

WHAT IS GOOD LITURGICAL LANGUAGE?

The Church Service Society has honoured me in inviting me to give this paper, and I am grateful. Thank you.

Let me begin by setting down some markers for myself. First, I am speaking from a Roman Catholic standpoint. Second, I limit myself to liturgical prayer rather than to Scripture translations. Third, you will appreciate that, in Roman Catholic liturgy, specifically the liturgy of Mass, although there may be some ‘original texts’ composed in English, most of the prayers are translations from Latin originals and so must be faithful to the latter. Fourth, in our Mass, most of the prayers are set texts, either occurring in every Mass or varying from day to day – but still appointed for that day in the liturgical calendar (the rules for the celebration of Mass allow for spontaneity at certain points, but these are relatively few).

You will appreciate that, until 1963, liturgy in the Roman rite of the Catholic Church was, and had been since very early times, entirely in Latin. Congregations could follow as well as they could, either because they knew Latin (a tiny and decreasing minority) or because they had provided themselves with prayer books which offered unofficial English translations of at least part of the Latin texts.

In 1963 the Second Vatican Council enacted the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) which permitted limited use of the vernacular languages in the celebration of the Mass. In following years, the permission was extended by the Holy See to other parts of the Mass and it was not long till the whole Mass was permitted in the vernacular.

At about the same time as *Sacrosanctum Concilium* was passed, bishops from ten countries where English is spoken and who were attending Vatican II met in the English College in Rome and set up an agency or commission to produce English liturgical texts for use in their countries. The Bishops’ Conferences represented at that meeting

were England and Wales, Ireland, Scotland, United States, Canada, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, India and Pakistan. The Philippines soon joined the original team and these eleven Bishops' Conferences are still the eleven members of the instrument called the International Commission for English in the Liturgy (ICEL).¹

Since its inception, ICEL has provided English-speaking Bishops' Conferences with a stream of liturgical texts (most of them translations, some original compositions) for use in the celebration of Mass, the various sacraments and other rites and ceremonies. The texts are the results of very thorough and detailed research and study by skilled and experienced scholars, experts in all relevant disciplines.

If a Bishops' Conference wishes to approve an ICEL text (there is no obligation to do so but the overwhelming majority of texts have been so approved), the Conference then sends the text to Rome to seek, from the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, its '*recognitio*' (i.e. its 'okay' or 'no objection'). Only then can the text, produced by ICEL and formally voted and approved by a Bishops' Conference, be published for official use in the Roman Catholic Church in that country.

ICEL's most important task has been the provision of Mass texts. A complete English Missal (Mass book, but without the Scripture readings because they are printed in the Lectionary) was prepared, approved, given the Vatican's *recognitio* and published in 1973. Since the need was urgent, the work was done hurriedly and it was soon clear that a revision was required. ICEL began work on this revision in 1982 and proceeded with painstaking care until, by 1998, Bishops' Conferences in the English-speaking world were sending the finished revised Missal to Rome, seeking the obligatory *recognitio*.

¹ Later, another fifteen Bishops' Conferences in countries where English is spoken have become associate members of ICEL.

For a few years before 1998 the Congregation for Divine Worship, headed by the Chilean Cardinal Jorge Arturo Medina Estévez, had been showing increasing signs of dissatisfaction with ICEL and this came to a dramatic climax when the Congregation, in the early months of 2002, refused to give its *recognitio* to the revised English missal.

The reaction of the Bishops' Conferences affected by this decision was mixed. Most, I think, were very upset and regarded the Congregation for Divine Worship as having become too strict in its demands for translations faithful to the Latin (as if translation and transliteration were really synonymous); moreover, it was felt that '*recognitio*' had come to mean 'approval' and that the Congregation was rejecting not only ICEL's work but the formal approval of Bishops' Conferences.

On the other hand, there were some who felt that the Congregation had done its duty because the ICEL translations were too free and thus lacking in fidelity to the Latin. Likewise it was said that ICEL had become independent, uncontrolled and recalcitrant.

In addition to its refusal of the *recognitio*, the Congregation for Divine Worship had also demanded that ICEL revise its constitution. For some years now ICEL has been doing this, trying to satisfy the Congregation and yet reluctant to become a mere instrument of the Congregation with no ability to put its case. Recent changes in ICEL personnel (the resignation of its Chairman – myself – and of its Executive Secretary, several changes in the eleven-man Episcopal Board) have had an important effect. And, since ICEL was established by Bishops' Conferences of countries where English is spoken, a greater involvement by those same Conferences in the issues concerning ICEL's work and its relations with the Vatican Congregation would be welcome and beneficial.

Sacrosanctum Concilium, Vatican II's 1963 Constitution on the Liturgy, had called for 'full, conscious and active participation' by the faithful in the liturgy. From its beginning, therefore, the International Commission on English in the Liturgy had tried to produce texts that

were intelligible, proclaimable and prayerful. Since its translations of Latin texts began only in the 1960s, ICEL decided that it would use contemporary language, not archaic ('thou', etc.), that it would pay due attention to using inclusive language (rather than using masculine nouns and pronouns to include women) and that it would be aware of the new ecumenical awareness in the Catholic Church.

In January 1969, the 'Consilium' set up by the Vatican 'for the implementation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy' issued its *Instruction on Translation of Liturgical Texts* – an enlightened document which ICEL found extremely helpful in applying in practice the principles of good liturgical translation. Here are a couple of the Instruction's statements:

The purpose of liturgical translations is to proclaim the message of salvation to believers and to express the prayer of the Church to the Lord: 'Liturgical translations have become... the voice of the Church' (address of Paul VI to participants in the Congress on translations of liturgical texts, 10 November 1965). To achieve this end, it is not sufficient that a liturgical translation merely reproduce the expressions and ideas of the original text. Rather it must faithfully communicate to a given people, and in their own language, that which the Church by means of this given text originally intended to communicate to another people in another time. A faithful translation, therefore, cannot be judged on the basis of individual words: the total context of this specific act of communication must be kept in mind, as well as the literary form proper to the respective language. (no. 6)

The translator must always keep in mind that the 'unit of meaning' is not the individual word but the whole passage. He or she must therefore be careful that the translation is not so analytical that it exaggerates the importance of particular phrases while it obscures or weakens the meaning of the whole. Thus, in Latin, the piling up of 'ratam, rationabilem,

acceptabilem' may increase the sense of invocation. In other tongues, a succession of adjectives may actually weaken the force of the prayer. The same is true of 'beatissima Virgo' or 'beata et gloriosa' or the routine addition of 'sanctus' or 'beatus' to a saint's name, or the too casual use of superlatives. Understatement in English is sometimes the more effective means of emphasis. (no. 12)

However, in its campaign to put an end to what it considered abuses by mixed commissions such as ICEL, the Congregation for Divine Worship issued in 2001 a new set of principles (known as '*Liturgiam Authenticam*' from the first two words of the Latin original) which superseded the 1969 Instruction and imposed new rules and regulations on ICEL.

There had to be greater fidelity to the Latin texts (including the structure of sentences with their relative clauses retained as in the Latin, the translation of every word and especially of every Latin adjective); ICEL had to cease producing original texts² and had to have no more ecumenical contacts; inclusive language had to be carefully limited.³ In addition, mixed commissions such as ICEL would in

2 In 'Observations' attached to a subsequent letter to the presidents of Bishops' Conferences, Cardinal Medina of the Congregation justified these decisions. 'The Congregation must insist that the texts newly composed by the Mixed Commission be excluded from the Missal'; among the reasons for this were:

'that the proliferation of original texts not hinder the meditation of the faithful and of their pastors on the riches already found in the prayers of the Roman Liturgy;

'that the desire for constant variety, typical of many consumerist societies, not come to be regarded in itself as constituting a cultural value capable of serving as a vehicle for authentic inculturation.'

3 The Observations state: 'In an effort to avoid completely the use of the term 'man' as a translation of the Latin *homo*, the translation often fails to convey the true content of that Latin term, and limits itself to a focus on the congregation actually present or to those presently living. The simultaneous reference to the unity and the collectivity of the human race is lost. The term 'humankind', coined for purposes of 'inclusive language', remains somewhat faddish and ill-adapted to the liturgical context, and, in addition, it is usually too abstract to convey the notion of the Latin *homo*. The latter, just as the English 'man', which some appear to have made the object of a taboo, are able to express in a collective but also concrete and personal manner the notion of a partner with God in a Covenant who gratefully receives from him the gifts of forgiveness and Redemption. At least in many instances, an abstract or binomial expression cannot achieve the same effect.'

Much of the Cardinal's argumentation, it should be added, was criticised by scholars as mistaken, erroneous or ill-judged.

future be ruled by the Congregation, a new constitution was required for ICEL, and all those who worked for ICEL (except bishops) would first be vetted and approved by the Congregation.

Liturgiam Authenticam seemed to many to be a very rigorous implementation of the Congregation's authority to give its 'recognitio' (greater indeed, many thought, than that accorded to it by Vatican II or Church law) and showing scant respect for, or trust in, the Bishops' Conferences who had approved the texts and in whose countries they would be used.

In background material by ICEL, produced for Bishops' Conferences to accompany the 1998 revised Mass texts, the following points are made:

An essential standard for the translating work of ICEL is fidelity to the substance of the original. The translation is designed to convey the content that the Latin texts embody, which in the case of the texts of the *Proprium de tempore* includes a definite tradition of teaching and worship. The purpose of a basic textual criticism is not to ensure a literal translation (a literal translation requires little more than a few years of school Latin). Rather this function is needed in order to achieve the richness and variety that is required to convey in English the true thought of the Latin text; or to make explicit, in a way that English may demand, what is cryptic or allusive in the Latin; or to permit a precise reflection of the liturgical function, occasion, or context of a text; or to retain the text's theme, point of view, or strength. A basic textual criticism may also be a safeguard against taking Latin words for cognates when they really are not, or against simply presuming the meaning of what looks like a familiar term.

By ‘Textual Criticism’ is meant a primary assessment of the Latin text that involves two steps: (i) consideration of the source of the *Missale Romanum* text in question and (ii) examination of the vocabulary of the *Missale Romanum* text in question.

But overall the primary guiding document for the revisors was the Apostolic See’s *Instruction on Translation of Liturgical Texts*, with its strong emphasis on texts not for reading and study but for public proclamation. One of the most salient paragraphs in that document states:

The prayer of the Church is always the prayer of some actual community, assembled here and now. It is not sufficient that a formula handed down from some other time or region be translated verbatim, even if accurately, for liturgical use. The formula translated must become the genuine prayer of the congregation and in it each of its members should be able to find and express himself or herself. (no. 20)

It must, however, be understood that a ‘guiding document’ addresses the task of the translator/revisor only in a general way. It cannot be expected to offer concrete, particular solutions. Thus the translator/revisor must also develop working principles and adapt them during the translation process. Particular, specific principles can only emerge after the various drafts have been prepared, discussed, and emended. This process may take months or even years. The translator/revisor must be willing to keep ever in mind the axiom: *solvitur ambulando*. Having uppermost in mind the *lex credendi*, the translator will inevitably at times have to struggle with an unavoidable tension between the original language and the receiver language, especially since the receiver language is intended not for private reading but for public proclamation.

It is possible at times that a slightly freer translation that is also a strong piece of English can actually bring out a doctrinal emphasis in the Latin with greater force than a more narrowly literal translation (see *Instruction on Translation of Liturgical Texts*, no. 6). The overall shape of an English text, its cadence and rhythm, is essential to achieving a tone of reverence and prayerfulness. The beauty of the text (as a piece of spoken English) is in the service of its meaning. This is certainly the aim of the translator of the English text as it was of the author of the Latin original. However, in the case of nearly 1,500 prayers one cannot expect a uniform success. This naturally applies to the Latin as well as to the English. By being attentive to the properties of spoken English, including such matters as the avoidance of too many unaccented syllables in a row, the need to avoid internal rhyme, the need in most instances to avoid repeating words already used in the text, the need for each line to end strongly, and particularly the need for the crucial final line to end, as often as possible, on an accented syllable – all of these have in a number of instances resulted in the English text reproducing clear echoes of the majestic Latin *cursus*. The ability in English to capture something of the *cursus* cannot help but ennoble the English prayer, giving to it both dignity and solemnity and setting it off as distinctively ritual language.

At the same time, ICEL made the case for new or original texts.

The need for the creation of original texts in the liturgical books prepared at the direction of the Second Vatican Council was foreseen in 1969 in the Holy See's *Instruction on Translation of Liturgical Texts*. The Instruction noted that 'texts translated from another language are clearly not sufficient for the celebration of a fully renewed liturgy. The creation of new texts will be necessary' (no. 43). For

this reason the conferences of bishops in the various language groups have sought over the last two to three decades to develop new liturgical texts that reflect the genius and idiom of their own languages and cultures. These new texts, serving as they do as supplements to the liturgical texts translated from the Latin, have helped to deepen the experience of liturgical worship among Catholics around the world. And, as also noted in the Holy See's 1969 Instruction, '... translation of texts transmitted through the tradition of the Church is the best school and discipline for the creation of new texts, so that any new forms adopted should in some way grow organically from forms already in existence' (Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 23).

General guidelines used in the composition of new or original liturgical texts in English were as follows.

1. The nature of the rite as well as the moment of the rite and its ritual context influence the content and tone of the prayers.
2. The prayers are intended for proclamation in the liturgical assembly.
3. The prayers must be doctrinally sound.
4. Christian liturgical prayer is traditionally directed to the First Person of the Trinity, through the mediation of the Son, in the power of the Spirit.
5. Attention to rhythm and cadence in the prayers is a primary consideration, this with a view to their being proclaimed well, heard, and easily understood.
6. The prayers should make use of a wide vocabulary. Colour and poetic imagery, where possible, should be evident in the compositions.

7. There should be a consistency of images, and care must be exercised not to use too many images in a single prayer.
8. The themes of the prayers should be fairly universal, so that they can be used in a variety of places and circumstances. These compositions are prepared for an international English-speaking community and should avoid themes that may be suitable only for a particular community or region.
9. Because of the providential recovery of the word of God in the liturgy and Catholic devotional life in general, inspiration for the new prayers will be found especially in the Scriptures, but also in the liturgical seasons and the theology underlying the various rites. For example, references to baptism would be expected in some presidential prayers in the seasons of Lent and Easter.

In the final section of this presentation, I offer a few examples of ICEL's work in the revision of the Missal (rejected by the Roman Congregation). I hope they will illustrate the standard achieved in the effort to produce texts that are in good English, suitable for being proclaimed, heard and prayed when people gather together to worship God. In other words, good liturgical language.

Translated Texts

1. Latin Text

Protector in te sperantium, Deus,
sine quo nihil est validum, nihil
sanctum,
multiplica super nos misericordiam
tuam
ut, te rectore, te duce,
sic bonis transeuntibus nunc
utamur,
ut iam possimus inhaerere
mansuris.

1973 Translation

God our Father and protector,
without you nothing is holy
nothing has value.
Guide us to everlasting life
by helping us to use wisely
the blessings you have given
to the world.

1998 Translation

O God, protector of those who
hope in you,
without whom nothing is strong,
nothing is holy,
enfold us in your gracious care and
mercy,
that with you as our ruler and
guide,
we may use wisely the gifts of this
passing world
and fix our hearts even now on
those which last for ever.

2. Latin Text

Gratias tibi, Domine, referimus
sacro munere vegetati,
tuam clementiam implorantes,
ut, per infusionem Spiritus tui,
in quibus caelestis virtus introivit,
sinceritatis gratia perseveret.

1973 Translation

Lord, we thank you for the
nourishment you give us through
your holy gift.
Pour out your Spirit upon us
and in the strength of this food
from heaven
keep us single-minded in your
service.

1998 Translation

Strengthened by this holy food,
O Lord,
we give you thanks and seek your
mercy,
that through the outpouring of
your Spirit
those who have been touched by
the power of this sacrament
may continue to live in sincerity
and truth.

Original Texts

1. For the Second Sunday of Advent when the gospel is John the Baptist's preaching (Luke 3:1-6)

God of our salvation,
you straighten the winding ways of our hearts
and smooth the paths made rough by sin.

Make our conduct blameless,
keep our hearts watchful in holiness,
and bring to perfection the good you have begun in us.

We ask this through him whose coming is certain, whose day
draws near:

your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God for ever and ever.

2. For the Third Sunday of Easter when the gospel is the Emmaus story (Luke 24:13-35)

O God of mystery,
out of death you delivered Christ Jesus,
and he walked in hidden glory among his disciples.

Stir up our faith,
that our hearts may burn within us
at the sound of his word,
and our eyes be opened to recognize him
in the breaking of the bread.

Grant this through Jesus Christ, firstborn from the dead,
who lives with you now and always in the unity of the Holy
Spirit,
God for ever and ever.

In addition, the 1998 Missal contains original collects for the following contemporary needs which may occur from time to time (and are not found in the Latin text):

For a reverent use of creation
For victims of abuse
For the homeless
For victims of addiction
In times of epidemic

Maurice Taylor

