

MICHAEL G. RYAN

# Act in haste, repent at leisure

Catholics in most of the English-speaking world will be introduced to a new translation of the Mass over the next 18 months. However more than 10,000 people from 43 countries have joined in a campaign for the text to be given a test run first. Here, the founder of the campaign makes the case



Last December I wrote an article for *America*, the Jesuits' respected weekly magazine, proposing a "road test" of the controversial new translations of the Roman Missal. Even in my most sanguine moments I never imagined that in one month more than 10,000 people – lay, Religious, and clergy – from all over the world would register their support. And this in perhaps the busiest month of the year, when people might not be expected to be pondering any-

thing so arcane as how best to translate revered old Latin texts.

I take this as a measure of the high importance Catholics attach to the Mass and to the prayers that are at the heart of their lives as believers. I also take it as a clear indication that people want a voice in decisions that touch them directly. Apparently, they've taken to heart the teaching of the Second Vatican Council.

The council, of course, is where all this

started. Forty-six years ago at the closing Mass of the second session of the council, the bishops of the world along with Pope Paul VI promulgated the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. In many ways, it was a modern Magna Carta. It transcended ecclesiastical politics: it was not just the pet project of a party but the overwhelming consensus of the world's bishops, who had voted for it 2,147 to 4. I was present in St Peter's Square that day, an eager and enthu-

## New words for old

The current International Commission on English in the Liturgy translation (1973) is in lighter type

### GREETING

The Lord be with you.  
And also with you.

The Lord be with you.  
And with your spirit.

### CONFITEOR

I have sinned  
through my own fault,  
in my thoughts and in my words,  
in what I have done,  
and in what I have failed to do ...

... I have greatly sinned  
in my thoughts and in my words,  
in what I have done  
and in what I have failed to do,  
through my fault, through my fault,  
through my most grievous fault

### SAMPLE COLLECT: THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

Father,  
you have taught us to overcome  
our sins  
by prayer, fasting, and works of  
mercy.  
When we are discouraged by our  
weakness,  
give us confidence in your love.  
We ask this ...

O God,  
author of every mercy and of all  
goodness,  
you who have pointed to fasting,  
prayer, and almsgiving  
as remedies for sin,  
look graciously on this our humble  
confession,  
that we who are bowed down by  
our conscience  
may always be lifted up by your  
mercy. Through our Lord Jesus  
Christ ...

### NICENE CREED

... of one Being with the Father ...  
... was born of the Virgin Mary ...

... consubstantial with the Father ...  
... was incarnate of the Virgin Mary ...

### FROM EUCHARISTIC PRAYER I

Look with favour on these offerings  
and accept them as once you  
accepted the gifts of your servant  
Abel, the sacrifice of Abraham, our  
father in faith, and the bread and  
wine offered by your priest  
Melchisedech.

Be pleased to look upon them with  
serene and kindly countenance,  
and to accept them, as you were  
pleased to accept the gifts of your  
servant Abel the just, the sacrifice  
of Abraham, our father in faith,  
and the offering of your high  
priest Melchizedek, holy sacrifice,  
a spotless victim.

### FROM EUCHARISTIC PRAYER II

Let your Spirit come upon these  
gifts to make them holy, so that  
they may become for us the body  
and blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Make holy, therefore, these gifts,  
we pray, by sending down your  
Spirit upon them like the dewfall,  
so that they may become for us  
the Body and Blood of our Lord,  
Jesus Christ.

### FROM EUCHARISTIC PRAYER III

Look with favour on your Church's  
offering, and see the Victim whose  
death has reconciled us to  
yourself ...

Look, we pray, upon the oblation  
of your Church, and, recognising  
the sacrificial Victim by whose  
death you willed to reconcile us to  
yourself ...

### ECCE AGNUS DEI

Lord, I am not worthy  
to receive you,  
but only say the word  
and I shall be healed.

Lord, I am not worthy  
that you should enter under my roof,  
but only say the word  
and my soul shall be healed.

siastic North American College seminarian, and I shall never forget it.

Never would it have occurred to me then that I would live to witness what seems like the systematic dismantling of the great vision of the council's decree. But I have. We all have. For evidence, we need look no further than the new translations of the Roman Missal that will soon reach the final stages of approval by the Holy See.

When that approval is given, those of us who enthusiastically embraced the liturgical reforms of the council will be asked to do the same with regard to the new translations. We will be hard put to do so. In fact, we can see the present moment only as an assault on the council and a blow to episcopal collegiality. It was, after all, the council that gave bishops' conferences the authority to produce vernacular translations (SC 36, 40), to be approved, of course, by the Holy See but not, presumably, to be controlled by it.

The council also wisely made provision for times of experimentation and evaluation (SC 40) – something that has been noticeably missing in the present case.

This leads me to pose a question: what if we were to awaken to the fact that these texts are simply not ready to be implemented? What if we just said: "Wait"?

For some, it might smack of insubordination to ask these questions, but I think it's loyalty and plain good sense – loyalty not to any ideological agenda but to the people of God whose prayer the new translations purport to improve, and good sense to anyone who stops to think about what is at stake here.

What is at stake is nothing less than the Church's credibility. The Church could surely gain some credibility by giving us more beautiful translations, but clumsy is not beautiful, and precious is not prayerful. During a recent dinner conversation, the issue of the new translations came up. Two at the table were keenly – and angrily – aware of the impending changes; two were not. When the uninformed heard a few examples ("and with your spirit"; "consubstantial with the Father"; "oblation of our service"; "precious chalice"), the reaction was somewhere between disbelief and indignation.

One person ventured the opinion that with all that the Church has on its plate today – global challenges of justice, peace and the environment; the ongoing clergy abuse scandal; a severe priest shortage; the growing disenchantment of many women; seriously lagging church attendance – it seems ludicrous to push ahead with an agenda that will seem at best trivial and at worst hopelessly out of touch.

And there's more: the chilly reception the people of South Africa have already given the new translations. The bishops misread the directives from Rome and introduced the new translations of the Order of Mass over a year ago. The translations were met almost uniformly with opposition bordering on outrage, and have created serious division in the parishes.

It is not my purpose here to discuss the flawed principles of translation behind this

effort or the weak, inconsistent translations that have resulted. Others have already ably done that. No, my concern is for the step we now face: implementing the new translations. This brings me back to my question: what if we just said, "Wait"?

What if we, the priests, Religious and laypeople of the English-speaking world, were to find our voice and tell our bishops that we want to help them avert a fiasco? What if we told them that we think it unwise to implement these changes until we have been consulted in an adult manner that honours our intelligence and our baptismal birthright? What if we just said, "Wait – not until we are ready for the new translations, but until the translations are ready for us"?

And so I offer the following modest proposals. What if pastors, parish councils, liturgical commissions and presbyteral councils were to appeal to their bishops to slow down and do some "market testing"? What if each conference of bishops were to designate communities where the new translations would receive a trial run: large, multicultural parishes and small parishes, urban and rural, affluent and poor, religious communities and college campuses? What if for the space of

one liturgical year the new translations were road-tested in these communities, with careful catechesis and thorough, honest evaluation? Wouldn't such testing yield valuable information for both the translators and the bishops?

In short, what if collegiality, dialogue and concern for the pastoral needs of the people of God were to be introduced at this late stage? Isn't it possible that we might help the Church we love avert disaster? And isn't it possible that those who have decided that Latinity is more important than lucidity might end up re-thinking their position, and that ungainly, awkward sentences could give way to noble, poetic translations of beautiful old texts that would be truly worthy of our greatest prayer?

So let the dialogue begin. If you would like to add your voice to the more than 10,000 who have already voiced their concern, you can do so by logging on to [www.whatifwejustsaidwait.org](http://www.whatifwejustsaidwait.org).

■ Fr Michael G. Ryan has been pastor of Seattle's St James Cathedral since 1988. This article is adapted from one that appeared in the 14 December 2009 issue of *America*. (See News from Britain and Ireland, page 35.)



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