

RAYMOND G. HELMICK

# ‘Opaque and clumsy’

It is 10 years since Pope John Paul II called for a revised English translation of the Roman Missal. But as anglophone Catholics prepare for its introduction there is grave disquiet about its rendering of a usable and sacred vernacular, as one of those involved in the 1960s translation explains

**N**ext year, we are due to have a major change in the way that English-speaking Catholics experience the Liturgy of the Mass. New translations of the ordinary parts and the Eucharistic Prayers have been prepared, largely at the instigation of the Holy See and its Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments.

Both the English versions of the 1960s and these new ones have come in for criticism. I happen to approach the change as one of the group who prepared the translations we have used these last 40 years and more, and must say first that it has been a joy for me to hear these prayers in the words that I had so much to do with. I read these new translations with a great deal of reservation, which I will try to explain in this article.

What we did back in the 1960s was not perfect, of course. After it had gone through several revisions, I wrote to the rest of the group about the First Eucharistic Prayer (it was the only one then, hence “The Roman Canon”), which I felt was rather like the camel – the horse designed by a committee – and that we needed to have more unity at the centre on any further translations. All the same, I remain very conscious of a number of principles we followed that I think were important, and that have been quite deliberately disregarded now.

Among the 10 of us who did that translation, I was particularly insistent that the English should be the English we actually speak. In that, I was supporting the principal translator, Edward Harold, a most extraordinary critical linguist who did the heaviest lifting on the

project. Fr Fred McManus had invited me to take part, because of the work I was doing then on liturgical chant, which involved a lot of sensitivity to the language. My contention was that to address God in language that was either archaic or artificial was to assert that the one addressed was not real.

That is my basic concern. I fear that this new translation, often clumsy to the point of incomprehensibility, is going to alienate our Catholic people still more than the current turmoil has already done, discouraging Mass participation by making the language opaque. Even now, despite this latest translation having been given official approval, or *recognitio*, it appears that there have since been yet more changes, with, as Alan Griffiths warned in his letter in last week’s *Tablet*, incorrect English and a lack of understanding of English grammar.

There are things that I like in the new translations. I’m glad to see us responding again “And with your spirit”. In the Gloria translation, I was happy to see that the triple formula, *qui tollis ... , qui tollis ... , qui sedes ...*, was restored, as it was a bad idea to condense it in the first place. I thought the changes in the new Creed translation rather unhelpful – “I” form rather than “We” form for what is a communal profession of faith, the loss of the articulation offered by the repeat “We/I believe” before Son, Holy Spirit and the articles at the end of the formula. But I thought the substitution of “consubstantial” for “one in Being” truly egregious. We are translating Greek and not Latin in the Creed, and the Latin *consubstantialem* is already an inadequate translation of *homoousios*, whereas “One in Being” translates it better than any Latin term. “Consubstantial”, in English, is without any meaning that can be deciphered without elaborate exegesis.

And there, exactly, is the central problem: the edict laid down by the Romans that everything should be the most literal possible cognate of the Latin. Defences of the translation that I have read try to make it a virtue that the language is not the English we speak, but somehow “elevated”. I think the translators have run right into the critical problem we were all so aware of in the 1960s – that artificial language says “God is not real”.

I was in sympathy then with people in the



Anglican tradition who had been using the centuries-old language of the Book of Common Prayer, because they had grown up with that language as their way of prayer. It was therefore right for them, but the archaic language, based on it, that we Catholics used to have in the parallel-text missals was distinctly not for us.

At one stage, we were given the proposition that we should do a fresh translation of the Lord’s Prayer, and I refused personally to have anything to do with it because we already know the “Our Father” and have used it all our lives. When that translation was nevertheless produced, our Catholic bishops in the United States had the good sense to reject it. Anglicans and some of the other Churches, following our work closely, did adopt it, and hated it so much that they quickly got rid of it. But the Anglican and Episcopal Churches liked our translations so well that they soon initiated alternative formulas closely parallel to ours.

The problem is most acute in the Roman Canon – First Eucharistic Prayer – where the Latin is of a very early century and contains many conventional usages, fine in their own historical context, that do not concur with anything in contemporary English. One such glaring usage is the constant employment of non-limiting adjectives in this fourth- or fifth-century Latin, which the new translation tries to duplicate slavishly, often with ridiculous effect, but there are many other instances as well. The other Eucharist Prayers are Latin compositions of a more contemporary period and therefore more cognate to our modern languages.

Much as I was disinclined in the 1960s to change things that had acquired traditional meaning in people’s actual life of prayer, such as the Book of Common Prayer to its own users, or the “Our Father”, I don’t like to see simple tinkering with what have become

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familiar formulas. That happens, to my mind, in the very trivial changes made to the prayers around the Preparation of the Gifts. These are needless, and only things for tongues to trip on. I do realise that, beyond inadequacies in our earlier translation, our language has changed in the last 40 years. We have become sensitive, for one thing, to inclusive language (something the Romans never want to hear of), which was not an issue then, and there are more subtle differences.

I don't want to be obstructive and argue against making reasonable changes. But once into the Eucharistic Prayers, the translation we are offered goes off the tracks into gibberish right from the start, with "To you, therefore ..." for *Te igitur* ... . Syntactically, this is not English, but Latin using English words. Immediately following this, we come to a first crop of non-limiting adjectives. Mention of these may be unfamiliar simply for the reason that we very seldom use them in English and may not recognise them as such when we do.

An adjective modifies its noun: it gives more information about the referent, the thing named. A chair may be a wooden chair, an upholstered chair. The adjective thus limits the meaning of the noun. Non-wooden chairs, or non-upholstered chairs are excluded. But we can use adjectives in a way that makes no such modification, but simply decorates the noun. A common instance would be the epistolary "dear." We open a letter with "Dear Mr X". This makes no assertion that we like Mr X or that he is truly dear to us. It is simply a conventional phrase. It says nothing more than that "This is a letter".

Other non-limiting adjectives are rare in English. One is to reduce the subject to the mythical or the fairy tale: "Brave Tarzan"; "faithful Cheeta". Or if used of an historical person, it gives an aura of the unreal, the unbelievable, the legendary: "Ivan the Terrible"; "Peter the Great"; "Good Pope John". This usage is purely conventional, having no more meaning than the epistolary "Dear ...".

There is only one other usage in the English we actually speak. That is to identify the user's peer-group identity. Adolescent girls, in the 1960s, sprinkled their conversation with "dear", "sweet", "adorable" and other like adjectives. A boy could be "adorable". So could a motor accident. The adjective did not mean anything to do with adoration, sweetness or affection. It merely identified the peer group: we are girls talking to one another. Perhaps in our own time, girls are more likely to imitate the boys of the same age who ornament conversation among their peer group with all the four-letter words.

And with that we have exhausted the contemporary English usage of non-limiting adjectives. So how are we to deal with the constant flow of *sancta, venerabilis, gloriosa, benedicta, praeclara* adjectives hung on the nouns of this fourth-century Latin, often in pairs: *sanctas ac venerabiles manus suas*? Our conclusion in the 1960s was that they could not stand in an English translation of these prayers without essentially distorting the meaning. Faithful translation of the meaning of the prayers must mean eliminating

them as a distorting foreign and archaic usage. Far from "elevating" the language, slavish inclusion of them in our own language deprives it of reverence.

Another pervasive usage in the quite beautiful Latin of this early epoch is the reference to servants. *Nos servi tui*. The reference is quite biblical, as so many of the New Testament parables speak of the *servi, douloi* in the Greek original, and their relation to their master. We need to understand that the term does not mean "servant" in any sense we would use, but always "slave". Modern translations of the Gospels normally recognise this. The master sends his slaves out to invite the guests to his supper, and that is quite appropriate for the time and place.

The social situation it supposes is that of the *latifundium*, the large landed estate with its house slaves and its field slaves. All of these made up the family of the master. All his slaves were valuable property. He might be angry with them, or punish them, but he always cared for them. They would not be cast off or be unforgiven. The relation was essentially personal, not at all like the cold and uncared-for status of the denizens of the Soviet collective farm. The slave could rely on his or her master.


This is a situation of the past (including the New Testament past), one that, if it exists anywhere today, is only in remote parts of Pakistan. "The servant", in our time, a less and less frequent figure in our experience, is the maid who comes in once or twice a week to clean the house, in no way an intuitive modelling of our relation to God. Prayer of the fourth century, like that of New Testament times, could understand our position before God in those terms. In our time it cannot.

I give only these few illustrations of guiding principles that have to be recognised if we are to have a faithful translation of our most important prayers. None of this has been done in the preparation of these new translations of the ordinary parts and Eucharistic Prayers of the Mass. The situation is not so drastic with the newly written Eucharistic Prayers II, III and IV, as they are composed in a Latin more compatible with our modern linguistic sensibilities.

We have been presented with a drastically botched job, botched basically because the Romans, people of goodwill whose language is not English, insistent on literal cognates of the Latin forms, have imposed an ill-chosen criterion. I wish this could be said more politely. I don't feel, as one who seriously thought through these matters of liturgical language in crafting, all those years ago, the versions we have been using, that I can responsibly let that pass unchallenged.

Our Catholic people have been presented, in recent years, with a series of shocks that have profoundly disorientated, disillusioned and disappointed them about our Church. Making the language of liturgy opaque will be one more reason for them to stay away.

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