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## How the Latin Liturgy gets put into English

Translating is integral to our faith. Trying to translate God's will for us into our actions and behavior is the path to holiness. God's eternal Word was "translated" into human language in the incarnation, when God's only begotten Son took human flesh and a human name. Born of the Virgin Mary, he assumed human nature for us and for our salvation. Translation bridges gaps.

Hebrew and Greek are the human languages made sacred by their use in Holy Scripture, which is the written witness to God's self-revelation in human history. The books of the Old Testament, most in Hebrew and some in Greek, and the books of the New Testament, all in Greek, have been put into almost every other language on the face of the earth. A Scriptural translation is not inspired, as is the original text, and every translation is therefore judged, first of all, by its fidelity to the original. Along with fidelity to the original text, however, is the need for a translation to be understandable in the new language, the "receiver" language, as it is called. The duet between fidelity to the original language and comprehensibility in the receiver language is a song sung by every translator. Translation is a

very exacting task, at the same time an art and a science.

Besides overseeing translations of Sacred Scripture to assure their fidelity to the Hebrew and Greek original texts, the Church also supervises translations of the liturgy. While the divinely inspired words of Holy Scripture bear witness to what God has done to create and save his people, the words of the liturgy bear witness to what the Church believes God has done and continues to do to sustain us in life and bring us to eternal life. The liturgical books are documents of the faith that enable us to worship in spirit and in truth. While not divinely inspired, the liturgical texts are fundamental witnesses to what Catholics believe. As documents expressing our faith, the liturgical books are given us by the Church and they are translated under the Church's supervision. For Catholics who belong to the Roman rite, the liturgical language is basically Latin; and translations of the liturgical books of the Roman rite are to be both faithful to the original Latin and comprehensible in the receiver language.

The exacting task of putting the Latin liturgical books of the Roman rite into English was begun right after the Second Vatican Council when the Bishops' Conferences of English-speaking countries set up the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL). The ICEL Board is made up of 11 bishops, one from each country where English is now a liturgical language. I am the representative of the United States bishops on that Board. The Board uses teams of translators and experts in various fields to do the work of translating, which is coordinated by a small administrative staff with an office in Washington D.C. Because bishops are responsible for the worship of the Church, the work of translating is done under their supervision and the results of the work are submitted for approval by each Bishops' Conference before being sent to the Holy See, which "recognizes" them as texts of the Roman rite in English.

On May 7, the Congregation for Divine Worship in Rome released a document which

clarifies the ground rules for translating the Latin liturgical texts into other languages. This document was anticipated for several years, because the instruction on translation given just after Vatican II was so broadly written that it didn't give a great deal of guidance. This was probably inevitable, since the task of liturgical translation presents challenges that have become evident only in the effort undertaken to put the liturgy into English in the past thirty years. The first translations, still being used in the English liturgy, were done as quickly as possible after the Council and have been heavily criticized, even by ICEL itself, for not adequately capturing the Latin original. The new document presents guidelines for the "second generation" of translated liturgical books. It recognizes the need to be both faithful to the original and to be understandable in English, but it places first emphasis on fidelity to the Latin.

None of this would cause much consternation, were it not for the fact that English has become something of a field for ideological warfare in the past 30 years. Recognizing that the language we speak shapes the way we think and the world in which we live, advertisers and politicians work to create phrases and words that influence people to buy products and make choices. As a public language, American English has self-censored many references to God in the past generation, or they have been deleted from public discourse by court order. Languages have developed differently in relation to historical and social circumstances. We are much more linguistically self-conscious now; yet language is more than the construct of any one generation or any single group. It has a life of its own and a nature proper to itself. It puts us in contact with people long dead. Linguistic manipulation, which severs these connections, is a first cousin to human engineering.

The English language, as it has evolved, has used a convention that permitted masculine words to stand for all human beings. This convention has been judged hurtful by many women, and "inclusivist" concerns have shaped English idiom in recent years. Some of

these have been successful, and some not. Last month, as a case in point, *The Economist*, a British political journal which is widely read throughout the English-speaking world, wrote an editorial insisting that “grammatical gender” is not dead in English. In other words, there are still words which are grammatically masculine or feminine but which do not refer to biological males or females. A ship is still “she” and a devil is still “he”. This very secular journal controverts a key point of “Inclusive English”, in which every masculine pronoun refers to a biological male. When translating religious texts, this inclusivist rule of thumb means you can’t use pronouns for God, since God is spirit. But languages always use pronouns, and elaborate circumlocutions have had to be introduced into Scriptural and liturgical translations and hymn texts in order to avoid them.

The U.S. bishops have tried to resolve this debate by insisting that language about God should be unaltered, but language describing human beings can respond to “inclusivist” concerns. This compromise has left few people entirely happy and has not solved the problem of linguistic manipulation. This debate will go on, because language is so central to one’s identity and self-respect. For the purposes of liturgical translation, however, the new document gives clearer guidelines to the work of translating texts which the Holy See can give back to us as the Roman liturgy in English.

The present liturgical books remain in use, of course, until they are replaced. When they are replaced, an extensive liturgical catechesis will be used to introduce the new texts. This will be an important moment, for deeper understanding of common texts will foster full participation in the liturgy on the part of all. Nothing is so destructive of the full participation desired by the Second Vatican Council than an individual, priest or reader or anyone else, making up changes to the texts as the liturgy is celebrated. Such changes draw attention to the individual and away from the rites which enable us to pray together. They weaken participation by leaving people unsure of what is going to come next.

These controversies have a history and an often complicated context which are betrayed by provocative newspaper headlines. Newspapers have basically one story, especially in religion: courageous and enlightened individuals fighting fusty, tradition-bound authorities (usually biologically male). Unfortunately, such a take on this new document, while it sells papers, manipulates opinion and makes the liturgy, which is supposed to be the source of our unity, into a battleground dividing us. The Church is Christ's body. If anyone "dominates", it must be Christ. The eucharistic liturgy is where the risen Christ is made visible in the sacrament of his Body and Blood; it is not a form of personal self-expression, except to the extent we are truly "in Christ". If we start with that basic conviction, linguistic problems have a chance of being worked out in such a way that our unity in worship is preserved. Any other agenda will divide us.

I would recommend that those most vitally interested in this discussion, and that includes many in an Archdiocese which has invested much time and talent in studying the liturgy and celebrating it well, read this new document ("Liturgiam authenticam") personally. For those with access to Websites, the document can be downloaded at:

[www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccdds](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds).

A careful reading will help us all, I believe, become more aware of the complications involved in the Church's giving us liturgical translations both faithful to the Latin and comprehensible in English. It might also move us to keep the translators in our prayers. God bless you.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Francis Cardinal George, OMI  
Archbishop of Chicago

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