

The New Translation of the Holy Mass: An Introduction

by Brian W. MacMichael

On the First Sunday of Advent next year (November 27, 2011), English-speaking Roman Catholic communities around the world will begin using a new English translation of the Roman Missal. The Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments gave its *recognitio*, or approval, to the new translation in late April. However, the delivery of the final texts and the announcement of an implementation date were delayed until now, largely in order to incorporate concluding edits recommended by the eleven different English-speaking conferences of bishops that have been working on this project.

The Roman Missal is the ritual book that contains the prayers and instructions for the Holy Mass. The word “missal” is derived from “missa,” the Latin word for Mass. In recent years, we have often called this book the “Sacramentary,” which is a historical title as well. But the term “Roman Missal” more properly conveys the important fact that we are part of the Roman Rite of the universal Catholic Church. Just as a Byzantine Catholic, for example, has a distinctive manner of worship, so our Roman Rite identity should be integral to how we pray.

This identity helps keep the new translation of the Mass in perspective - the Mass is our central act of Christian worship, which has developed from an apostolic tradition over the course of two millennia. Therefore, it is extremely important to make certain that we pray it well, in a way that gives fitting glory to God and maintains continuity with the Church's worship in centuries past.

These new English texts are the culmination of a discernment process that has lasted many years. Our existing English edition of the Mass is based on the hasty initial translation of the “new Mass” in the 1970s, which then underwent some relatively minor adaptations in a 1985 edition. Still, the need to prepare an improved and more careful translation was commonly understood, and a completely revised translation was in fact developed and proposed by the late 1990s. However, a fresh start was necessitated by two developments: the announcement of an updated Latin edition of the Roman Missal in 2000 (the Latin editions remain the authoritative versions of the Missal even today), and the subsequent release of a Vatican instruction entitled *Liturgiam Authenticam* (“authentic liturgy”).

Begun in 1997 at the request of Pope John Paul II, *Liturgiam Authenticam* was published in 2001. Having observed major discrepancies in liturgical books during his travels, and being an accomplished linguist himself, the Holy Father recognized a need to provide a guide to ensure that all the vernacular translations of liturgical texts throughout the world would more closely correspond to the original Latin. Often, entire phrases of the original prayers were being lost in translation! With *Liturgiam Authenticam's* renewed emphasis on faithful adherence to the Latin, the respective translations would carry more accurate theological and scriptural content, and also maintain greater universality.

The International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL) was the organization charged with preparing our current translation, according to the principles outlined under Pope John Paul II and affirmed under Pope Benedict XVI. In addition, a special committee of bishops, called Vox Clara (“a clear voice”), regularly convened in Rome to advise the Holy See on the English translations. The present translation effort will have taken almost a full decade to complete, and has involved many phases. The national conferences of bishops would examine initial drafts of parts of the Missal, offering recommended changes. Then, ICEL would make revisions and send a new draft to the bishops. Once each section was approved by the conferences, it would be sent to Rome for the *recognitio*.

As one can imagine, coordinating a single English translation for so many different countries is a daunting task. Even when comparing American and British idioms, there are numerous clear differences in the way we use words. For example, what we would call a “flashlight” is known as a “torch” in England. Moreover, words can change meaning over time, and particular manners of speech can fall in and out of favor.

Now, imagine the need to develop a single, worthy English translation for use in worship in all these English-speaking nations: the United States, Canada, England, Wales, Ireland, Scotland, South Africa, Pakistan, India, Australia, New Zealand, and the Philippines. These are the places where our new translation will be employed, along with many other English-speaking communities across the globe, such as in Ghana, Nigeria, Bangladesh, and Singapore.

So, clearly, the work of translating so important a text is a long and extraordinarily tedious process. The translators, bishops, Popes, and others who have worked so hard to provide us with words suitable for use in the sacred liturgy truly deserve our thanks.

In a series of articles, we will examine the many reasons for the new translation, as well as the tremendous benefits it offers. It will also be important to address the misconceptions or misinformation that have been promoted in the media and by some outspoken critics of the effort. It is essential to keep in mind that the words we pray at Mass will be different, but the Mass itself is not changing. This is not like the dramatic changes after the Second Vatican Council, nor is it a reversal of the liturgical reforms.

The motto offered on the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Roman Missal website is “New words: a deeper meaning, but the same Mass.” That is an apt description, and as we all prepare for the arrival of the new Missal, the faithful are also encouraged to look over the texts and resources available on that website (<http://uscgb.org/romanmissal/>) - including comparisons of some current and forthcoming versions of Mass prayers.

Although this adjustment from a set of prayers with which we have grown familiar over forty years will not be easy, it will nonetheless present a great opportunity for the English-speaking Church. We wish to show how the new translation makes possible an increased sense of beauty and reverence in the sacred liturgy, which will hopefully

contribute to our common vocation to holiness. Let us pray that the effects of this renewal will be far-reaching, and ultimately enable us to experience a more profound encounter with Christ.