

The Mystery of the Written Word--

Why the Church is spending so much time and effort on the new English translation of the Latin Liturgy.

By: Rev. Fr. Ronnie P. Floyd

In the Advent of 2011, all throughout the English speaking Catholic world, the way we pray as a community is scheduled for a major change. Maybe you have heard about the new translation, maybe you have even seen it, maybe you question the need for it, in light of all the problems our Church and our world are experiencing! One way or the other, change is coming, as it always does! It might be difficult, but change whether good or bad, always challenges us as believers to trust more in the providential will of God, giving us an opportunity to grow in faith, hope, and love. Our challenge now as Catholics, just as in 1970 when the current translation was put forward, is to try to embrace it, to understand it, and to benefit from it as much as possible, remembering always that God "works all things for good for those who love Him."

In order to understand the new translation and the need for this change it's important to think a little bit about the nature of the Divine Liturgy itself. The English poet A. E. Housman once suggested:

Even when poetry has a meaning, as it usually has, it may be inadvisable to draw it out...

Perfect understanding will sometimes almost extinguish pleasure.

Words are a medium for communication but also as Housman suggests a *locus*, a place or a moment, where persons (human or divine) can encounter and enjoy each other, creation, and the mystery of existence. As a society today maybe we don't appreciate this idea because we are so impatient about those things that seem to serve no immediate or proximate practical purpose. Today we are so caught up with doing and making and fixing, that we are failing to do what we were created for, simply being. As the old Baltimore Catechism taught: "I was created to know, love, and serve God in this life, so as to be with Him forever in the life to come." In his famous book *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger suggests that this means that we were created ultimately for that seventh day rest, a rest that is not characterized by sleep or inaction, but by actively being in the presence of God and responding in the only way we can to His goodness: enjoyment, which becomes perfect adoration. We were created for the Divine Liturgy, for what we Latin Catholics call the Mass.

Housman's quote captures the essence of prayer and the prayer of the Church the Divine Liturgy which is so much more than simple communication but is essentially about the pleasure of being in the presence of God through words, as well as through gestures, art, smells, and sounds. The Liturgy is poetry for all of the senses. Prayer, our conversation with God, is a two way street, that always has meaning. We speak to God in prayer, but He also responds to us, and although prayer almost always has a simple literal meaning, it often conceals, like one of those famous Russian Matryoshka nesting dolls, layer upon layer of deeper meaning below the surface. As the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard suggested, the things of God are too far beyond our understanding to be reveal directly; rather they must be revealed by hiding them below the surface, and using the mystery and opaqueness of human art, culture, and language to draw the hearer, or reader, or, in the case of the liturgy, the worshiper into this mystery.

The Divine Liturgy is a combination of poetry and pageantry, ballet and symphony, which reminds us of the truth that hidden behind these mysterious and sometimes strange mediums of communication is the reality of God's presence among us, in which at Mass we are invite to

participate. As we are drawn into the mystery, penetrating deeper and deeper into its core, we are ever discovering new levels of God's goodness, experiencing a taste here on earth of what Heaven will be like for all eternity. Participating in the perfect prayer of Christ, the Son of God, which has been going on from all eternity, but was made accessible to man through the incarnation and most especially on the Cross, we are drawn into that conversation between the Father and the Son and the Spirit. The text of the liturgy is not meant to be a quick and painless exchange of petitions and pious platitudes, but an invitation into the wedding feast of the Lamb. In the late 60s and early 70s in the rush to translate the liturgy from Latin into the vernacular this outlook on the purpose of the Liturgy was lost, as were for 40 years some of the most beautifully poetic prayers to God ever composed. The hope is that the richness of the texts of the Mass that we will receive next year will help us better enter into the eternal event of the Mass.

For the average lay-person the changes in their parts of the Mass are minimal. Most notable among the changes in the peoples parts is the constant refrain, in Latin: *Et cum spiritu tuo*, which for the past 40 years English speakers have rendered "and also with you." Of course, even the average person, lacking any training in the Latin language, can see if they look closely the absence of the word "spirit." Also noticeable will be the *mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*, which in the current translation was translated just once. The new translation restores this threefold reminder of our personal guilt, a reminder not of our wretchedness but of how much God loves us. At the Creed, the communal "we" will be replaced by the personal "I," asking each person to take personal responsibility for the deposit of faith they received at their own Baptism. Another change will be the substitution of the theological term "consubstantial" for its current equivalent translation, "one in being." These two phrases mean essentially the same thing, however, see how the more mysterious word draws the hearer into the mystery. One. In. Being. These words may mean essentially the same thing as consubstantial; however because all three are commonly used they give us a false sense of understanding the incomprehensible. In contrast, the theological term invites us to realize that we don't really understand what it means for the Son to be one in being with the Father. A few minor changes in the preface dialogue round off the minor changes in the peoples parts.

The more major changes include the complete re-translation of the seldom used second penitential rite, as well as the correct translation of the *Gloria*, which will sound much different to the average Catholic. The complete elimination of the first option for the Memorial Acclamation may be one of the most striking changes to average Catholic who grew up singing "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again...." The problem with this acclamation is that it has no basis in the Latin text of the Mass. Of the remaining three options only the second is largely unchanged. One final major change is the response made by the people after the Priest presents the Blessed Sacrament to them, saying: "This is the Lamb of God." The current response which seems to be a simple statement of Eucharistic piety and humility, is replaced with the equally pious biblical response drawing us into the image and story of Christ's encounter with the centurion in Capernaum, recounted in Luke's Gospel, and how Jesus' words had the power of life and death.

These major changes, as well as the less stark ones, point to the two working principles behind the new translation. In the instruction, *Liturgiam Authenticam*, issued in March of 2001 at the direction of Pope John Paul II, the Holy See gave two main instructions on the process of re-translating the Liturgy. First, care was to be taken, that the parts of the Mass based on Sacred Scripture were translated faithfully, because as the document notes, "they express truths that transcend the limits of time and space." Likewise the Vatican instructs those charged with translating the liturgy to be

faithful to the Ecclesial wisdom contained in the non-scriptural Latin texts themselves. The Congregation notes that these texts contain both the accumulated wisdom and experience of the Church throughout the ages as well as the authentic fruits of the liturgical renewal called for by the Second Vatican Council. In short, the congregation suggest that it is desirable to actually translate exactly what is written in Latin, whether scriptural or not, taking very limited editorial license. The reason for this instruction is our belief that Divine Revelation has been given to the Church by our Lord for the salvation of souls in the form of both Tradition and Scripture, which are both potently expressed in the words of the Sacred Liturgy. As *Liturgiam Authenticam* states quite beautifully:

...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 and in the power of the Holy Spirit.¹

The reason the Church needs this re-translation is that without an authentic translation of the liturgy, which the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, tells us is the source and summit of our Christian life, the Church lacks a firm foundation to undertake authentically the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. That's a provocative claim to make forty years after the conclusion of the council and yet that is essentially the argument made by *Liturgiam Authenticam*. While the translation of 1970 may have been relatively straightforward and understandable, it eliminated the enjoyment of the mysteries of our Faith that are meant to draw us away from the understandable into the unknowable mystery of the Triune God.

Resulting from *Liturgiam Authenticam* and almost a decade of work, the new translation recaptures much of the beauty and timeless quality of the Liturgy. It also regularly brings us face to face with our own ignorance about the mysteries of God. For some, not understanding exactly what we are saying or praying will be point of frustration--our challenge is to make it a point of departure from which we can pursue always a greater understanding of the unknowable God. Like poetry, which indeed has a meaning, our job is not to draw it out, as if we could exhaust the meaning in the liturgy, but to savor it enjoying its sweetness and depth. To do this, rather than looking only at the surface meaning, we must gaze deeper bringing together the various threads of Scripture and Tradition hidden under the surface to begin to construct a picture of all human history, past and future, which culminates in the Cross, and leads to eternal happiness, eternal joy, eternal life in Heaven.

One of the most anticipated results of the new translation is that so many scriptural references, lifted straight out of the pages of the bible and pieced together in the prayer of the ages, will be restored and made explicit. Texts like, *et cum spiritu tuo* (to be translated "and with your spirit"). This phrase lifted straight out of St. Paul's letters and that has used in the Divine Liturgy of both the Eastern and Western Church from the first century onward, draws us out from our merely material understanding of existence into the spiritual reality of our life, expressing our desire that God's Spirit be with ours. Another major restoration of scripture will be the second penitential rite, which as noted has been completely re-translated and so that it accurately reflects the text from Baruch and from the 85th psalm. Another significant change in the people's parts is the translation of the *Sanctus* to more accurately reflect the difficult to translate word Sabaoth, which comes directly from

¹ *Liturgiam Authenticam*, n. 19. Cf. Second Vatican Council, Const. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 33; Dogm. Const. on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, n. 8; cf. *Missale Romanum*, editio typica tertia: *Institutio Generalis*, n. 2.

Revelation 4:8, Holy, holy holy, is the Lord God of Host." Notice we haven't even begun to consider the priests parts of the Mass, which will be most difficult for the priests to re-learn, but will also affect the way the Mass sounds, and the images it evokes, for the laity.

Although it would be impossible to detail each and every change, particularly the more that 60 scriptural references in the Liturgy, one way Catholics can prepare for and even get excited about the new translation is to do a bible study on the Mass itself. This is made easy by a document published by the Congregation for Divine Worship, called the "White Book Annotated," which is readily available for download on the USCCB, Committee on the Divine Worship website.² Imagine what spiritual fruits could be born in your families and parishes if when finally the new translation is heard on that first Sunday of Advent, 2011, virtually every line called to mind a scene (or scenes) in the Bible! Of course, minimally, every Catholic should read through the new translation of the Mass before it becomes official in December 2011, but why stop there? The new translation provides us with a great opportunity to ask questions about and learn about the liturgy itself. In my parish one study group re-read, or perhaps read for the first time, the text of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concillium*. Personally, I am preparing to go to and give workshops to my parishioners about the new translation but also on the nature of the liturgy itself, which the new translation challenges us to consider.

Common wisdom says that it takes at least 100 years for the reforms of a council to be fully felt. If true, that means that we are in for another 50 years of reforming the reforms until we fully enact the vision of the Second Vatican Council. Change is never easy, but it can be exciting, if we see it as the opportunity to grow in our Faith that it is!

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² <http://www.usccb.org/romanmissal/WhiteBookAnnotated.pdf>