

The process of translation

In December 1963, the “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy” was promulgated. Its Article 14 resonates forever in our Catholic ears:

“Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that fully conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy. ... In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy, this full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else; for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit. ... ”

Liturgical books were to be revised and translations for the Latin text into the vernacular, “the mother tongue,” were to begin. Even before the Second Vatican Council closed, English-speaking bishops from various countries began discussing ways to produce a common English translation so that the whole English-speaking Catholic world could begin to pray in the vernacular, which led to the formation of the “International Commission on English in the Liturgy” (ICEL) in 1963. It assembled representatives from the 11 English-speaking bishops’ conferences, ranging from England to South Africa to the Philippines, as well as bishops from 15 other countries where the Mass is often celebrated in English.

In 1965 they began work on the parts of the Mass. While interim translations for some parts were quickly approved for use, the first full English translation was not completed until 1974. A second edition, still in use today, was issued in 1985. The 20-year work of these first translators deserves recognition and respect, for they followed the theoretical and practical principles of the 1969 Vatican instruction, “*Comme le prévoit*,” advocating a rule of translation known as “Dynamic Equivalence.” The primary concern of that theory is to translate concepts rather than words. The purpose is to make texts accessible and the meaning comprehensible to the hearer. In 2001, Rome adopted “*Liturgiam authenticam*,” a different guiding principle of translation known as “Formal Correspondence” that calls for a more exact rendering of the Latin original.

In November 1965, Pope Paul VI addressed translators of liturgical texts and recognized the “exalted duty and weighty responsibilities of those who translate

liturgical texts,” using the words of St. Jerome: “If I translate word by word, it sounds absurd; if I am forced to change something in the work order or style, I seem to have stopped being a translator.”

The patron saint of Scripture scholars and translators, St. Jerome succinctly captures the frustration any translator has felt. Translation is an art, not an exact science; it is never simple and it always involves making choices that can sometimes feel more like betrayal than translation. Liturgist Father Paul Turner writes that many people “assume there is a one-to-one correspondence between words in one language and their mates in another, but a simple glance in any dictionary shows the multiple definitions that exist for any one word within one language.”

As one who has worked as a French interpreter and translator for many years, I wholeheartedly agree.

The translation of the Bible is an excellent example of the complexity of translation and the issues translators must face: picking the right words, translating figurative language, dealing with the idiosyncrasies of Greek grammar, bridging cultural gaps between then and now, accurately translating gender, making correct text-critical decisions, and translating for audiences with varying reading levels and vocabularies. The Revised English Bible, Today’s English Version and the well-respected New Jerusalem Bible are examples of “dynamic equivalence,” whereas the New Revised Standard Version, the New International Version, and the Revised New American Bible (RNAB) are examples of “formal correspondence.” While American Catholics use the RNAB at liturgy, none of these is “wrong” and all of them have value.

The most convincing argument for the new translation of the Roman Missal, to be introduced in November 2011, is that English will be used as the source text for 250 other languages. In these language groups, they cannot afford to train Latin scholars who could render the Latin texts into their own language. However, there usually are people who are proficient enough to do so from English. The source text, then, must be exact and culturally “neutral,” since it will be used globally.

The first paragraph of “Comme le Prévoit” stated, “Above all, after sufficient experiment and passage of time, all translations will need review.” Time has passed,

the translations of Mass texts and prayers have been reviewed, and a new English Roman Missal is in the publication stage. And who knows what will happen 30 years from now?

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