

Liturgical Translations: The Road Ahead

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It may seem, at first, unnecessary to know the history of the 2011 English translation of the Roman Missal. The text is what is encountered in worship. Do we really need to know the decisions that shaped it, or what went on behind the scenes prior to its publication?

In this case, the answer is yes. This translation has been mired in controversy from the beginning. The words themselves are the tip of the iceberg. Only by reviewing the history can we appreciate the challenge this new translation represents, not only for the language of the liturgy, but for the life of the church—a challenge that continues on the road ahead.

The Background: 1963 to 2000

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, concessions for a modest or experimental use of the vernacular were given at various times. Therefore, when the Council decided in 1963 to permit a more generous use of "the mother tongue" in the liturgy, the English-speaking bishops were ready. Even before the Council was over, they created the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL) to undertake the work of translation. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* gave to the competent territorial authorities the role of overseeing translations (see SC 22, 36, 54, 63, 101). Accordingly, ICEL's constitution made it answerable to the episcopal conferences which made up its membership. ICEL is a mixed commission, consisting of 26 conferences which use English either as a primary or a secondary language.

ICEL's initial translations were published in 1973. They were informed by a Vatican document entitled *Comme le prévoit* (1969) issued to guide translators of liturgical texts. *Comme le prévoit* gave generous scope for "dynamic equivalence" the aim of which is to create the same *effect* in the receptor language, taking cultural context into account.¹ It also allowed use of "formal correspondence" which attempts to recreate the message phrase-by-phrase.²

The 1973 texts were the first attempt at a full translation of the liturgy into English. It was recognized that adjustments would be needed, as the Church reflected on and learned from the experience of the

¹ "The purpose of liturgical translations is to proclaim the message of salvation to believers and to express the prayer of the Church to the Lord... it is necessary to take into account not only the message to be conveyed, but also the speaker, the audience, and the style." (CLP 6–7).

² The concept of equivalence itself is a fraught category. See Vanessa Leonardi, "Equivalence in Translation: Between Myth and Reality," *Translation Journal*, Volume 4, No. 4, October 2000. The term "dynamic equivalence" was coined by linguist Eugene Nida.

vernacular. Beyond this, the very idea of producing a “timeless” vernacular translation was not seen as the goal. After 400 years of the Tridentine era, in which rites were “frozen” and presented to the faithful as unchanging and unchangeable, the Vatican II reformers were concerned to create mechanisms for a “living” liturgy that would develop organically over time and in various parts of the world. Translations were part of this greater understanding of liturgy as a reality which works not only “from the top down,” but also “from the bottom up.” Therefore, it came as no surprise when ICEL undertook a re-translation project beginning in 1982.

The *Sacramentary* translation, a huge undertaking, was completed in 1998. The process included openly shared progress reports and consultations. The bishops’ feedback shaped the final product. They wanted a more thorough rendering of the Latin originals, without sacrifice of native idiom or intelligibility; they wanted a moderate use of gender-inclusive language, which had become a pastoral issue; they also wanted a translation that would not disrupt the people’s prayer. The 1998 text accomplished all these things. It was rich, elegant, beautiful, and more faithful to the Latin. It employed inclusive language to a modest degree. It did not alter the people’s parts, so could be implemented with a minimum of disruption.

The translation was approved by all 26 member conferences of ICEL. A minority of bishops was dissatisfied, however, and took their concerns to Rome. The result was that the *recognitio* was not granted. Then-Cardinal Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and Cardinal Jorge Medina Estévez, then prefect for the Congregation for Divine Worship, were two powerful figures behind the rejection. (Medina is a Chilean with traditionalist sympathies and close ties to the authoritarian regime of Auguste Pinochet.) Not only were the texts rejected, Cardinal Medina demanded fundamental changes in the structure and operations of ICEL itself. ICEL must answer to Rome, not to the English-speaking bishops. The chairman of ICEL, Scottish bishop Maurice Taylor, aware that a principle from *Sacrosanctum Concilium* was at stake, asked for dialogue and sought compromise. His pleas were harshly rejected.³

Liturgiam Authenticam and the Restructuring of ICEL

In 2001, the Congregation published a new instruction on “the right implementation of Sacrosanctum Concilium,” devoted to translation. This instruction, *Liturgiam authenticam*, charged that earlier translations “prevented... a fuller, healthier and more authentic renewal” (LA 6). The proposed corrective was a complete repudiation of *Comme le prévoit*, with its concern for “speaker, audience, and style.” Instead, liturgical texts are treated as sacred artifacts to be preserved. The words of the liturgy, according to the instruction, do not voice the interior dispositions of the faithful but rather express “truths that transcend the limits of time and space” (LA 19).

Liturgiam authenticam presents the liturgy as a supra-cultural entity. Because the Roman Rite itself “transcends the boundaries of any single region” (LA 5) it does not need to be adapted but must, rather,

³ For a detailed account of the events that led up to the restructuring of ICEL, see John Wilkins, “Lost in Translation,” *Commonweal*, November 28, 2005. See also Maurice Taylor, “A Cold Wind from Rome” in *It’s the Eucharist, Thank God*, Decani Books, 2009.

be preserved and transmitted exactly. Accordingly, every Latin word must be accounted for. The syntax and capitalization patterns of Latin originals must be reproduced. The ordering and numbering of notes in the text must not be changed. Arcane or obsolete expressions contribute to a “sacred style” and are to be preserved.

The instruction restricted work on common texts with other Christians, causing the immediate withdrawal of Catholics from all ecumenical translation efforts. It also ruled out gender-inclusive language, and prohibited the use of contemporary style books as guides. In addition, it formalized the new procedures by which Rome controls translations, and may intervene at any time to alter them. Reaction against the document was immediate and widespread.⁴

The English-speaking bishops capitulated on the basic question of their authority over translations. The constitution of ICEL was withdrawn and new statutes put in place in 2003, giving authority to Rome. The distinguished executive director of ICEL, Dr. John Page, who had given years of faithful service, was cruelly treated and dismissed. The former open, consultative procedures were eliminated. One of the harshest critics of the old ICEL, Msgr. Bruce Harbert, was installed as executive director of the new ICEL. A body called Vox Clara, made up of English-speaking bishops, was appointed to monitor the work of ICEL, and report to the Congregation for Divine Worship. It was, in sum, a hostile takeover.

A New Translation Takes Shape

A fresh effort at translating the Missal then began. Not only were the provisions of *Liturgiam authenticam* followed, they were sometimes applied more strictly than required. For example, the instruction allows that some original prayers, composed in the mother tongue, may be added to the Missal. But it was made clear that no original compositions would be approved for the English version of the Missal.

The translation was completed in 2008. It then fell victim to the secrecy of the new process. When the final text appeared in 2010, an estimated 10,000 changes had been introduced by an unknown hand, inserting errors and ambiguities into the carefully literal translation produced under Msgr. Harbert’s direction. This altered text was given to the English-speaking conferences to approve and implement. They obediently did so. Even though some bishops deplored the process and its results privately, few spoke out against it.⁵

Promotion and Protest

Priests, deacons, and their lay co-workers in ministry did their best to put a good face on things, offering numerous workshops, presentations, and resources to explain and praise the translation as a necessary improvement. Many who had doubts or concerns about the translation nonetheless promoted it,

⁴ Peter Jeffrey, Professor of Music History at Princeton University, wrote a four-part critique, later published as a book (*Translating Tradition: A Chant Historian Reads Liturgiam Authenticam*, Liturgical Press, 2006). He called the instruction “the most ignorant statement on liturgy ever issued by a modern Vatican congregation.”

⁵ An outstanding exception was Donald Trautman, bishop of Erie, who continued to bring up concerns about the translation at meetings of the US bishops.

bowing to the inevitable and seeing the workshops and presentations as an opportunity for general liturgical education.

The translation was hailed by its more enthusiastic supporters as a breakthrough, an important step in the “reform of the reform.” The elevated register and syntactic complexity of the new translation were praised as re-sacralizing influences that would restore reverence to the Mass by distancing it from the language of everyday speech.⁶

Popular protest movements, such as *What If We Just Said Wait?* and *Misguided Missal*, sprang up in the United States, to little effect. Appeals to bishops from the Association of Irish Priests and a group in priests in Australia were ignored. Two of ICEL’s highly skilled and generous contributors—an American (Anthony Ruff, OSB) and a Briton (Alan Griffiths)—protested the final alterations to the text and the secrecy surrounding the process. They were made to resign. The new translation was implemented.

The Text

The language of the new translation, overall, is quite different in feel from the version it replaced. Although the changes are not merely stylistic, they do create a certain style, which is, to put it kindly, mannered and complex. Like the Latin originals, the new translation speaks in long sentences. It shows a preference for fustian language and courtly address. Although the richness of the Latin originals comes through, some texts have been rendered puzzling and awkward.⁷ Certain words have even elicited ridicule.⁸

The translation has been roundly panned for its English style. Writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Rupert Shortt observed: “The Latin is of course rendered more exactly, but frequently at the price of losing elegance or pith. Some of the collects are too stilted to lend themselves to public recitation. Reading as though composed by incompetent pedants, they should have been sent back for revision at the earliest chance.”⁹

Word choices, such as “chalice,” have received critique.¹⁰ Theological concerns have been raised about the ecclesiology of the Missal.¹¹ The specific text that has aroused the sharpest *pastoral* concern, however, is the translation of *pro multis*. Earlier translations rendered this Christ died “for all.” The new translation says “for many.” This suggests that some are excluded from the offer of salvation. We know

⁶ Online publications such as *Adoremus*, and blogs such as *New Liturgical Movement*, *Chant Café*, and *What Does the Prayer Really Say*, took this line.

⁷ For examples, see Rita Ferrone, “It Doesn’t Sing: The Trouble with the New Roman Missal,” *Commonweal*, June 30, 2011.

⁸ Comedian Stephen Colbert mocked the word “consubstantial” on his popular television program, *The Colbert Report*: <http://thecolbertreport.cc.com/videos/r8p3nn/yahweh-or-no-way---altered-catholic-mass--papal-seat-belt---offensive-vodka-ad>

⁹ Rupert Shortt, “Tactical Missal,” *The Times Literary Supplement*, 12 December 2012, p. 2.

¹⁰ Rita Ferrone, “Take This Chalice—Please,” *Commonweal* June 30, 1914, cf Barry M. Craig, “Potency Not Preciousness,” *Worship*, Vol. 1, No. 4, July 1, 2007, p. 290-313. See also John R. Donohue, “Cup or Chalice?” *Commonweal*, May 21, 2012.

¹¹ James Dallen, “What Kind of Ecclesiology?” <http://misguidedmissal.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Translation-Ecclesiology-Jim-Dallen-3-6-2012.pdf>

this to be untrue, because of the meaning of scripture and our Catholic theology: the biblical expression “for many,” on which the liturgical text is based, means something vastly inclusive, the multitude. But that expansive sense is lost in translation; in English “for many” is restrictive.¹² Resistance to the literal translation of this text has also arisen among German-speaking and Italian-speaking bishops.

Reception

Despite these and other problems, the people in the pews have accepted the new translation, for the most part, with a willing spirit. One year after the implementation, online polls at *US Catholic* and *The Tablet* in the UK showed widespread dissatisfaction, however a scientific survey carried out in the United States found that 7 out of 10 Catholics agreed with the statement “Overall, I think the new translation of the Mass is a good thing.”¹³ After some initial cacophony or falling silent in the pews, most people have followed along with the new words and adapted.

Andrew Hamilton, SJ, writing in the Australian publication, *Eureka Street*, had this to say:

One year on it is clear that the more dramatic hopes and fears about the new translation were not realised. There were no reports of widespread rebellion in the pews... of mass defection.

But nor has the introduction of the new translation been accompanied by the great spiritual renewal, the fresh understanding of the liturgy and the heightened sensitivity to scriptural echoes that some promised. The reverence and sense of transcendence claimed for the translation seem to have been perceived by few of those exposed to it.¹⁴

A majority of priests in the US continue to be unhappy with the new translation. A 2014 CARA survey showed that 52% of clergy “don’t like” the new texts. Coming after several years of experience, this finding suggests that the problem is more than “getting used to” something new. A full 75% find some of the language “awkward and distracting,” while 50% agree that “the new translation needs urgently to be revised.” Only 27% felt the translation had lived up to expectations.¹⁵

Music

The new translation has occasioned new musical settings and alterations to existing settings. The Church in the United States, which does not have a national hymnal, saw an explosion of new service music. Self-published resources were added to the music available through mainstream publishers.

Michael Silhavey, then director of music for the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis (a diocese of 187 parishes in the American Midwest), found that the new translation produced not more musical cohesion among parishes, but less. More than fifty Mass settings were in use in his diocese alone. This reflects larger trends. Older settings that were adapted to fit the new words remain popular, while a

¹² Toan Joseph Do, “All In?” *Commonweal*, December 19, 2008.

¹³ Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, “Tracking Changes... Accepted?” <http://nineteensixty-four.blogspot.com/2012/11/tracking-changes-accepted.html>

¹⁴ Andrew Hamilton, “Using poor language in the liturgy,” *Eureka Street*, 16 January 2013.

¹⁵ <http://www.praytellig.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/CARA-Missal-Study-April-2014.pdf>

plethora of new settings has received a mixed reception. Overall, the chants in the Missal itself were received with the least enthusiasm.¹⁶

The new service music is sometimes very good, but overall it has been uneven in quality, as reviews of new editions of hymnals attest. Not surprisingly, the abundance of new service music, produced in haste, calls to mind the 1970s. As British composer Paul Inwood observed:

In the 40 years from the 1970s to the end of the 2000s a repertoire was gradually built up. Composers lived with the texts. They learned lessons from writing and using one setting which they applied to the next one, so that (at least in the case of some composers), technique was gradually refined and the music got better and better. ...

Contrast that organic development with what we have experienced in the past 5-6 years. Publishers rushing to fill a complete vacuum, composers doing the same. Capturing the market was the main impulse here. No chance to live with the texts, no chance for composers to learn lessons in what works and what doesn't, and so no refining from one setting to the next. Adaptations of existing settings that will never be as good as the originals. Clunky texts that sometimes even seem designed to be anti-musical.

In the past very few years, publishers have managed to put out as much material as they did in the preceding 40. That is why it feels like the 1970s, because that is as far as composers have had time to develop with these texts. It is no surprise, then, that there is a lot of dross and little of lasting value. I believe that the best wine is still to come...¹⁷

Conclusion

In looking back over how the new English translation of the Roman Missal came into use, some things are clear, but questions remain. First, tension exists between the decentralized model of oversight for translations (described in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*), and the tightly controlled, centralized one (as imposed upon ICEL, and reinforced by *Vox Clara*). How will this tension be resolved? Pope Francis has encouraged bishops to take initiatives on behalf of their local churches, suggesting fresh openness to decentralization. Might the balance change for translations as well?

Second, competing visions of how liturgy and language develop are embodied in the controversy surrounding translation. On the one hand, there is a vision of organic development, from the ground up, discerned and guided by the hierarchy. On the other, there is a vision of translators charged with producing a "sacral vernacular" expressing "timeless truths," detached from changing circumstances on the ground. Which vision is correct? Is it possible to combine values from both perspectives?

Third, other liturgical books are being translated even now, using the same principles that were employed in the Missal translation. Is it wise to continue on this path, when we know that the results

¹⁶ Michael Silhavey, "What Mass Settings Are We Using?" *Pray Tell Blog*, August 11, 2012.

¹⁷ Comment posted on the Pray Tell Blog, December 28, 2014, in the discussion of "Hymnal Review: One in Faith."

have been divisive? Can pastors and pastoral leaders continue to support such efforts in good conscience, without at least trying to address the more obvious problems?

Despite the tensions and questions, the liturgy continues to invite us to “lift up our hearts” in faith and hope and in love for one another. The road ahead on the translation front, however, is anything but clear.