

Words Can Change Us — Can We Change Them?

Paul Inwood

I wonder if you have ever noticed the variant texts that occur in different versions of the same Taizé chant? Over the years a number of Taizé chants have been modified — this happened especially at the beginning of the 1990s. Sometimes the motive behind the changes was an attempt to produce a more inclusive, or a more “politically correct”, text. In the case of other chants, changes seem to have been introduced for other reasons, not all of which are easy to discern. It can occasionally be rather disconcerting, and people often ask me “Which version should I use?”

A good example of this is *In the Lord*. The original text is in Catalan, a language close to Spanish with a dash of French, and runs as follows:

El Se - ñor és la me-va for - ça, el Se -
ñor el me-u cant. El m'ha_e-stat la sal - va -
ciõ, en ell con - fi - o i no tinc por, en ell con -
fi - o i no tinc por. El Se -

The ‘t’ of “cant” [song] is silent, as is the second ‘t’ of “estat” [been]. A fairly literal translation would run:

*The Lord is my strength,
the Lord is my song;
he has been my salvation;
in him I trust and have no fear. [x2]*

The text is actually taken straight from Isaiah 12:2, which goes like this:

*Truly God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not fear,
for the Lord God is my strength and my song,
and he has become my salvation.*

It will be seen that the Catalan text has the lines are in a different order from the biblical text, but it is in the nature of translations that phrases can be transposed, often because of the characteristics of the receptor language.

It so happened that I was present at Taizé the very week that this chant was first introduced. I was so captivated by it that I immediately produced an English translation and a number of instrumental descants. My text ran as follows:



In the Lord is my true sal - va - tion, in the
Lord my last-ing joy. He be - came my
strength and my song: I trust in him and I shall not
fear, I trust in him and I shall not fear. In the

It is clear that, despite the different order of lines, this translation follows the Isaiah original quite closely in addition to being an excellent fit for Jacques Berthier's music. My text circulated quite widely in England during the following months, even being published in the hymnal *Celebration Hymnal for Everyone*.

However, after a while the brothers at Taizé came out with their own English text for the same music:

*In the Lord I'll be ever thankful,
in the Lord I will rejoice!
Trust in him, do not be afraid,
in him rejoicing — the Lord is near! [x2]*

This text has almost nothing to do with the Isaiah original, and the construction of the last two lines feels like padding. The Taizé brothers themselves must have found it unsatisfactory, for they later revised it, taking the opportunity at the same time to inclusivize by de-gendering (“God” for “him”):

*In the Lord I'll be ever thankful,
in the Lord I will rejoice!*

*Look to God, do not be afraid:
lift up your voices, the Lord is near. [x2]*

This latest version is what the Taizé community currently insists is printed in hymnbooks and elsewhere; and yet the text is still not a translation of the original Isaiah. The phrase “Look to God” does not sing well, and the notion of trusting in God has gone out of the window. As you can imagine, I still prefer my earlier text!

Here’s a second example, this time with a German original:



Blei - bet hier und wa - chet mit mir,
wa - chet und be - tet, wa - chet und be - tet.

The image shows two staves of musical notation in 4/4 time, key of B-flat. The first staff contains the melody for the first line of the German text. The second staff contains the melody for the second line. The lyrics are written below the notes.

The earliest Taizé translation ran as follows:



Stay here, keep watch with me,
watch and pray, watch and pray.

The image shows two staves of musical notation in 4/4 time, key of B-flat. The first staff contains the melody for the first line of the English text. The second staff contains the melody for the second line. The lyrics are written below the notes.

This is a literal rendition. Not only is it rather ugly, with the thump on “here”, but the “watch and pray” completely ignores the feminine endings of the German verbs and thus jars with the music. Two subsequent revisions from Taizé followed, and what we eventually have today in their fourth version is:

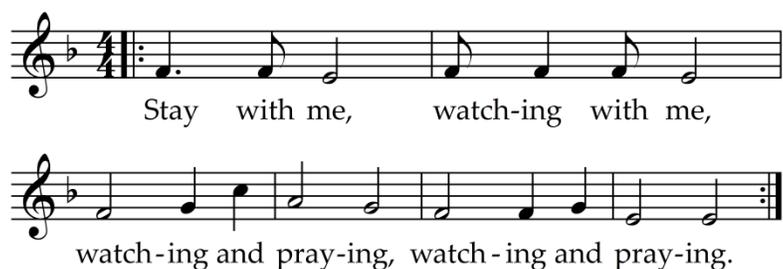


Stay with me, re - main here with me,
watch and pray, watch and pray.

The image shows two staves of musical notation in 4/4 time, key of B-flat. The first staff contains the melody for the first line of the English text. The second staff contains the melody for the second line. The lyrics are written below the notes.

This still has most of the unsatisfactory features of the earliest version.

In the meantime, my own version had also circulated widely, in fact coming out ahead of the first Taizé version:



Stay with me, watch-ing with me,
 watch-ing and pray-ing, watch-ing and pray-ing.

This is much closer to the rhythm of the German words as well as a better translation of the first line. Apart from turning the second dotted quarter + eighth note in the first measure into a half note, the words are a much better fit with the music, especially in the second line. I know which version I would use!

A third example, this time in French:



La té - nè - bre n'est point té - nè - bre de - vant
 toi: la nuit com - me le jour est lu -
 miè - re. La té -

This is Ps 139:12ab. A literal translation would be:

*Darkness is not [at all] darkness before you:
 the night is as light as day.*

The Revised Grail Psalter has:
*even darkness is not dark to you,
 the night shall be as bright as day,*

Once again, my translation was circulating ahead of the Taizé version. Here it is:

E-ven dark-ness is ne-ver dark-ness in your
sight: the night be-comes as clear as the
day - light. E-ven

In the fullness of time, the first Taizé version emerged, as follows:

In our dark-ness there is no dark - ness with
you, O Lord, the deep-est night is
clear as the day. In our

The gratuitous “our” is not in the original, nor “O Lord”, and the final “day” ignores the 4/3 suspension-resolution under the two half notes at the end.

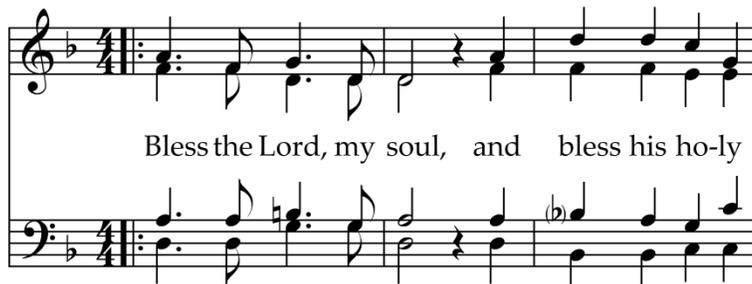
Several years passed before a revised version appeared, which is the “official” one today:

Our dark-ness is ne-ver dark-ness
in your sight: the deep-est night is
clear as the day - light. Our

Here we can see that several phrases have been borrowed from my earlier version, although the “Our” on the first two eighth notes is not a musical improvement. As previously noted, the word

“our” simply does not appear in the psalm as a qualifier of darkness. Perhaps those responsible were thinking of an association with St John of the Cross’s dark night of the soul.

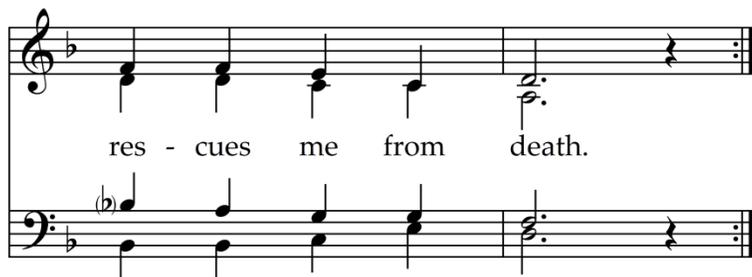
Now let us turn to a different kind of textual change. The well-known chant *Bless the Lord, my soul* was originally written to an English text:



Bless the Lord, my soul, and bless his ho-ly



name. Bless the Lord, my soul: he



res - cues me from death.

The updated, “politically-correct” official text now reads:

*Bless the Lord, my soul,
and bless God’s holy name.
Bless the Lord, my soul,
who leads me into life.*

Here the inclusivization agenda is at work once more, with “God’s ” instead of “his” and the grammatically awkward “who” instead of “he”. Of much greater concern, however, is the substitution of “leads me into life” for “rescues me from death”. I would be willing to bet any money that Jacques Berthier would never have set the new text to the same music. “Death” is set to a descending cadence, and the music fits this well; you would think that “life” might lead to a rising cadence, with a very different melody-line. For example, one can imagine “leads me into life” set to F-F-G-C-A at the very least, if not ending higher still. Additionally, it is difficult to

reconcile the “darkness” of the music, with its minor key and bare fifths in measures 2 and 6, with the optimism of leading to life rather than rescuing from death. I cannot understand the motivation behind this textual change. The original is taken from Ps 103:1bc + 2a and 4a (“redeems your life from the grave” in the RGP = “rescues me from death”), and also has echoes of Ps 40:3. The concept of leading into life is completely absent.

Why does all this matter? Because, I believe, we need words that are not only faithful to the spirit of the originals, but which speak directly to us, and which fit the music like a glove. When this happens we are nourished and thrive. When this does not happen, when we have inferior texts, we are dulled and diminished in spirit. Of course this does not apply just to Taizé chants but to all the texts we use. It applies to music that does not respect the natural rhythms of the words, just as much as to a Missal translation that does not respect the natural patterns of the receptor language. That is why some recent translations have been questionable in their effects, because their aim is quite different: they have aspired to be a textbook for fidelity rather than a vehicle for prayer.

(Some have asked why it is that Taizé do not make use of better versions, especially when they are already out there. I believe that the rationale is in order to keep everything “in house” and under control. That is understandable, and of course there is a financial consideration too: using only their own translations impacts the revenue the Community receive from printed editions via sales and royalties. Nevertheless, I also believe that those who, like me, make their own versions, both textual [translations] and musical [instrumental descants, etc.] would be more than happy to share with and donate their work to the Taizé Community.)

A major question for me, then, is this:

Texts can change us. They change how we feel; they affect and enhance our spiritual lives. Inferior texts change us differently and perhaps less well. Can we alter texts so that their effect on us is, shall we say, more desirable? Or at least so that their effect on us is enhanced?

It seems clear that the brothers at Taizé have no problem with tweaking texts, although, as I have shown, it is not clear that their tweakings are always improvements. Similarly, our textual tweakings may not necessarily be improvements either, and here we get into the less tangible areas of taste and discernment, alongside skill and a feel for language. When we encounter these qualities, we should hold up our hands and rejoice, while recognizing that we also get into two other areas: the theological and the philosophical.

It is evident that good taste and a feel for language are by themselves insufficient. If we change the text, and its effect on us, we may also be changing the overall meaning of the text; and theologians may have opinions about whether we might even stray unwittingly into heresy. I am not talking about such extreme cases here, but about instances such as the orations in the latest translation of the 3rd edition of the Roman Missal. It seems clear that after more than two years of use, these are

still as clumsy and awkward as ever. Many priests continue to be simply unable to proclaim them, let alone pray them. Some prayers remain resolutely incomprehensible, and a whole list of translation errors has been unearthed, meaning that the texts themselves are by no means always correct. Many other priests are either making their own adjustments to the texts, or using earlier versions, both published and unpublished. I have also found a small proportion of priests who are unconsciously making slight adaptations to the text, tweakings which improve the flow, while not actually being aware that they are doing so (when you quiz them, they say that they are sure they proclaimed the text exactly as it stood!). Provided that the meaning remains basically the same, is tweaking these texts objectively sinful? I think not.

The philosophical question is one that would be raised by those who appear to maintain, as Cardinal Ratzinger did, that the liturgy is in some way an ontological entity that has been given to us from on high; and therefore we may not tinker with it. The question, then, is do we have any right to tweak texts at all, or must we respect them exactly as they are given to us? It seems to me that setting up a vernacular liturgical text as a kind of untouchable icon is not a tenable position. It's only a translation, for heaven's sake! When there is clearly a better alternative available, it seems perverse to persist with an inferior rendering just because it has been promulgated in that way.

An excellent case is the opening of the Gloria. This has proved one of the most awkward pair of lines for musicians to deal with since the current text became available. The problem is in the second line:

and on earth peace to people of good will.

If you are going to follow the natural rhythm of the text as it would be spoken, two problems arise. The first and major rhythmic problem is with the two long stressed syllables *earth peace* following immediately one after the other. The other lesser problem is *of good will*: where do you place the stress? On *good* or *will*? Or neither? Or both? And how do you avoid putting the word *of* on a stronger beat?

Out of the hundreds of settings that have been published over the past three years or so, it has to be admitted that most of them sadly get one or other if not both of these wrong, even in the case of very reputable composers. Only a few settings can therefore be recommended, but it would be invidious to do so here.

Rather than castigating composers, my point is that much of this could have been avoided by a simple tweak of the text:

*and **peace on earth** to people of good will*

would have been so much easier to set to music as well as to speak. But you can't do that, say the translators, citing *Liturgiam Authenticam* as their authority. Why not? Because the Latin is *et in terra*

pax and not *et pax in terra*, and we have to follow the Latin word order. Really? Are you sure we do? In that case, I am going to insist that for *Pleni sunt caeli et terra gloria tua* we use

Full are the heavens and the earth of your glory

since that is the Latin word order. But no one would ever do that, and the translators gave us

Heaven and earth are full of your glory

unchanged from the previous version. If they can allow themselves to massage the word order in that case, they can certainly do the same with the opening of the Gloria. I challenge them to provide one good reason for not doing so.

Speaking of the Sanctus, the England and Wales 1966 official text for the opening of this acclamation was actually

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts.

Your glory fills all heaven and earth

which was in some ways rhythmically easier to handle than the present translation because of the final strong syllable instead of the current feminine ending on *glory*. That version eventually disappeared once the present translation came in, but some have said that they would still like to return to it.

I say again, all these texts are only translations. Not only that, but our language is evolving every day. Do we have the right to modify texts when they are found to be wanting? Can anyone seriously maintain that they are untouchable because “they have been given to us”? In the case of my translations of Taizé texts, I would be very happy to see them replaced by even better versions when these eventually come along, as they may do in the fullness of time.

The Church is a living organism, and its people grow and develop and change as do languages. What has meaning for one generation may be meaningless for the next. What feeds one generation may be found wanting by the next. While respecting tradition, we *need* to be changed by texts; we need to be formed by them, too. If that is not happening, we have a duty to make it happen. Can we change texts so that they may transform us anew? I believe the answer is Yes.