen, the present translation has the priest or deacon say at one point, “Receive the sign of the cross over your heart” (56). The Latin words are *in pectore*, which the proposed revision translates “on your chest” (85). The provisional translation from 1974 used the words “on your breast,” which, though accurate, held inappropriate social resonances, as if inviting the priest or deacon to stroke a person’s breast. The word recurs in a rubric concerning anointing with the oil of catechumens (132 in Latin), where again the proposed revision has “chest” where the present translation has “breast” (301). In context, the word probably means the top of the sternum.

CONCLUSION

Some of the changes in the translation seem mundane, but they express the care with which the process approached the work. The Latin original was a product of considerable research, consultation, and inspiration by a team of specialists in the field of initiation. The forthcoming revised translation will invite the Church to look up from a close scrutiny of the words into a renewed appreciation of the entire suite of rituals. As the order of initiation invigorated the Church over the past few decades, its reappearance between new covers will put rituals at the service of evangelization. It will help us recommit to the final command of Jesus to go into the world and make disciples.

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