

Latin? English? What's the fuss?  
The Principles and Process for the New Translation

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On 15 September 2003, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments formally established ICEL (the International Commission for English in the Liturgy) as a mixed commission in accordance with the Holy See's Instruction, *Liturgiam authenticam*, published in May 2001, which significantly revised the principles then in use for translation. One of the aims in this restructuring of ICEL was to establish greater episcopal oversight in the process of translation. The Congregation also created in the spring of 2002 a consultative body of bishops and experts called *Vox Clara* ("A Clear Voice"). Since the Congregation had now reserved the approval of translations to itself, it was deemed necessary to form a team of bishops and experts who could act as consultants to the Congregation and facilitate their cooperation with the various English speaking Episcopal Conferences.

The process of achieving an approved English translation for the liturgy is extraordinarily involved. Indeed, I would venture to say that never in the history of the world has a set of texts received so much consultation, review, and revision. ICEL has divided the *Missale Romanum* into twelve sections.

- 1) The work begins with the base translators. These are experts whom ICEL employs to make the initial translation from Latin to English.
- 2) Their translations are then studied by nine review teams.
- 3) Next, the texts are sent to the Roman Missal Editorial Committee (RMEC), which chiefly serves an editorial purpose. RMEC, which is a committee of ICEL, seeks to bring a unified style and consistency of vocabulary to prayers that have been composed and reviewed by various groups.
- 4) From RMEC, the texts go to the ICEL secretariat, which reviews and checks them for typographical or other mistakes.
- 5) The secretariat then brings them before the ICEL commission, which consists of eleven bishops—one from each of the eleven member conferences. Others usually present at these meetings include three members from the ICEL secretariat in Washington, DC, the chair of RMEC, and a few other experts and assistants. They review and emend each text, with only the eleven bishop members having voting rights.
- 6) Once a given section of the *Missale* is approved by the ICEL commission, then it is sent to each of the eleven Episcopal Conferences who have full membership. At this point, the particular section of the *Missale* is called a "green book" because of the color of its binder. The secretariat for each Episcopal Conference suggests revisions and solicits suggestions from every bishop in the Conference (the US Conference of Catholic Bishops has 273 active bishops in its membership).
- 7) Suggestions from each of the Episcopal Conferences are then sent back to the ICEL secretariat.

- 8) Along this process, the proposed translations are also sent to the Congregation in Rome for suggestions and feedback from *Vox Clara*. There is often a regular exchange back and forth between ICEL and *Vox Clara*.
- 9) ICEL reviews the suggestions from the Episcopal Conferences (and from *Vox Clara*), and makes further revisions. The ICEL membership then votes to approve the translation, now called the “gray book” based on the color of its new binder.
- 10) The “gray book” is then sent back to each Episcopal Conference who votes to accept or reject it. If they accept the gray book, it then goes to Rome for final approval by the Congregation and the Holy Father. Each Episcopal Conference can also request adaptations in the gray book version, which Rome would approve only for that particular Conference.
- 11) Finally, the Holy See provides (hopefully!) the “recognition” of the text, which then may be published and put to use.

As you can see, the process is long and involved! There can be many bumps and plenty of disagreements along the way, but it is hoped that with so many competent persons working together, the end result—even though it may be by “committee”—will be worthy of Divine Worship in the liturgy.

Here is the current status of the translation project: ICEL has completed all the green books, and most of the gray books. The US Bishop’s Conference is scheduled to vote on the last gray book in November 2009. If all the votes go well between now and then, the final section will be sent to Rome by the end of 2009. As soon as Rome gives final “recognition” the English language “Roman Missal” will be ready for publication and use in the dioceses of the United States, possibly by the end of 2010.

Finally I offer some of the stylistic differences that will be seen in the new translation when it is available for use in the liturgy.

*Liturgiam authenticam* provides its main principles for translation in paragraph 57:

That notable feature of the Roman Rite, namely its straightforward, concise and compact manner of expression, is to be maintained insofar as possible in the translation. Furthermore, the same manner of rendering a given expression is to be maintained throughout the translation, insofar as feasible. These principles are to be observed:

- a) 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.
- b) In the translation of terms contained in the original text, the same person, number, and gender are to be maintained insofar as possible.

c) The theological significance of words expressing causality, purpose or consequence (such as *ut, ideo, enim, and quia*) is to be maintained, though different languages may employ varying means for doing so.

d) The principles set forth... in n. 51, regarding variety of vocabulary, are to be observed also in the variety of syntax and style (for example, in the location within the Collect of the vocative addressed to God).

The US bishops' Committee for Divine Worship makes the following comment with regard to the challenges presented by these principles of translation:

The application of this paragraph of *Liturgiam authenticam* has made some extraordinary demands on translators, especially with reference to 57a. The use of extended subordination is a method to order all the elements of a sentence in such a way as to express a dependence on God as the source of all saving action. The very syntax of the sentence indicates what is secondary or subordinate. In addition, the meaning of the prayer is communicated through the use of a sequence of [verb] tenses that links all action solely to that of the main clause.

When such a sentence is broken up, in English, into many shorter sentences there comes about a cumulative loss of meaning between those ideas which are secondary and their subordination to a principal action. In general, the translators have remained faithful to the principle, but there have been some prayers that were so extensively long that they needed to be broken into two sentences.

An example of the difference this principle of translation demands can be seen in the following comparison of the current translation of the Prayer Over the Offerings for the Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time and the proposed new translation:

Current Translation

A Suggested Early Draft

Lord God, in this bread and wine  
you give us food for body and spirit.  
May the eucharist renew our  
strength and bring us health of mind  
and body.

O God, who in the gifts presented here  
nourish with food and renew with Sacrament  
the twofold nature of the human race,  
grant, we pray, that their sustenance  
may not fail us in body or in mind.

The present English translation breaks up a long Latin sentence into two (as here, or sometimes even three independent clauses). This has made the content easier to grasp, but has resulted in the loss of some meaning. It has also caused a style of prayer in which the Church makes statements to God about what God should already know, and the link between the address of the divinity and the request of the prayer is broken. We end up telling God what he does, and then separately asking him for something, whereas in the proposed translation, we are asking God for something because we recognize what he has already done for us. The longer sentence does make it more tricky both to proclaim and to hear, but the potential benefits seem well worth it. Other modern languages do this already and have adapted to this style without any trouble. The new translation will,

therefore, also better harmonize with the closer translations of other languages, thus creating a more unified voice throughout the Catholic world.

Another change will be the use of a broader vocabulary. The current translation employs a rather narrow range of words to translate a considerably larger lexicon in the Latin original. In the new translation, then, a greater English vocabulary will not only be more faithful to the Latin but also enrich the sounds, content and images of the English translation. There are many images in the Latin original that were never used in the current translation. One example is the image of dewfall used for the action of the Holy Spirit in the second Eucharistic Prayer. In the current translation, this imagery was simply omitted.

There is a need to broaden and deepen the liturgical/theological lexicon that we can draw upon in the English language. This will enable the liturgical books to be more consistent and uniform not only in the prayers, but also for the rubrics. Bishop Arthur Serratelli of Paterson, NJ, chairman of the US Bishops Committee for Divine Worship, has written that the proposed translations “are densely theological. They respect the rich vocabulary of the Roman Rite. They carefully avoid the overuse of certain phrases and words.” (from a column which appeared in the June 19, 2008 edition of *The Beacon*, Bishop Serratelli’s diocesan newspaper)

The style of the prayer texts will be more formal than what we currently hear. Another description for this is that the new translations use a “higher linguistic register.” The texts portray a more submissive stance of humanity in relation to the divine power. They stress God’s mercy and our unworthiness. This is not at all to say that they promote groveling, a grim countenance, or worthlessness. To the contrary! The great truth of our unworthiness, when combined with God’s mercy to us in Christ, creates not despondency but delight! There is joy in the fact that God “has looked with favor on my lowliness, and from now on, all people will call me blessed!” (from Mary’s declaration to Elizabeth in Lk. 1:48).

The word order of the new translations consciously follows the word order of the Latin as much as possible. This hinders the flow of English style a bit, but it adds a theological nuance that is important.

Latin orations, especially Post-Communions, tend to conclude strongly with a teleological or eschatological point. The new translations in English follow the sequence of these Latin prayers in order to end on a strong note...Why should we strip the English translation of the distinctive theological emphases of the Latin text? A slightly non-colloquial word order can lead the listener to a greater attention to the point of the prayer.” (from Bishop Serratelli’s diocesan column)

For the sake of clarity, “teleological” and “eschatological” both refer to the final goal of life, the end time or heaven. Many of the Latin prayers end in the key of heaven—which is where every good prayer should take us! A good illustration of how this desire for a strong ending can make the English less fluid, however, is found in the proposed new translation for the Prayer after Communion for Wednesday of Holy Week. Bishop

Galeone of St. Augustine, Florida, proposed an alternative translation which rendered the English more fluid, but sacrificed the eschatological ending (i.e. ending with a reference to the goal of heaven).

*Proposed New Translation*

Fill our minds, almighty God,  
with sure confidence that,  
through your Son's Death in time,  
to which awesome mysteries bear witness,  
you have given us perpetual life.

*Bp. Galeone's Suggested Revision*

Almighty God,  
fill our minds with [the] sure confidence  
that you have given us perpetual life  
through your Son's Death in time,  
to which [these] awesome mysteries bear  
witness.

There is a definite advantage to ending the prayer with the reference to perpetual life, but to do so will require the Priest-Celebrant to proclaim the prayer with just the right cadence and inflection. It will require mindfulness on the part of the priest.

Lastly, there has been a growing desire in recent years for the Mass prayers to be sung. Good singing can add a note of both solemnity and joy to a celebration. In order to facilitate this, ICEL has tried to be mindful of the rhythm and singability of the texts. It has also created a special committee which is working to write chants for these new liturgical texts.

When the revised prayers finally arrive, there will be new words to hear, new syntaxes to comprehend and a new style to absorb. This will require some effort on the part of the priest who proclaims, as well as on the part of the assembly who hears. One of the recommendations that have been continually stressed by the US bishops is the need for the prayers to be written in sense lines to facilitate their proper proclamation by the priest.

The new translations are a great improvement in many ways over the current translation. Hopefully, we can experience a certain excitement that we will soon be proclaiming and hearing not something that was created in the 1970s and early 1980s, but rather something that is much closer to what the Church has prayed for centuries, and which Catholics are praying in other languages around the world!

In the next article, I will treat specific examples of the changes that will be found in the upcoming liturgical translations.