

## Why is there a new translation of the Mass?

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Beginning in September, many parishes of the Diocese of Harrisburg will begin singing the new translation of the *Gloria*, the *Sanctus*, and the Memorial Acclamation. This is a precursor to what will affect the entire English-speaking Church on the First Sunday of Advent, November 27, 2011, when the use of the revised translation of all of the prayers and acclamations of the Mass becomes mandatory. Throughout the Diocese, parishes and individuals have been preparing themselves in different ways to receive this new translation. Whether through presentations or study groups, many have embraced the opportunity for focused study and prayer on the changes to the Mass. For some, there remains the nagging question: why is there a new translation? Looking back, we find some clear indications that the new translation is not only something that we need at the present moment in the Church's life, but was anticipated by those who were entrusted with the current translation that has been in use since the 1970s.

In 1963, the Second Vatican Council promulgated *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy). This was the first major document given to the Church by the Council. In it we find the mandate to review and revise the rites and rituals of the Church in line with the unbroken Tradition. Part of the revision was to allow for some parts of the Sacred Liturgy, especially the Scripture readings, to be translated into the ordinary language at use in local communities. This is called the *vernacular* language. The Council did not provide the rules for translation, it entrusted that to the special commission who developed the guidelines for translation of the Latin texts into the modern languages. *Comme le prevoit*, issued in 1969, became the document guiding all the translations at that time.

Looking at this document, we discover the basic rules governing the creation of vernacular translations. Most admirable about this document is the understanding that the text of the Sacred Liturgy is understood as “a ritual sign” (no. 5), meaning that the language itself, in addition to the ritual actions and ritual matter, acts as an outward sign that communicates the spiritual and mystical realities made present in the celebration of the rites. Because it is a ritual sign, the language seeks to “proclaim the message of salvation to believers and to express the prayer of the Church to the Lord” (no. 6). Of course, these are not the debatable issues. The real question becomes, *how* do we communicate the message of salvation and express the Church's prayer adequately?

Prevailing philosophies in 1969 sought to communicate the Faith in everyday language (no. 15), following a “less is more” approach removing the descriptiveness of adjectives, repetitions, and superlatives (no. 12). The priority focused on bringing the language of Sacred Liturgy down to the ordinary level, so that it better reflected how we speak in everyday conversation. The general principle for translation favored *dynamic equivalence* over the strict rules of translating by

*formal equivalence*. In the end, although creating easy to hear and easy to speak sentences, these rules for translation limited in some ways the message of salvation and the expression of the Church's prayer, resulting in sometimes inaccurate ideas and overly generalized prayers.

Perhaps one of the most surprising directives of this 1969 document is found in its first lines. Recognizing that the project of vernacular translation is so new in the life of the Church, the document wisely issues this directive for a future time: "The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy foresees that many Latin texts of the Roman liturgy must be translated into different languages (art. 36). . . . After sufficient experiment and passage of time, all translations will need review" (no. 1). From the very beginning, those rules guiding the vernacular texts wisely anticipated revision and review, since time and use test their enduring worth and spiritual effectiveness.

Blessed John Paul II recognized some of these problems of the vernacular translations, not just with the English prayers but with other languages as well, as he boldly travelled the world to pastor the Universal Church. This wise and intelligent man, fluent in several languages, became aware that many of the Mass texts that had been translated into modern languages lacked a clear similarity to the prayers in Latin. Latin remains the typically language of the Church in which the Faith is communicated and preserved. Therefore, when the time came for a review and revision of the Mass texts, Pope John Paul II issued new rules for translation in his 2001 document *Liturgiam Authenticam*, replacing the document of 1969.

In this papal directive for translation, Pope John Paul II tried to reclaim the unbroken continuity in the Church's worship, challenging the vernacular translations to become more faithful to the manner of expression and the images used in the Latin prayers. He mandated that *formal equivalence* guide the process of translation so that those Latin prayers which have been part of the Church's liturgical tradition and part of society's literary patrimony will be clearly recognizable in the modern languages as well. Pope John Paul II calls the translators to be mindful of the theological richness of the text, the biblical roots and allusions that permeate most of the Mass prayers, as well as the poetic nature of the original Latin. Above all, the new translations must be faithful: expressing clearly the enduring Faith of the Church without any equivocation or confusion. In this way, the Holy Father was reminding us of the medieval axiom, "*Lex orandi, lex credendi*," that the rule of praying is the rule of believing. Simply put, the prayer of the Church expresses and proclaims the Faith of the Church.

Additionally, there is another dimension that is at work in bringing us this new translation. In 2000, Pope John Paul II issued what is the third edition of the *Roman Missal*. He issued a new edition of the prayers and rubrics for the Mass. This was published in Latin in 2002. In 2008, Pope Benedict left his own mark on the *Roman Missal*, further adjusting some of the directives for the celebration of Mass and adding some other new elements. Since the third of edition of the *Roman Missal* contains prayers for saints and directions for Mass that have not yet been at use in the Church, the need for translation immediately presented itself. That is why Pope John Paul II issued those new rules for translation in 2001. He was keenly aware that new translations of new

prayers needed to be made and he wisely invited the whole Church to review and revise the current translations as originally envisioned by the 1969 document *Comme le prevoit*. We are the recipients of Blessed John Paul II's vision and guidance for the Church as we prepare to receive the new translation of the Mass.

In the end, there is more at work in this revised *Roman Missal* than some arbitrary requirement for Latin based translations. The new millennium brought the Church to a critical moment when the wise vision for review of 1969 met the new publication of the third edition of the *Roman Missal* in 2000. These liturgical texts, which have nourished the life of the Church for centuries, inspired by the words of Christ and drawn from the images of Sacred Scripture, are given to the Church anew in this new era. They seek, above all, to bring to us every time we hear them and speak them, the saving message of Christ and to express with clear voice the unchanging Faith of the Church. If, at first glance they seem to sound unlike our ordinary, everyday language, it is because they invite us to reflect more deeply on the extraordinary, heavenly reality that they signify in the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy. Therefore, the challenge of the text is not merely to our ears or to our vocabulary, the true challenge of the text is given to our hearts. We are invited this Fall to renew our understanding and participation in the Mass through study, prayer, and reflection. Like the language itself, this project of translating the third edition of the *Roman Missal* is a sign of something deeper: the call to allow the holy words on our lips to influence and direct our hearts.