

The Challenge of Translation

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In the new official translation of the current edition of the Roman Missal, without the National Propers for Ireland, there are 210,873 words, according to my computer. In the Latin from which it was translated, there are 187,747 words. The translation is an awesome task, not made easier by the fact that it is from a dead language to a language which is living and changing. The genius of gifted translation is that the gifts of expression of the second language can become a new revelation of meaning springing from the original language.

The task is all the more challenging because of the aim to convey not just the meanings of words and sentences, but also a sense of the allusions to Scripture and to the traditions of Christianity. We need to find words to express a sense of the mystery and awe which are so much an integral element of the mystery of a loving God revealed in the Word made flesh. Finally, we need words which, as *Liturgiam Authenticam* (the official Vatican guide to liturgical translation) states, will be “*evident and comprehensible even to the faithful who lack any special intellectual formation, the translations should be characterized by a kind of language which is easily understandable, yet which at the same time preserves these texts’ dignity, beauty, and doctrinal precision.*” (Paragraph 25)

No translation is ever perfect. The current translation, dating from 1973, did a remarkable job in a relatively short time for the English-speaking church in many parts of the world. It aimed to express meaning without strict word for word equivalence, but it also lost some of the richness of the Latin text. I have been asking myself: is this new translation more successful? It does restore some of the lost richness. Yet, sadly, in my view this is not the translation we need. *Liturgiam Authenticam* insists that “*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.*” (20) It also insists on maintaining the syntax of Latin “*as completely as possible in a manner appropriate to the vernacular language.*” (57) A doctrinaire rigidity in applying these principles causes major pastoral problems.

According to a statement from the Irish Conference of Catholic bishops on 19 October 2010 on the new edition and translation of the Roman Missal, “The work of publishing an edition for Ireland has now begun and it is hoped that it will be in use on the First Sunday of Advent, 27 November 2011”. There is and will be much material promoting the benefits of the new translation. My critical remarks which follow present a different assessment.

The church was born in translation. At Pentecost, devout men (yes, Acts 2:5 uses the specific word *andres* for the male of the species) from every nation under heaven were amazed to hear that first church gathering speaking of the marvels of God. Given the differences of usage and meaning and association of words in diverse languages, it’s not likely that all these men heard identical communications

How about the words of Gabriel to Mary: “The Lord is with you” (Luke 1:28)? Except that’s not what the Greek text says. (I’m afraid I can’t tell you what the Aramaic was.) The Greek text is *ho kurios meta sou – the lord with you*. There’s no verb, just as in the Latin *Dominus vobiscum*, and in the Irish *Dia dibh*. The English language, however, requires a verb, so any translation is already an interpretation which goes beyond the original.

The language in the texts we have of the New Testament is Greek. Not just any Greek, or classical Greek, but *Koiné* Greek. (Remember *koinonia*: community.) There used to be speculation that the Greek of the New Testament is a kind of special Holy Spirit language, because it was not the same as the better known classical form of Greek in the Greek literature of the time. From papyri and other more recent discoveries, we know now that the New Testament is in ordinary vernacular Greek – the Greek used for buying food and normal activities of everyday life. There were different levels of

Koine Greek. There was a more cultivated literary form influenced by Attic Greek, and there was the ordinary vernacular form used in correspondence and inscriptions and in everyday use. The New Testament has the everyday form, except that Luke and Hebrews show some touches of literary Koine (Raymond Browne: *Introduction to the New Testament*, Doubleday 1999, p.70). When Latin replaced Greek as the lingua franca in Rome in the fourth century, Pope Damasus asked St Jerome to translate Scripture. This Jerome did, not into classical Latin, but into the commonly spoken Latin, which we call “Vulgate”.

This is the gift and challenge of the Incarnation: we do not need to seek a sense of awe in approaching God by using some special religious language removed from everyday usage. We find God approaching us in the very fleshy experience of the birth of a baby, and in the everyday sharing of meals with others, including sinners, and in the awfulness of death on a cross. The everyday is transformed into a sacrament of the presence of God. We can, of course, use poetic and literary language as well, since these too are a reality of our lives and of Scripture, but the greater part of the lives of most of us is lived in the everyday. It would be a tragedy to hold that it would be unbecoming to let everyday language and life be a vehicle of our relationship with God. Scripture takes everyday words and stretches our minds beyond all our imagining. *The Word became flesh and pitched tent among us!* (John 1:14) The English word “word” does not necessarily convey the same dynamism and associations as the Greek word *logos* or the Hebrew word *dabar*, but it has its own dynamism. Our current Irish language translation uses not the word *focal*, but the more dynamic word *briathar*: “*Rinneadh feoil den Bhriathar.*”

It is sad that the Congregation for Divine Worship (CDW) seems, in our new translation of the Roman Missal in English, to want a form of language in our liturgy which is so far removed from our everyday reality and use. It may seem a relatively superficial matter, but it could indicate a seriously defective theology. What we want is to recognise and celebrate the accompanying presence of the living God in the burning bush, and to take off our shoes – not because the shoes are profane, but because we want the living presence to soak us directly right through, even while we may sit around and pick blackberries, to use the image offered by poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Certainly we do not want to see just a profane thornbush. We want the whole of creation to be a burning bush, a sacrament of the presence of the living God. If our liturgy is not an expression of this, we ourselves will not be transformed by that liturgy. An insistence on non-everyday language forms and words may indeed generate a kind of strangeness and awe. This is ephemeral when contrasted with the more deeply rooted awe which can be inspired through everyday language used effectively, precisely because the language is “everyday”. Everyday language, of course, may at times be banal, but it is not necessarily so. In no way do we want to “dumb down” the kind of language we use in our liturgy. We have many gifted people who can use everyday language beautifully in prose and poetry to inspire us.

In theology, as in any other specialisation, there are situations when it is necessary to use technical language to express precise ideas. For specific purposes, it can be helpful to have a translation from one language to another which explicitly adopts a policy of formal equivalence, where the second language version images as closely as possible word for word and phrase for phrase the original version. Such a version, however, is not usually one which facilitates prayerful understanding and full conscious and active participation by the worshipping community.

For example, in our current edition of the Missal, and excluding the concluding *We ask this ...*, more than half of the Collects for Sundays in Ordinary Time consist of more than one sentence. Since the tradition in Latin has been that the Collect (opening Prayer) is all one sentence, this has been implemented also in the new translation. This will be a challenge for both presiding celebrant and assembly.

The Eucharistic Prayer is at the core of the liturgy. A comparison of the four regular Eucharistic Prayers (omitting Prefaces, Acclamations, and doxology) in the current and the new translations shows:

	Current trans.	New trans.	Change
Number of words	2177	2549	+ 17%
Number of sentences	106	72	- 32%
Average words per sentence	20.54	35.4	+ 72%

This gives a bird's eye view. The new translation has 17% more words, but the number of sentences is reduced by 32%. The average number of words per sentence has increased about 72%. The first sentence of the Third Eucharistic Prayer in the new translation has 72 words; the current translation of it comprises three sentences, with 61 words. The Flesch-Kincaid (US) Grade Level test suggests that one would require education beyond second level to be comfortable with the language used in the new translation.

The new translation of the First Eucharistic Prayer (Roman Canon) has 8 sentences before the words of consecration. All but one are over 40 words long. (The sentence structure of two of those would allow them to be spoken as two units.) The current translation has 18 sentences. An occasional long sentence is not usually a problem. A succession of them most definitely is.

For purposes of comparison, I checked diocesan websites for homilies given by eleven Irish bishops to general congregations. The eleven homilies are within the range of 16.87 to 23.70 average words per sentence, which seems to indicate a good normal level of communication. Contrast that with an average of 35.4 words per sentence in the new translation of the four Eucharistic Prayers.

Why not check your diocesan website to see whether your bishop has a homily there? For DIY, paste it into your word-processor to see the number of words. Use your "Find and Replace" function to replace each "." with the same ".", and see the number of replacements carried out. Do the same with "?" Add the two numbers to get the number of sentences, and calculate the average number of words per sentence. Free on-line "readability" utilities can do this automatically.

We need to keep in mind also that, when reading text oneself, it is possible to look back in a long sentence to get a second chance to understand. When listening to the words spoken by another, if I lose track in one sentence it means I probably lose also the next sentence or two. Whatever difficulties people experience in full participation at present, the above information indicates that they will be faced with a significantly increased challenge with the new translation. It seems likely that this will lead to an increase in frustration and boredom among the congregation. The task of getting used to new words is temporary. The ongoing effort with obscure language is far more serious. The pastoral effects of this apparently simple matter must be damaging to the church in Ireland in general, and to the Irish hierarchy.

- 1) While some will welcome it, those in our congregations who will live with the new translation face an entirely unnecessary obstacle to the full, conscious and active participation which Vatican II states is their right and duty. Listening also is active participation.
- 2) Those who "lack any special intellectual formation" and who still stick with it will be deprived of the fuller level of conscious active participation to which they have been accustomed up to now, and to which they have a right. This is an injustice to the most vulnerable.
- 3) Beyond the initial period, even with the most sensitive preparation and catechesis many in our congregations will experience on-going frustration, leading to falling away from weekly attendance.
- 4) The stock of the hierarchy with the public is at a low ebb due to recent scandals and other reasons. People have had, for up to 40 years, some sense of personal investment in the celebration at their principle locus of contact with church. Those who are at present just barely hanging in with the church will have their view confirmed of a hierarchy out of touch. It will also confirm their sense of the hierarchy and the Vatican as autocratic, as the new translation is introduced without any attempt at consultation beforehand with the people.

Apart from another child abuse scandal, it is difficult to imagine a more effective way of depleting our congregations at their most frequent point of contact. We could well consider whether the introduction of the new translation is pastorally wise at this time.

Bishop Maurice Taylor, Bishop emeritus of Galloway in Scotland, was president of ICEL (International Commission on English in the Liturgy) from 1997 to 2002. In his 1999 book, *It's the Eucharist, Thank God*, he writes: "English texts ... had a special importance. This was because many bishops' conferences, mainly in the developing countries of Africa and Asia, were understood to use the English texts as the basis of their translations into many local, non-European, languages" (page 47). See <http://www.theway.org.uk/endeianweb/lttaylor.pdf> for Chapter 5 ("A Cold Wind from Rome") of his book.

The breakdown in trust and respect between the CDW and the various conferences of bishops involved in ICEL which Bishop Taylor describes is collateral damage which seems entirely regrettable. He wonders how the CDW, or the Holy See itself, would have reacted if the conferences of bishops had claimed that their legitimate authority had been infringed by the Congregation's behaviour. It seems remarkable that Bishop Taylor felt such a frank account had to be written and published. It is sad, too, that the CDW banned the cooperation with other Christian churches and ecclesial bodies, which ICEL had actively promoted.

The Congregation for Divine Worship (CDW) is rightly concerned for the integrity of the liturgy of the Roman Rite. Is it possible that such legitimate concern has led officials of the CDW to lose sight of the everyday experience of liturgy at grassroots level? If this is the case, such concerns about translation as Bishop Taylor refers to should be taken up with the competent authorities in those parts of the world where such translations may be in prospect, without placing an unnecessary burden on those peoples who celebrate the liturgy in English. The CDW rejected the translation prepared and submitted in 1998, a translation which had been approved by the bishops' conferences which ICEL was set up to serve.

In this article, I have confined myself to general questions about the introduction of the new edition and translation. There has been much discussion elsewhere about matters like the change from *And also with you* to *And with your Spirit*; the change from *We believe* to *I believe*, and the use of the word *consubstantial*, in the Creed; the change at the consecration from *shed for you and for all* to *poured out for you and for many*; the use of non-inclusive language in order to reflect the Latin word pattern; and many others.

Bishop Brian Dunn of Antigonish, Nova Scotia, a Doctor of Canon Law, in his paper on the Role of the Conference of Bishops in the Translation of Liturgical Texts writes that "ultimately, the Congregation of Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments does not have the authority to impose a new translation upon a country." The final decision to introduce the translation is still that of the bishops. The Congregation does not have authority to impose it (*Liturgiam Authenticam*, 104). The spirit of Paul in Galatians 2:11, when he recognised that Peter was manifestly in the wrong, is required. Decisions of the Conference of Bishops, unlike the laws of the Medes and Persians (Daniel 6:8/9), are not incapable of being revisited, even at this stage.

If CDW is the watchdog for the integrity of the liturgy of the Roman Rite, and if the various accounts written about its dealings with ICEL are accurate, we need to ask *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* – Who is there to monitor those watchdogs? It should not, of course, become a case of "I am for ICEL" or "I am for CDW" or "I am for Trent". There must surely be a better way to deal with such differences while maintaining respect and trust. The fact that there is so far no attempt at consultation with either people or priests at grassroots level – the very ones who will have to implement it – does not help.

We have had the current English translation of the Missal for nearly 40 years. A new edition and translation is likely to be with me for the rest of my life. A more vital matter is that it would likely be with the children who are receiving their first Holy Communion this year for much of, if not for the

rest of, their lives. Whatever new translation is introduced, I want to ask: is this the legacy I want to leave to them?

I offer a suggestion. I have offered my reflections above, which I am sure will not reflect every person's thinking. This matter will directly affect well over a million people in Ireland every Sunday, and many others who come to Mass on specific occasions. Look at the current and new versions side by side, to see the effect of the changes. During Lent, people in every parish could discuss the translation at the Parish Pastoral Council and/or with people in the parish who wish to be a part of it. Lay people can do this either on their own initiative, or with the priest(s) of their parish. Reflections, positive or negative, could be sent to the local bishop before Easter.

It's not a healthy church if communication is predominantly one-way. This is an opportunity to bring much-needed renewed life and participation into the church.

POSTSCRIPT

With nine months to Advent 2011, what could be done?

If we invest the resources now in printing all the materials for the 2010 translation, we'll have to live with it for at least the next 20 years. If we are going ahead, and acknowledge that there are some serious defects, it is worth taking the time to do it right. It's not back to the drawing-board. An enormous amount of spade-work has been done over the past 20 years.

It seems that some bishops are happy with the translation as it stands, whereas there are others who are not. To raise this is not to cause division. Divisions are already there. It is better to face this, and not sweep it under the carpet. There is much documentation of defects.

If I were to contract to buy a new car which I would use for the next five years, and I became aware of defects which would inhibit it from being effective in the purpose for which I bought it, and which could even be damaging to people I love, I would suspend the completion of the contract until those defects were remedied.

All the more, if there are problems with the new translation which affect it in a similar way, and since we would be using this for at least the next twenty years, I would most definitely suspend the operation until the defects can be remedied, even if the contract has already been formalised.

Knowing the history of the translation, it would be good that there be an urgent consultation among the conferences of bishops of English-speaking countries, without recriminations, so that we are not left with defective material. The bishops have the pastoral care of the people of their individual dioceses; they also have *sollicitudo omnium ecclesiarum*, a duty of care for all the churches (2 Corinthians 11:28). If the Congregation for Divine Worship is unhappy with a proposal from the bishops to make the necessary corrections, so be it: this too needs to be faced.

As we would do if buying a new car, we want to make sure that all the parts are in good working order. It would be better to hold on to the old model, rather than be stuck with a defective new model. After all the delays, another year or two would be well worth while to attain what our people need and in which they can fully participate for the foreseeable future.

The much more public debate which this would involve could only be a positive factor in the renewal of the church, and would help make the riches of the Roman rite in our liturgy better appreciated.