

Reflections on the Revised Roman Missal

Many people have raised the question, Why bother to do a revised translation of the Mass if the current translation has served us rather well for forty years? I have come to know the limitations and even the real deficiencies of the texts that I have used since my ordination forty years ago. Still, undertaking a new translation and changing the words of the Mass for priests and people represent such a major effort that clear and compelling reasons ought to ground this labor-intensive and emotionally-charged effort.

As I have studied the literature on the revision, three purposes seemed to ground the new translation. The revised text was, first of all, to capture a greater formality that corresponds to the solemnity and gravity of liturgical prayer. Secondly, revisions were meant to make the biblical references more available and more evident. A major direction of the liturgical renewal ushered in by the Second Vatican Council was to bring the riches of Sacred Scripture to those who worship. Finally, there seemed to be a need to highlight the continuity of the great liturgical tradition of the Western Church its texts, images, and theology embedded in the liturgy across two thousand years.

To unfamiliar eyes and ears, the revised texts may seem stilted or even quaint, but undeniably they do achieve a more formal tone, a clearer reference to the biblical allusions, and a more accurate rendition of historically and spiritually important texts of the Western liturgical tradition. Time will tell if these purposes that have driven the efforts of revision will bear fruit.

My further reflections based on a re-reading of *Liturgiam authenticam*, the fifth instruction on vernacular translations of the Roman liturgy led me to what I consider more compelling reasons for the revision. These reasons are not so obvious, and yet they can exercise a powerful shaping force in our life of worship.

A first and, in my estimation, very compelling reason to revise the liturgical texts is to reclaim the voice of the true speaker of the words of worship. Saint Paul says that when we pray, God's Spirit prays in us (see Romans 8:26-27). Some mystics of our traditions have made similar affirmations, for example, Julian of Norwich who records a vision in which God says to her, I am the ground of thy beseeching. Theologically, especially in the context of the Eucharist, this makes sense. The Letter to the Hebrews insists that there is one, eternal sacrifice that Christ offers in the heavenly liturgy to which we are united and which is offered for our benefit: For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. (Hebrews 9:24, 26) Our earthly liturgy is linked to the one, eternal, and heavenly liturgy. And the one who offers worship par excellence is Jesus Christ, our human-divine mediator. We may use our voices and our language, but, ultimately, it is the voice of Christ the High Priest who prays in us.

This sense of Christ praying in us through the liturgy corresponds to the very first general principle of translation articulated in *Liturgiam authenticam*:

The words of the Sacred Scriptures, as well as the other words spoken in liturgical celebrations, especially in the celebration of the Sacraments, are not intended primarily to be a sort of mirror of the interior dispositions of the faithful; rather, they express truths that transcend the limits of time and space.

Indeed, by means of these words God speaks continually with the Spouse of his beloved Son, the Holy Spirit leads the Christian faithful into all truth and causes the word of Christ to dwell abundantly within them, and the Church perpetuates and transmits all that she herself is and all that she believes, even as she offers the prayers of all the faithful to God, through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. N. 19

The formality of worship language, then, captures in some measure the reality of its origin in God. This formality and its rationale stand in stark contrast to what has been, in my estimation, a countervailing movement across the past forty years. In many quarters of the United States, we have seen the liturgy primarily as an expression of our reality, certainly a prayer directed to God but also most certainly coming from us. The touches of personalization and informality in language, in gesture, in art, and in environment were, in fact, meant to be what *Liturgiam authenticam* calls a sort of mirror of the interior dispositions of the faithful. The great challenge of the revised texts is not primarily their stiffness or, as some might say, their stuffiness. The far more significant challenge is shifting from an anthropocentric focus of expression to a theocentric one. The more formal style makes sense, when we realize that we are not the only ones talking, when we realize that the Spirit is praying in and through us.

My reflections on *Liturgiam authenticam* led me a second understanding of the revised translations. It began with the great difficulty I had in accepting the translation in the words of institution *pro multis* as for many.

Here is the context: For this is the chalice of my blood, the blood of the new and eternal covenant which will be poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. I did extensive work for my doctoral dissertation on Mark 10:45: For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom (anti pollon) for many. (NRSV) Scholars were of one mind that anti pollon had a collective and inclusive sense. Still, when we hear it in English, it seems to be limiting, that is, saying many but not all. For forty years, we have said for all, and our hope has been that people have understood the universal value of the sacrifice of Jesus, a sacrifice destined for the salvation of all not just a select number. They may not have grasped that important element of faith, but at least it was clearly stated in the language of the ritual. So, it seemed especially troubling to have the translation for all, which I thought would certainly hinder a true understanding of what we believe.

The translation of pro multis as for many is accurate, as the NRSV translation of Mark 10:45 attests. It just seems to cause misunderstanding in the minds of people accustomed to hearing for all for forty years (although actually for a part of that period it was for all men). And that is a pastoral inconvenience for priest-celebrants and others charged with the catechesis and formation of the faithful.

What helped me to understand that this accurate but more difficult translation was, in fact, a good thing is a reference in Liturgiam authenticam. It says, It is the task of the homily and of catechesis to set forth the meaning of the liturgical texts (Number 29) Liturgiam authenticam draws on references from the Second Vatican Council to make this assertion, which I came to see as very important. The operative assumption is that texts of the liturgy are not necessarily immediately clear. They require some explanation and exposition. From another perspective, this means that mystagogical preaching is to be recognized as a necessary component to fulfill the preaching task entrusted to the ordained. Priest-celebrants, for example, should regularly be pointing out the meaning of the rituals and words that are used in the liturgy. In fact, this mystagogical preaching becomes a vehicle for more deeply appropriating the mysteries which are celebrated.

Let us return to that troubling phrase for many. Accurate as it is, it can also generate significant misunderstanding about the efficacy and extension of Christs redeeming work for humanity. It is precisely that potential for misunderstanding that directs us to give an explanation. For many becomes an occasion to explain Gods universal salvific will. We can draw, for example, on the classic text: This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (1 Timothy 2:3-4) There other powerful indications of Gods universal salvific will embedded in other parts of Sacred Scripture, for example, Jesus words in Johns gospel: Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. (John 6:37-40)

Although the more informal and colloquial translations seem to disclose the meaning of the mysteries being celebrated more readily, in fact, they can foster the illusion that there is little need for explanation. The language, after all, is supposed to be self-explanatory. This is not true. Mystagogical preaching and catechesis is always needed. The language of the Revised Roman Missal makes us more acutely aware of this need. That is a very good thing.

No doubt, as a priest-celebrant I will encounter challenges in leading people in prayer using the Revised Roman Missal. Much of that challenge stems from using the same words for forty years and now needing to adapt to a somewhat different text. What helps me meet the challenge and to do so with confidence is a better understanding of the rationale for the revisions. It may be important for every priest before he begins to work through the mechanics of using the revised text to grasp at least in some measure the positive purpose of that text.

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