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Latin? English? What's the fuss? Why a New Translation

“If I translate word by word, it sounds absurd, if I am forced to change something in the word order or style, I seem to have stopped being a translator.” (St. Jerome (+420), *Interpret. Chron. Euseb. Pamph.*, Praef.: PL. 27, 35)

St. Jerome is the patron saint for scripture scholars and Bible translators. He is most famous for his translation of the Old and New Testaments from Hebrew and Greek into Latin, commonly called the Vulgate (from the Latin word “vulgare” meaning to make accessible or common). His quotation above succinctly captures the frustration everyone has felt who attempts to move from one language to another. It is never simple, and it always involves making choices that can feel more like betrayal than translation. Many people “assume there is a one-to-one correspondence between words in one language and their mates in another. But a simple glance at any dictionary shows the multiple definitions that exist for any one word within one language.” (Quote from an unpublished article by Fr. Paul Turner) It is important to recall that our liturgy is not an original creation of our own making, but has been handed down to us—and in translation at that.

Even before the Second Vatican Council closed, when it became apparent that at least some vernacular would be permitted in the liturgy, English-speaking bishops from various countries began discussing ways to cooperate on a way to produce a common English translation for the whole English-speaking, Catholic world. This was, in part, at the prompting of the Council itself. In the “Constitution on the Liturgy” #36.3, the Council Fathers had recommended that, “whenever it seems to be called for, this authority [an Episcopal Conference, e.g. of the United States] is to consult with bishops of neighboring regions which have the same language.” The result of these early discussions led to the formation of the “International Commission on English in the Liturgy” (ICEL) on 17 October 1963. Rome established and approved for its governance a constitution composed of 11 member conferences and 15 associate member conferences.

The first changes to the order of the Mass, following upon the recommendations of the Bishops at the Second Vatican Council, were promulgated by the Sacred Congregation of Rites on 25 January 1965. The parts of the Mass that pertained to the people were translated by ICEL. The private prayers of the priest and the Eucharistic Prayer were kept in Latin, and the whole text, with the aforementioned parts in English, was published the following year (1966). This order of the Mass was then thoroughly revised into the shape which is familiar to us today, and it was promulgated in 1969 (in Latin). ICEL began the work of translation immediately, and a full English translation was published in 1974—by which time permission had been granted for the celebration of the entire Mass in English. In 1975, Rome promulgated a revised edition of the *Missale Romanum* (“Roman Missal,” the book containing all the prayers and rubrics necessary for the Mass). This was necessary for a variety of reasons. The office of subdeacon had been

suppressed in 1973, and several prayer texts for specific celebrations had been added. The translation of this second edition of the *Missale* appeared in 1985, the version still in use today.

From the beginning, this work of translation was understood to be a new exercise in the history of the Church—at least on such a scale. It was taken for granted that there would be a learning curve, and that the translations would require revision. There had been considerable pressure to make them available as soon as possible. Already in 1983, ICEL began a less rushed process of translation, drawing on the experiences of previous years and consulting broadly with experts in various fields: linguistics, poetry, music, grammar and, of course, spirituality and liturgy. Gradually, a revised translation was approved by all the Episcopal Conferences of ICEL and sent to Rome for approval in 1998. Approval was never given.

For some time, concerns had been growing in Rome over the style of translation being used. For principles of translation, ICEL used the 1969 instruction, *Comme le prévoit*, which advocated a rule of translation known as “Dynamic Equivalence.” According to this theory, the concern is to translate concepts more than words. The concept or sense of a phrase must be translated, rather than the exact words. An example is given here from the Opening Prayer for the First Sunday of Lent. The current translation uses the principle of Dynamic Equivalence and the proposed new translation uses the principle of Formal Equivalence—a more literal rendering of the Latin original:

Current Translation

Father, through our observance of Lent, help us to understand the meaning of your Son’s death and resurrection, and teach us to reflect it in our lives.

Proposed New Translation

Grant us, almighty God, through our yearly exercises in the holy Season of Lent, to grow in understanding of the riches hidden in Christ and to pursue their effects by a worthy way of life.

The original prayers of the Church use a wide variety of titles for the divine: God, Lord, almighty God, eternal Lord, etc., etc. Using the principle of dynamic equivalence, ICEL chose to translate most of these titles with the English “Father.” The thought was that all of these titles refer to the same divinity and that “Father” conveys more warmth than “almighty God.” Next, “our observance of Lent” *basically* means the same thing as “our yearly exercise in the holy Season of Lent,” but it seems clear that, though the substance was maintained and a certain crispness garnered, some depth and richness were lost. Lastly, the “riches hidden in Christ” does refer to his “death and resurrection,” but again, poetry was sacrificed.

ICEL had also been experimenting with the creation of original English texts. Some language theories doubt whether it is ever possible to translate accurately from one language to another, and the alternative in such a case would be free composition in the genius of the native language. In May 2001, the Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments promulgated a new document on translation theory entitled

Liturgiam authenticam (the authentic Liturgy). This instruction reserved the creation of new liturgical compositions to the Holy See alone. It also provided principles for translation that differed significantly from the previous instruction, *Comme le prévoit*. Note, for example, the following excerpt from *Liturgiam authenticam*:

The translation of the liturgical texts of the Roman Liturgy is not so much a work of creative innovation as it is of rendering the liturgical texts faithfully and accurately into the vernacular language. 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. Any adaptations to the characteristics or the nature of the various vernacular languages is to be sober and discreet.” (#20)

A number of factors led to the promulgation of *Liturgiam authenticam*. By 2001, the Roman Rite had over 35 years of experience in using a vernacular liturgy. In 2000, the Roman Rite had promulgated a revised “General Instruction of the Roman Missal” and a revision of the Roman Missal itself was coming (published in 2002).

The question often arises, why does it take so long to get a revised English translation? Every other major European language has already undergone revisions of its initial translations in light of decades of experience. In part, the reason for this discrepancy was that the English translation was not for only one country, but for every English speaking country in the Catholic world. In the Spanish speaking world, on the other hand, Spain, Argentina, Mexico, Chile, etc., all use their own Spanish translation that differ from one another. If it were only up to the United States, it would be much easier, but that is not the case. The English language translation affects the whole English speaking world. And actually, the English translation affects the non-English world as well. In some countries, there is no one who knows Latin, and so they actually translate from English. This raises the importance of an English translation above other vernacular translations. This can be seen from a letter written on 26 October, 1999 by the prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments, Jorge Cardinal Medina Estevez, to Bishop Maurice Taylor of Galloway, Scotland, head of ICEL at that time. In that letter the prefect said:

Problems with the English language translations of the liturgical texts assume a particular gravity in proportion to the prominence of the English language in the international community. Even while it remains essential that liturgical translations be made directly from the original texts into the various modern vernacular languages, the impact which the English language translation is likely to exert on certain other versions is an observed and unavoidable fact, which in turn must be said to place a significant responsibility on those charged with the translations into English.

The third edition of the *Missale Romanum*, which was published in 2002, included various modifications due, in part, to a revised Code of Canon Law and the publication of other liturgical books (e.g. the Ceremonial of Bishops). There were also new Mass formulas for recently canonized saints, as well as new prayers for the Commons of Martyrs and the Blessed Virgin Mary.

We can say, then, that there are three major reasons for the new translation currently underway:

first, because the current translation was always considered provisional;
second, because the Church has provided significantly revised principles of translation;
and third, because of the publication of the third edition of the *Missale Romanum*.

It has never been a matter of whether to do a new translation, but rather when...and how. The Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, has repeatedly encouraged the English speaking bishops to speed the new translation along as quickly as possible. The Holy Father understands the language of the liturgy to be an essential dimension of the renewal of the liturgy, and one of the most important means of inculturating the Roman Rite into the genius of various peoples. In the next article, I will discuss the principles and the process for making a new translation.