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The new Mass translation introduced in 2010 has few admirers. Reports that Pope Francis has established a commission to revisit the controversial document that inspired it have raised expectations of a more intelligible and prayerful missal



When I was ordained to the priestly ministry, I could carry on conversations in Latin, compose Latin poetry, and had won the medal in Latin at the University of Melbourne. But it was a huge relief when the change to the vernacular came and I could celebrate Mass in the language of the people. Hearing and using their own language encouraged what the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) wanted – full and active participation in the liturgy by all the faithful.

The change came when I was living in Germany. Translations from the Latin texts into good, vernacular German were prepared by liturgical experts and approved by the bishops. It was a great joy to proclaim the liturgy with people in language that they found intelligible and religiously engaging. They could pray easily in the proper German of their everyday life.

Meanwhile, the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (Icel) had, by 1972, prepared a translation of the new Latin Missal, which had been issued by Pope Paul VI in 1970. This new English missal was a workable and clear translation. But revisions were needed, especially for the opening prayers or collects. From 1981, Icel set itself to revisit this missal.

Icel worked in the light of guidelines on translation provided by the Vatican and published in 1969 in six languages. The document was known by the opening words of the French version, *Comme le prévoit*. It identified the issues and offered advice to those translating the new liturgical texts into vernacular or local languages. *Comme le prévoit* did not interfere with the situation in which conferences of bishops appointed commissions for their different languages. Icel and the other

commissions were to report to the respective episcopal conferences.

Comme le prévoit followed St Jerome and all the great translators of Christian history by setting its face against word-for-word translations. A word-for-word method forgets what St Thomas Aquinas wrote in a letter to Pope Urban IV: “It is the task of the good translator to preserve the meaning but to adapt the mode of expression, so that it is in harmony with the idiom of the language into which he is translating.” Aquinas rejected translating word for word and upheld a “meaning-for-meaning” approach: “When anything expressed in one language is translated merely word for word into another, it will be no surprise if perplexity concerning the meaning of the original sometimes occurs.”

In *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford University Press, 1975), George Steiner summed up the task of translation as producing “a faithful but autonomous restatement”. He explained: “The translator closely reproduces the original, but composes a text that is natural to his own tongue, which can stand on its own.”

Comme le prévoit expected translators to keep in mind the “literary form proper” to the receptor language – what Jerome called the language’s “style” and Aquinas its “idiom”. This means, as the guidelines recognised, that “adaptation”, “change” and even “paraphrasing” may sometimes be necessary, if the meaning of the original ideas is to be conveyed. Over and over again Comme le prévoit urged the cause of intelligibility: “Translations must be faithful to the art of communication in all its aspects.” The “intelligibility of prayers when said aloud” may at times have to take “precedence” over mere “verbal fidelity”. In short, “liturgical texts should normally be intelligible to all, even to the less well educated”.

Following these and other guidelines from Comme le prévoit, Icel carefully revised the 1972 missal and submitted the new texts to the 11 English-speaking conferences. All accepted the new 1998 missal and it was referred to the Vatican for confirmation. What happened next is well known. Without any discussion, Cardinal Jorge Medina Estévez, then prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, rejected this missal and seized control of Icel, in effect usurping the collegial authority of the bishops’ conferences.

English-speaking Catholics lost a gem in the 1998 missal. Its language comes across as intelligible and prayerful English that is suitable for today. It does not indulge long, breathless sentences that sound more like Cicero’s Latin than English. It avoids the obsequious language that belongs to the ancient courts of Rome and Byzantium. It is easy to proclaim and readily understandable. It manages to preserve the meaning of the original Latin, while being in harmony with the English idiom and usage of today.

For the most part, the 1998 missal needed to revise only slightly the 1972 missal. The collects or opening prayers called, however, for many changes. The new collect for Mass on Christmas Day illustrates such improvements: “O God, you wonderfully created human nature and even more wonderfully restored its dignity. Give us the grace to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.” This captures excellently the theology of the Latin collect and puts it into understandable English.

The 1998 missal followed what Comme le prévoit had proposed by also including alternative prayers.

In particular, the alternative opening prayers focus on themes in the prescribed readings for Sundays. When the Gospel presents the beatitudes in Matthew's version, we have the following collect: "O God, teach us the hidden wisdom of the gospel, so that we may hunger and thirst for holiness and work tirelessly for peace, and be counted among those who seek first the blessedness of your kingdom." The collects in the 1998 missal, published by Canterbury Press as *Opening Prayers*, are landmark compositions in the history of English-speaking liturgy.

Having rejected the 1998 missal, the Vatican supervised the creation of a new Icel, established the Vox Clara Committee (with Cardinal George Pell as president) to oversee the production of liturgical texts in English, and produced new guidelines for translators, *Liturgiam Authenticam* (L.A.) ("Authentic Liturgy"). In an authoritative and careful critique, *Translating Tradition: A Chant Historian Reads Liturgiam Authenticam* (Liturgical Press, 2005), Professor Peter Jeffery of Princeton University described L.A. as "the most ignorant statement on liturgy ever issued by a modern Vatican congregation". Those who wrote it were "seriously misinformed" and made many "misstatements about the Roman liturgical tradition". They falsely claimed, for instance, that the Latin Church shared a uniform tradition of starting the Creed with "I believe", as if "we believe" were merely an Eastern tradition.

Those who produced the 2010 missal followed the prescriptions of L.A. about using a "sacred vernacular" that differs from ordinary speech and could even sound "obsolete". They repeatedly prefer the word "charity" over "love", "compunction" over "repentance", "laud" over "praise", "supplication" over "prayer", and "wondrous" over "wonderful". In the Creed, "consubstantial" (straight out of Latin) has replaced the genial "of one being". "Consubstantial", like "prevenient" grace, used for the feast of the Immaculate Conception, belongs to traditional theological discourse, not to the liturgy we celebrate together.

Encouraged by L.A., the 2010 missal indulges unctuous language derived from ancient Byzantium and Rome. It is all very different from what Jesus taught about addressing God in a childlike and straightforward fashion.

Perhaps the most regrettable example of the 2010 missal applying the word-for-word principle inculcated by L.A., rather than the meaning-for-meaning method of Aquinas, comes when it reverts to "for many" at the consecration of the wine. This suggests that Jesus shed his blood only for many people and not "for all". Add, too, that the 2010 missal frequently moves close to the ancient Pelagian heresy by implying that through our own efforts we can "merit" salvation. Many priests find it distressing to be asked to espouse a "do-it-yourself" redemption.

Pope Francis has just appointed a commission to revisit L.A. This could be an opportunity for a return to the pastoral good sense of *Comme le prévoit*, opening the way to finally introducing the 1998 missal. It needs a few additions, such as the memorials of recently canonised saints, but it would be a blessing for the English-speaking churches, and it is ready and waiting in the wings.

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