

A CRISIS OF RECEPTION:
THE CONSTITUTION ON THE SACRED LITURGY AND THE
DEBATE OVER THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF THE
ROMAN MISSAL

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CHAPTER SIX: Evaluation and Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to “re-read” the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy in light of a major conflict within the contemporary Church. The struggle over the translation of the Roman Missal into English has produced bitterness and recrimination, as well as charges that the Constitution’s vision of liturgical reform has been distorted or even betrayed. My hope was that an analysis of the Constitution’s principles and norms could help us understand the values that each side in this dispute was trying to preserve. A scholar’s responsibility to the truth demands that I apportion responsibility for the conflict as the facts—as I have come to understand them—require. Nevertheless, it is my deeper wish as a Christian that this study might contribute in some small way to the healing of the wounds which I have described.

My method of analysis has been to make use of an approach to the conciliar texts developed by the theologian Ormond Rush. As we saw in Chapter 2, Rush argues that the understanding of any communicative event requires an understanding of the communicator, the communication, and the recipient of the communication. Thus in analyzing the texts of the Second Vatican Council, we require a “hermeneutics of the authors,” a “hermeneutic of the text,” and a “hermeneutic of the receivers.” Chapters 3, 4, and 5 of this study were an effort to apply this method to the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. I looked first at the movements and individuals who shaped the development of the Constitution, then at the text itself, and finally at how the Constitution was received by the actors involved in the process of developing and approving the English translation of the Roman Missal.

This final chapter will summarize and analyze the evidence that I have presented. I will begin by briefly reviewing that evidence and then move to my analysis and conclusion. This second part of the chapter will focus on two broad

issues: 1) the *process* by which translations are reviewed and approved and 2) the *approach* to translation that determines their content. In both cases, I will assess how the positions of the parties in this dispute are consistent with the values and norms of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy.

I will argue that one way to understand the conflict over the English translation of the Roman Missal is to see it as a *crisis of reception*. In the immediate aftermath of the Council, those who worked to implement the Constitution attempted to do so in ways that were faithful to the tensions identified in Chapter 4. Nevertheless, certain concepts within the document inevitably received more emphasis than others. For a variety of reasons, an effort to recover these submerged elements during the process of revising the Missal translation produced a crisis for which both sides in the dispute must share some responsibility.

I will also argue, however, that the preponderance of evidence favors the positions taken by ICEL and its member episcopal conferences. With respect to the process by which translations are approved, it is clear that the authors of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy intended that substantial deference be given to the judgments of the national episcopal conferences regarding the details of the translations. The principles of collegiality embedded in both the Constitution and other conciliar documents should also place prudential restraints on the oversight of the conferences' translation process. With respect to the approach to translation, I will argue that the norms of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy favor an approach to translation that is more flexible than that embodied in *Liturgiam authenticam*. Nevertheless, I will also concede that there are certain aspects of ICEL's approach to translating the Missal that are difficult to defend. In my conclusion, I will suggest the need for an international body similar to the Pontifical Biblical Commission that could advise the Holy See on broad theoretical questions related to the liturgy in general and translation and

inculturation in particular. The existence of such a body could reduce the future likelihood of these sorts of conflicts.

A Review of the Evidence

Our first step in interpreting the Constitution was to develop a *hermeneutic of the authors*. As we noted in Chapter Three, the liturgical questions debated at the Council were the fruit of at least a century of pastoral and theological reflection on the role of the liturgy in Catholic life. In its early years, the liturgical movement sought to bring the people closer to the liturgy as it was then celebrated. Eventually, the movement embraced the position that the liturgy could—and should—be changed in order to promote active participation.

Liturgical language thus became one of the central issues in the debate over the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. The use of Latin was criticized by many Council fathers as a barrier to participation in the liturgy. It was defended by others who saw it as a guarantor of ecclesial unity and doctrinal orthodoxy. A consensus emerged that the episcopal conferences should be given more authority in this area so as to better respond to the diverse needs of local churches.

Our second step in interpreting the Constitution was to look at the text itself. I argued that the Constitution is a document characterized by four major tensions. *First*, with respect to the liturgy itself, the Constitution asks that we see it as both something we receive from God, but also something that expresses our faith. Many of its elements are historically conditioned and subject to change, but we must do so with humility, allowing ourselves to be formed by the liturgical tradition before seeking to form it ourselves. *Second*, the Constitution's understanding of human action in the liturgy is that it is both communal and hierarchically ordered. All the faithful are called to participate actively, according to the role that each has within the liturgy. *Thirdly*, reform of the liturgy must walk a *via media* between preserving sound tradition and allowing for legitimate

progress. *Finally*, efforts must be made to adapt the liturgy to particular cultures while still preserving the “substantial unity” of the Roman rite.

These tensions emerge in a particular way in the Constitution’s efforts to regulate the use of the vernacular. While calling for the preservation of Latin in the liturgy, the Constitution encouraged the episcopal conferences to make use of the vernacular. The decisions of the conferences were to be “approved, that is confirmed” by the Holy See. Adaptations that went beyond those specified in the Constitution were to receive a higher degree of scrutiny. Relations between the Holy See and the bishops on these issues and others were to be governed by an understanding of collegiality embedded in the Constitution and documents such as *Lumen Gentium* and *Christus Dominus*.

Our final approach to interpreting the Constitution examined its reception, particularly with respect to the preparation of an English translation of the Roman Missal. Here, I made a distinction between the *process* by which translations were developed and the *approach* to translation used by those who prepared it. In the years immediately after the Council, there was not a significant gap between the Holy See’s understanding of the Constitution and that of the episcopal conferences on either of these issues. After the controversy over *Sacram Liturgiam*, all subsequent instructions regarding the approval of translations hewed closely to the language of the Constitution. The 1969 instruction *Comme le prévoit*, prepared by the Consilium and approved by Paul VI, strongly emphasized the Constitution’s call to adapt the liturgy to culture. ICEL and its episcopal leadership took the instruction’s norms to heart and prepared a translation of the Missal characterized by simple, direct prose that attempted to convey the meaning of the Latin texts without relying on word-for-word translation. While the text was controversial in some quarters, it was confirmed by the Holy See.

During the pontificate of John Paul II there was a gradual change in how the Holy See interpreted the Constitution with respect to translations of the

liturgical books. During the 1990s, the Congregation for Divine worship rejected a number of decisions of the USCCB regarding texts to be used in the liturgy. By the early years of the 21st century, it was demanding a restructuring of ICEL itself. This demand for changes in the process of developing and approving translations was being driven by a desire for changes in the approach to translations. In 2001, the CDW issued a new directive on translation, *Liturgiam authenticam*, that replaced *Comme le prévoit*. While the latter document had taken its bearings from the Constitution's call to adapt the liturgy to the "temperament and traditions of people" (SC 37), *Liturgiam authenticam's* underlying concern was the "substantial unity of the Roman rite" (SC 38). Accordingly, it favored a much more literal approach to translation and exhibited skepticism about inclusive language and original compositions. One year after the document's promulgation, the CDW definitively rejected the translation of the Missal developed by ICEL.

Evaluation: A Crisis of Reception?

How do we explain the sharp divergence between the positions of the Holy See and that of ICEL and the episcopal conferences that emerged during the 1980s and 1990s? It is tempting—and perhaps not inaccurate—to see the translation dispute as another example of how the Holy See has moved over the past 25 years to strengthen its own authority at the expense of the episcopal conferences. A more sociological or historical analysis than my own might also highlight the role that key individuals played in moving the levers of curial power to achieve their desired end.

It is also true, however, that power is generally exercised for a reason. To paraphrase Clausewitz, the exercise of papal or episcopal authority is theology by other means. The actors in this dispute were motivated by their particular readings of the Constitution on the Liturgy, readings that became more divergent

over time. Both sides in the dispute acted as they did because they felt important values were at stake.

I would argue that the best way of understanding this dispute is as a *crisis of reception*. As Chapter 4 made clear, the Constitution on the Liturgy is a document characterized by tensions. It contains assertions and aspirations that are not necessarily easy to resolve in practice. As we saw in Chapter 2, Hermann Pottmeyer has suggested that the juxtaposition of theses in tension with one another was a deliberate strategy by the Fathers, who aimed to hold in tension their twin goals of preserving the tradition and renewing it.¹⁶⁹ The process of creating a new synthesis of the juxtaposed positions was left to the process of reception.

Critics of the Holy See's actions during the translation dispute might well argue that such a synthesis was achieved in the immediate post-conciliar period, which was characterized by a high degree of consensus about what the Constitution required. In this reading of the dispute, it was the Congregation for Divine Worship that introduced, during the 1990s, a new and divergent reading of what the Constitution required.

I think there is a significant amount of truth in this argument. I do not, however, think it is the whole truth. I would also argue that in the immediate post-conciliar period, certain elements of the Constitution received more emphasis than others. The Constitution's teaching on the importance of adapting the liturgy to culture received, for example, more attention than its teaching on the importance of preserving the "substantial unity" of the Roman rite. While the reasons for this were understandable (the emphasis had been entirely in the other direction for the previous 500 years), the result was that certain elements of the Constitution were less adequately developed during the process of reception. These underdeveloped elements of the Constitution lay somewhat dormant until subsequent conflicts over the liturgy brought them into higher

¹⁶⁹ Hermann Pottmeyer 39; see discussion in Chapter 2, pages 9-10

relief. Ideally, the recovery of these elements should have been part of the continued process of the reception of the Constitution. Instead, that recovery produced a crisis.

As I will argue below, a respect for the facts suggests that blame for this crisis is not equally apportioned between both sides. Nevertheless, each side can make a plausible claim that they are defending important values in the Constitution that receive less emphasis from those on the other side of the argument. In what follows, I want to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the positions of the two sides, focusing first on the process by which the translations were approved and secondarily on the approaches to translation that the two sides embraced.

Evaluating the Arguments

With respect to the process by which the translations are approved, I would argue that ICEL and the episcopal conferences have the better case. As we saw in Chapters 3 and 4, a desire for greater decentralization of authority with respect to the liturgy was a key theme in the debates over the Constitution. In their debates over Article 36, the fathers specifically rejected language that was thought to give the Holy See too much control over decisions by the episcopal conferences to expand use of the vernacular. The final phrase—*probatis, seu confirmatis* (“approved, that is confirmed”)—clearly suggested that the Holy See’s oversight would be primarily—although not exclusively—procedural.

The events of the years immediately following the promulgation of the Constitution strengthen the case for this interpretation. The controversy over *Sacram Liturgiam* showed that the bishops were inclined to resist efforts by curial officials to interpret the Constitution in ways that strengthened their oversight role. The subsequent approval of ICEL’s 1973 Sacramentary showed that the Holy See was inclined to give substantial deference to the decisions of the

episcopal conferences, even in the face of public complaints about certain aspects of the translation.

In recent years, by contrast, the actions of the Holy See with respect to the approval of translations have shown a marked centralizing tendency that stands in significant tension with both the spirit and the letter of the Constitution. It is almost inconceivable that the degree of curial micromanagement of the translation process that prevailed in the 1990s would have been tolerated by the bishops who had drafted the Constitution on the Liturgy.

Having said that, I want to concede at least two small points in favor of the Holy See's position. First of all, when we are dealing with *adaptations* of the liturgical books, rather than merely their translation, the issue is not quite so clear. The Constitution clearly states that adaptations are to be given a higher level of scrutiny. The text does not suggest that the decisions of the episcopal conferences with respect to adaptations are to be given the same degree of deference as their decisions regarding the use of vernacular or translations. As we saw in Chapter 5, one of the key issues in this controversy has been the inclusion of originally composed texts in the Sacramentary. While one can disagree with the Holy See's judgment with respect to these texts, it is harder to claim that it is exceeding the Constitution's mandate. At the same time, it seems that a respect for the principles of collegiality and subsidiarity would demand at least some deference to the judgments of the conferences.

Secondly, the evidence from the Constitution, *Lumen Gentium*, and *Christus Dominus* does not suggest that the Council fathers wished to place juridical limits on the pope's freedom of action. To the extent that a proposed translation truly raised serious doctrinal issues, it is doubtful that the Constitution can be interpreted to prevent the pope from intervening. What someone once observed of the American Constitution is also true of the Constitution on the Liturgy: it is not a suicide pact. At the same time, these documents also strongly suggest that the pope should exercise his authority in

this area in ways that strengthen—rather than weaken—the bonds of episcopal collegiality. Allowing curial officials almost unlimited discretionary power to second-guess decisions made by episcopal conferences may not be the best way of exercising papal authority in a collegial fashion.

With respect to the content of the translations themselves, the evidence is less one-sided. Nevertheless, I would also argue that here, too, ICEL and its defenders have the better of the argument. Prior to 2001, the only document from the Holy See providing norms for translation that had any kind of official status was *Comme le prévoit*. While the document is not immune from criticism, it was, so to speak, the “controlling legal authority.” The vast majority of the translation decisions made by ICEL and the episcopal conferences in the preparation of both editions of the Sacramentary are eminently defensible under its norms. It seems almost absurd to fault them for following the rules that were in force during virtually the entire period when the revised Sacramentary was being prepared.

There is no question that *Comme le prévoit* has become a highly contested document. One of the tensions we identified earlier in the Constitution on the Liturgy was the tension between adapting the Roman rite to particular cultures and preserving its “substantial unity.” *Comme le prévoit* has significantly more to say about the former than the latter and it has been used to justify certain translation decisions that are open to question (about which more will be said in a moment). The excessive literalism of *Liturgiam authenticam*, however, leans too far in the opposite direction. It is being used to justify the creation of English texts that in some cases are manifestly unsuitable for public proclamation and singing and may thus become a barrier to the “active participation” of the assembly. As recently as 2007, the (newly restructured and staffed) ICEL was proposing the following prayer over the gifts for Advent:

Accept, O Lord, these gifts,
and by your power change them into the sacrament of salvation,
in which the prefiguring sacrifices of the Fathers have an end
and the true Lamb is offered,
he who was born ineffably of the inviolate Virgin.¹⁷⁰

It is hard to imagine the average English-speaking congregation being able to enter into this prayer and truly make it their own. The images and concepts being expressed here are powerful ones that a good translation should preserve. The question is whether the use of a sentence structure and vocabulary alien to modern English is the only way of doing that.

For these reasons, I believe ICEL's (pre-2001) approach to translation is more consistent with the Constitution on the Liturgy than the approach that has replaced it. At the same time, I would argue that some aspects of the translations are more difficult to defend and deserve some reflection. While "dynamic equivalence" implies translating meaning-for-meaning rather than word-for-word, there are situations in which it is unclear if the full *meaning* of the phrase or passage in question has been translated.

The most obvious example, of course, is the collects from the 1973 Sacramentary. As we saw in Chapter 5, however, there were definitely cases where important aspects of the meaning of the original Latin prayers—particularly how they dealt with the delicate balance between God's grace and human freedom—were left on the cutting room floor. This balance also lies at the heart of one of the four tensions we identified in the Constitution, i.e. the tension between the liturgy as reception and expression. For this reason, concern about how the translation of the collects was handled is not unreasonable. To be fair, this was one of the first issues that ICEL attempted to resolve when preparing the

¹⁷⁰ Donald Trautman, "How Accessible Are the New Mass Translations?" *America*, May 21, 2007.

revised Sacramentary and some critics of the 1973 collects seem largely pleased with the results.¹⁷¹

Another example would be how ICEL handled phrases that related to the distinct role of ordained ministers within the liturgy. The phrase *et cum spiritu tuo* was rendered—using the ICET text—as “and also with you.” In both the Ordination Rite and the Sacramentary, the word *presbyteri* was occasionally translated as “presbyters” rather than “priests.”¹⁷² Similarly, the word *universo clero* in the Eucharistic Prayer II was translated in the 1994 text as “all who minister to your people” rather than “all the clergy,” (as it was in the 1973 Sacramentary).¹⁷³ In the rubrics for the Order of the Mass, the Latin *Tunc sacerdos incipit Precem eucharisticum* is translated as “the priest leads the assembly in the eucharistic prayer.”¹⁷⁴ While reasons can be offered for each of these individual decisions, the combined effect of these changes seems to suggest a certain embarrassment with the hierarchical ordering of the celebration of the Eucharist. As we saw in Chapter 4, however, the authors of the Constitution on the Liturgy were seeking to promote active participation in ways that preserved the tension between the liturgy’s communal and hierarchical elements.

These are just two sets of examples; more could be offered. My point is that if one is to employ “dynamic equivalence,” one must make sure that the meanings of the source text and the translation are truly equivalent. This is obviously, however, a matter of judgment and we should not be surprised if reasonable people can disagree about a particular decision.

A final point concerns the inclusion of new texts in the Sacramentary. This, too, is a complex issue. *Comme le prévoit* called for the composition of

¹⁷¹ Eamon Duffy, 124.

¹⁷² See discussion in Chapter 5, pages 89-90.

¹⁷³ Michael Witczak, 124.

¹⁷⁴ Jorge Cardinal Medina Estévez to Bishop Anthony Pilla, September 20, 1997, http://www.adoremus.org/98-01_cdwletter.htm [accessed February 10, 2008].

original texts and such texts were ultimately included not only in the English Sacramentary, but also in the Roman Missal translations prepared by a number of other language groups.¹⁷⁵ While the Constitution (as noted above) does presume that adaptations to the liturgical texts are to be given a higher level of scrutiny than translations, the practice of the Holy See for the first two decades after the Council was to defer to the judgments of the episcopal conferences.

It is also true, however, that the volume of new texts included in the revised Sacramentary was substantial (more than 300, including alternative collects for each Sunday and feast in the three year cycle and a new version of the *Exultet* for the Easter Vigil).¹⁷⁶ The texts in the *editio typicae* of the Roman Missal are drawn from different historical periods in the history of the Church. Are we confident that the introduction of such a large number of new texts composed during a relatively narrow historical window will not result in the loss of some aspects of our historical tradition? Similarly, are we confident that this process—replicated by episcopal conferences in nations around the world—will consistently produce forms of prayer that express the Church’s common and orthodox faith?

The answer to these questions may well be “yes,” even a resounding one. All of the issues raised above, however, relate to two of the tensions in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy that were identified in Chapter Four: the tension between “sound tradition” and “legitimate progress” and the tension between “legitimate variation” and “substantial unity.” Whatever one thinks about how the Holy See exercised its authority with respect to these questions, I would argue that it is a legitimate exercise of the universal ministry of the Bishop of Rome and his agents to ask whether the tensions within the Constitution have been adequately reflected in liturgical texts proposed for use.

¹⁷⁵ John Baldovin, “Translating the Liturgy,” *America*, September 25, 2006; Donald Trautman, “Rome and ICEL,” *America*, March 4, 2000.

¹⁷⁶ Christopher Walsh, 6-7.

One of the things that Vatican II reminded us, however, is that the universal ministry is not exercised alone but in communion with the entire episcopal college. As Christopher Walsh has observed, what we are witnessing with respect to the translation dispute is “a manifest breakdown of two fundamental ecclesiological principles, collegiality and subsidiarity.”¹⁷⁷ I have argued that the burden of responsibility for this breakdown falls primarily on the shoulders of the Holy See. I don’t, however, think it is unreasonable to ask those on the other side of this dispute to reflect critically on how their own actions and decisions may have contributed to the breakdown as well.

Moving Forward

At the time of this writing, a revised English translation of the Roman Missal is working its way through the episcopal conferences. Given that the conferences have paid a great deal of attention to ensuring that the revised Missal is in compliance with *Liturgiam authenticam*, it seems likely that the Holy See will ultimately approve the text.

It is tempting to think that this will put an end to what I have termed a “crisis of reception.” In this reading, the new paradigm regarding translation that is embodied in *Liturgiam authenticam* has simply replaced the old one embodied in *Comme le prévoit*. I tend to think this is wishful thinking on the part of those who favor the new approach. The movement toward greater inculturation of the liturgy that was initiated by Vatican II may slow its pace, but it will not reverse itself, nor should it. The demand for new texts, composed in living languages will grow. Given the current extent of inculturation—to say nothing of Pope Benedict’s recent statement that there are now two forms of the Roman rite, “ordinary” and “extraordinary”—the question of what it means to speak of the “substantial unity” of the Roman rite is very much on the table.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 13.

It is not clear that the ecclesial institutions that currently exist are adequate to dealing with these questions in a systematic way. They are issues that cross national and cultural boundaries and thus are not easily dealt with by national episcopal conferences and mixed commissions. For similar reasons, it is not clear that the limited resources of the Congregation for Divine Worship are up to the task either. My own view is that something new is needed: an international body on the model of the International Theological Commission or the Pontifical Biblical Commission. The members should be a mix of bishops drawn from the liturgical commissions of their conferences and theologians with expertise in the liturgy. Unlike the Congregation for Divine Worship, this body would not have juridical authority. It would confine itself to dealing with broader theoretical questions in ways that could guide the work of the Congregation, the episcopal conferences, and mixed commissions.

Among the first tasks of such a commission should be a revision of *Liturgiam authenticam*. While its norms are being followed in the preparation of revised translations, the instruction remains controversial. Now that the immediate crisis that occasioned its promulgation has passed, this would be a good opportunity for reflection and revision. A process that consulted a wider range of experts could well lead to a document that would have the staying power and credibility of the Pontifical Biblical Commission's *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*.

The conflict over the translation of the Roman Missal into English was not the Church's finest hour. On the scale of evils, it certainly does not rank with the clerical sexual abuse crisis or some other events of the recent past that could be named. In its own way, though, it has resulted in bitterness and polarization within the Church and a decline in trust between the Holy See and the college of bishops. Regardless of where one comes down on the merits of the various issues at stake, it is reasonable to wonder whether a different way can be found to

resolve such disputes in the future. That is something for which we can hope, and something for which we can pray.