



ACTA Leeds

THE NEW TRANSLATION OF THE ROMAN MISSAL

ORIGIN OF THE PROBLEM

It is easy to list the many infelicities in the new translation, which have upset so many people. But we understand also how we came to have such a translation. The problems seem to us to derive from a document published by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. The approach taken in the translation of the Roman Missal by the International Commission for English in the Liturgy (ICEL) was demanded by that document: *Liturgiam Authenticam*, an Instruction on the use of vernacular languages in the publication of the books of the Roman Liturgy (28th March, 2001). It has been widely criticised – most seriously in that the mind of the document is far removed from the essence of liturgical renewal, which is the promotion of the participation of all the faithful in every aspect of the liturgy. In defence of ICEL, we are also aware that the Commission was obliged to comply with the very detailed and narrow prescriptions governing the task of translating liturgical texts set down in that Instruction. It was that approach to the task of translating that made ICEL an unwilling victim of fundamentalism.

THE PROBLEM OF THE PROCESS

But we understand also that there has been a procedural problem, which has exacerbated the difficulties. We are aware that ICEL as an agent, not of the Holy See, but of the Bishops' Conferences of the countries in which English is the principal or a major spoken language, submits its translations to those Conferences and amends its proposed translations in the light of comments received from them. We know that a final text is submitted to the Conferences who then must approve it by at least a two-thirds majority of voting members (the canonical *approbatio*), and that it is then submitted to the Congregation in Rome for the canonical *recognitio*. We are also aware that an additional hurdle has been introduced by the Congregation itself in relation to the English-speaking world by its appointment of the Vox Clara committee, the members of which are senior cardinals and archbishops from around the English-speaking world (several of them already retired) who, it seems, have a rather obscure and ill-defined task of guiding the Congregation on the advisability of granting the *recognitio* to new translations. We are further aware that the Congregation has also taken upon itself the responsibility – a long way beyond the *recognitio* – of introducing very many revisions into the translation to the point where it barely resembles that given the *approbatio* by the Bishops' Conferences.

THE RESULTING DIFFICULTIES IN THE TRANSLATED TEXT

Two of the most significant criticisms of the translation may seem trivial, but they are indicative of the fundamentalist approach to the task of translating simply from the Latin language, required by *Liturgiam Authenticam*, without reference to the original languages from which the Latin text derives.

- *Pro multis – for many*: This phrase occurs so centrally, in the very heart of the Eucharistic Prayers, in the words of institution of the Eucharist and the very words of consecration. To translate this biblical phrase simply from the Latin language without reference to the original language (Aramaic) or its derived language (Greek) is in scholarly circles simply risible; biblical scholars do not any longer translate from the Latin Vulgate. The words *for many*, although an accurate translation of the Latin *pro multis*, present a particular and one-sided interpretation of the original Aramaic language, and of the words and intention of Jesus himself, whose will, without any doubt, was for the salvation of *all people*; it was most certainly not restricted merely to *the many*.
- *Credo, Credimus – I believe, we believe*: It cannot possibly be claimed that the Latin version of the profession of faith of the Council of Nicea, originally composed in Greek, is accurate. A Conciliar creed was composed in the plural form (*Credimus – We believe*). Many Bishops' Conferences (not only in the English-speaking world) in the first translation of the Missal texts, approved a translation of the original Greek version of the creed of Nicea: *credimus – we believe*, adopting the position that this best expressed the faith of a community gathered together and worshipping together, although they did accept that a baptismal creed (the Apostles' creed), as the expression of the faith of an individual, is best expressed in the singular: *credo – I believe*.

These instances give the unfortunate impression that we are a Catholic Church no longer, but only a Roman and Latin one.

Excessively long sentences:

One of the directives given in *Liturgiam Authenticam* reads: “While it is permissible to arrange the wording, the syntax and the style in such a way as to prepare a flowing vernacular text suitable to the rhythm of popular prayer, 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.” (art. 20)

Another reads: “The connection between various expressions, manifested by subordinate and relative clauses, the ordering of words, and various forms of parallelism, is to be maintained as completely as possible in a manner appropriate to the vernacular language.” (art. 57 a)

These prescriptions presented great challenges to translators into the English language, and the outcome is seen in texts rendered in extremely long sentences with a multitude of clauses. There are many examples of this, but three are particularly striking:

- Eucharistic Prayer I (the Roman Canon): the single sentence after the Memorial Acclamation beginning *Therefore, O Lord*, is rendered in 13 lines and no less than 70 words.
- Preface VIII of the Sundays in Ordinary Time: the second paragraph is a single sentence of seven lines, 64 words and no less than six subordinate or relative clauses. It is barely comprehensible to the priest proclaiming it and quite incomprehensible to anyone hearing it without being able to follow the printed text of the prayer.
- Preface I of Advent: the second paragraph is a single sentence of nine lines, 64 words and six clauses: three main and three subordinate. In presiding, it is very difficult to sustain its sense for the benefit of those hearing it.

Sentences structured in this manner are far from contemporary English style and usage.

Archaic language:

The use of archaic language runs the risk of expressing to disillusioned Catholics and to an increasingly sceptical society that God belongs to a different age. In some cases it appears that such archaic language has been chosen deliberately and quite unnecessarily. Some prime examples of this are:

- In the Nicene creed “consubstantial”: in the Oxford dictionaries the word is defined as meaning “of the same substance or essence”; “of one Being...with the Father” really did not need to be changed, as its meaning was quite clear; if the word “substance” is so important, then “one in substance..” would have been more understandable and certainly preferable. It is a word that has no current usage outside Christian theology.
- In the Eucharistic Prayers and in other contexts “oblation”: similarly, this is a word without usage outside Christian theology. It has a clear meaning - “offering”, which is a word in very common usage and also used many times in the translation anyway.

The use of archaic language, particularly when it is a reversion away from something more modern, is interpreted by many – especially young people – as a clear message that God and/or the Church has nothing meaningful to say to them today. This is not to say that the language which the Church uses for worship should be “dumbed down”, but that it should reflect how we actually speak and should be language to which we can lend our minds and hearts with full joy and vigour. Language in a heightened style that is clear and expressed in contemporary usage is much preferable to language that is archaic and – to many – artificial.

Clumsy phraseology:

Attempts to render every Latin word with its equivalent in English leads to some quite ugly phraseology. There are many examples of this, but these samples illustrate the point:

- One of the Advent Prayers after Communion, used seven times, begins with the line: “Replenished by the food of spiritual nourishment...”
- One of the Prayers over the People: “Hold out to your faithful people, Lord, the right hand of heavenly assistance...”
- The Collect for Wednesday of Advent week 1: “...and merit to receive heavenly nourishment from his hands”.

They appear to be a mangled “Englishing” of the Latin with the possible purpose of heightening a sense of the sacred. They result in arcane “flowerisms” which, rather than drawing participants into the mysteries we celebrate, alienate them from them.

Exclusive language:

The use of language that is not inclusive many, especially women, see as a studied insult to women and is deeply offensive to all, of both genders, who seek greater justice for women in the Church. Although the first paragraph of Eucharistic Prayer IV, the most glaring example of the issue, is a slight improvement on the previous translation, it still retains the exclusive and male rendering of the Latin “homo, hominis”, the first meaning of which is “human”, as opposed to beasts, or in its plural form “people” inclusive of both genders. [The Latin word “vir, viri” refers to a man or a male person,

just as “mulier, mulieris” refers to a woman or a female person. These are not the words used in this context.]

The language of all liturgical texts must enhance the conscious participation of *everyone* present. If that language tends to alienate some members of the participating congregation, making them feel in some way excluded from the celebration, then that is highly undesirable, the wording undoubtedly ill-chosen and requiring amendment. It offends against the very nature of liturgical renewal – the development of the participation of everyone present at a celebration. This teaching of the Council makes this criterion so important that it overrides all others, even the insistence upon an accurate translation of the Latin. The one exception would be in the rare case where the use of inclusive language might result in compromising the integrity of revealed truth.

Symbolic language:

As Catholics we are taught to understand and respond to symbolism. But much of the symbolism within the new translation is negative and unhelpful. For example:

- The return to dualism: e.g. “and with your spirit” instead of “and also with you”; e.g. “my soul will be healed” in place of “I shall be healed”.
- Our relationship with God: Language which is cold and formal does not convey the abiding love of God. Some words and phrases used seem to belong more to a relationship of cringing subservience before God: excessive use of the words “gracious” and “graciously”. The words in the introduction to the Lord's prayer: “we dare to say” does not mean the same as “we have the courage to say” or “Let us pray with confidence...”.
- Older members of our congregations remember the words “under my roof” from their youth, but this wording is quite alien to many younger people.

Ecumenical regression:

In the English-speaking world we have enjoyed hitherto a most welcome uniformity in the use of agreed translations of liturgical texts in common use among many other Churches and ecclesial communities as well as the Catholic Church. It is regrettable that the restrictions of *Liturgiam Authenticam* (cf. n. 91) now make such ecumenical co-operation extremely difficult if not impossible for the future.

A WAY FORWARD

The great axioms of liturgical renewal are found, of course, in the Liturgy Constitution of the Council, the 50th anniversary of the publication of which we are celebrating just now. The **purpose** of renewal is in the first place (a) to **edify** the faithful, building them up into a holy temple of the Lord to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ, but it is also (b) to **motivate** the faithful to apostolic activity in every way for the building of the reign of God in the world (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 2). The **nature** of liturgical renewal is to be understood as the continuing development to the fullest degree possible of the participation of all present whenever the liturgy is celebrated. The two **means** to achieve those axioms are (a) **liturgical formation** of the faithful and (b) the **reforms** of our liturgy to ensure that the purpose of renewal and the nature of it can be achieved.

Every single reform of our liturgy must strive to fulfil those axioms, and the translation of our liturgical texts is just one amongst many of those reforms. If the reformed language we use in our liturgy is not edifying and motivating the faithful and is failing to develop their participation in it, it is not a genuine reform. We must look in another direction to find a language for our liturgical texts that does so.

We already have two complete translations of the *Missale Romanum*, approved in the usual canonical way by all the bishops conferences of the countries where English is the major spoken language. (1) The first achieved that status, after more than twenty years of research and development, in the year 2000. It was rejected by the Vatican because it did not meet the criteria set down in *Liturgiam Authenticam*, which was published only in 2001 - the year after the completion of all the work. (2) The second to achieve that status, which was completed in accord with all the narrow directives of *Liturgiam Authenticam* and again given the canonical approval by the same bishops conferences, suffered wholesale revisions at the hands of the Roman Congregation, as described above, without any reference to the bishops conferences. Surely one or the other of those two translations would better serve the demands of liturgical renewal than the very inadequate translation that has been imposed upon us.

One of our most distinguished English liturgists was Mgr James D Crichton, who published a seminal book *The Once and The Future Liturgy* (Dublin, Veritas, 1977). In it he addressed the matter of the language of our liturgy, which gave us a much more positive vision than that given to us by *Liturgiam Authenticam*:

“Sooner or later we shall be faced with the need to create our own liturgical language, a language that will express the faith, the religious sentiments, the mentality of English-speaking Christians. It will have to be a language that emerges from our way of thinking and doing things, as did the Latin that was the language of the Roman rite for sixteen hundred years.” (p. 28)

The fact that there are serious concerns and objections to the new translation of the *Missale Romanum* should not be interpreted as being simply resistant or averse to change. Indeed, it was recognized from the outset that one potentially beneficial feature of introducing the vernacular was that it would require more regular review in order to reflect the very best of the rich and living language that we speak.

Sadly, on account of *Liturgiam Authenticam* and the unwarranted interference in the approval process by the Vatican Congregation, this translation is regressive rather than progressive and, whilst the words may be English, the language is most certainly not.

St Thomas Aquinas wrote that “the translator's task is to keep the meaning while changing the turn of speech. A word-for-word version is unsuitable when putting Latin into the vulgar tongue.” (Cf. Opusc. xxvii, *Contra Errores Graecorum*, Introduction)

Because English is the nearest thing the world has to a universal language, it is particularly concerning that the language of this translation is largely artificial, and serves neither the purpose nor the nature of liturgical renewal.

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February 2014