

Tridentine Community News

November 8, 2009

Accurate Translation of the Propers of Holy Mass

Much press has been given in recent months to the forthcoming new translation of the Ordinary Form Missal. Even though the Vatican has made clear its intention that a new English translation be created which is more faithful to the original Latin, certain prelates continue to object, maintaining that the average North American resident will not comprehend some of the wording used.

As someone who does not follow sports, this writer counters: Don't underestimate people's intelligence. Anyone who can understand the rules of hockey or football, or memorize vital statistics of baseball players, can certainly handle the challenge of learning the meaning of a few new words.

Perhaps you have read the following comparison, often used as an example of the inaccuracy of our current translation of the Mass:

Original Latin from the Roman Canon (Eucharistic Prayer #1): "accipiens et hunc præclarum cálicem in sanctas ac venerábiles manus suas"

Literal translation as found in many Extraordinary Form hand missals: "taking also this excellent Chalice into His holy and venerable hands"

Present Ordinary Form translation: "He took the cup"

Yes, we know this is an extreme example, worthy of a rim-shot sound effect, but it is also a reason for some concern: The majority of English-speaking Catholics likely never have taken the time to learn the original Latin meaning. Fortunately, the new translation is a vast improvement: "he took this precious chalice into his holy and venerable hands". The remainder of the translation of the Ordinary is, by and large, comparably improved.

Not much has yet been said about the translations of the Propers of the Mass, those orations (Opening Prayer, Prayer Over the Gifts, and Prayer After Communion), antiphons (Introit and Communion), and readings which change from day to day over the liturgical year. The bulk of the Roman Missal is, after all, the Propers; the translation of them represents a far more monumental work than the translation of the Ordinary, or unchanging part, of the Mass.

Readers may be surprised to learn that many of the Latin orations and antiphons have not changed all that much between the Extraordinary and Ordinary Forms. For instance, the Secret oration for the Second Sunday of Advent in the Extraordinary Form is:

Placáre, quaesumus, Dómine, humilitátis nostræ précibus et hóstiis: et ubi nulla súppetunt suffrágia meritórum, tuis nobis succúrre præsiidiis. Per Dóminum nostrum...

In the Ordinary Form, the only change in the corresponding Prayer Over the Gifts is the substitution of the abbreviated

conclusion "Per Christum Dóminum nostrum," a common change throughout the Missal. The actual Latin prayer itself is the same.

However, the English versions differ significantly. A typical, literal, Douay-Rheims-style English translation as found in many Extraordinary Form hand missals is:

Be appeased, we beseech Thee, O Lord, by the prayers and sacrifices of our humility: and where we lack pleading merits of our own, do Thou, by Thine aid, assist us. Through our Lord...

In contrast, the current Ordinary Form English translation reads:

Lord, we are nothing without you. As you sustain us with your mercy, receive our prayers and offerings. We ask this through Christ our Lord.

The latter is almost devoid of hierarchical character. First, "you" is a rather informal pronoun to use when addressing a member of the Holy Trinity. Second, the latter lacks the supplicative character of the former, which expresses more clearly our position as creatures of the One to Whom we address our prayer. Third, many of the orations in the current translation seem almost undistinguishable from one another because they are rather generically translated and use similar wording. Prayer should have meaning; the Propers of the Mass should indeed be "proper" and substantially different for each feast.

The Holy Trinity should not be addressed with dumbed-down banalities. God deserves better than that. Even if one supports the use of more modern English, it is hard to justify adapting the essential meaning of the prayers. Excessively casual wording of prayers is a slippery slope that arguably leads to inappropriate liturgical art and music, simplistic vestments and architecture, and an overall lax attitude towards our Catholic faith. After all, *lex orándi, lex credéndi*: The law of prayer is law of belief.

The new English translation of the Ordinary Form Ordinary of the Mass has been posted at: www.usccb.org/romanmissal. However, little has been revealed thus far about the phrasing of the newly translated Propers. Translation of the Propers is such an enormous project that translators could get burned out, especially as pressure builds to get it done. A rush to the finish line could result in sloppy work. Let us pray that the members of the International Commission on English in the Liturgy will remain diligent in returning to a more faithful rendering of the prayers, to the very end of the effort.

If accurate expression of the prayers of Holy Mother Church concerns you, the solution is, of course, at hand: Attend the Extraordinary Form of Holy Mass, where the English translations provided in most every handout and hand missal are literal and employ hierarchical language. The orations are quite distinct week-to-week. The high standard to which the Sacred Liturgy is held spills over into high standards for all that surrounds it, in art, architecture, and music. Corners are not cut, our Holy Catholic Faith is transmitted clearly, and culture and society cannot help but benefit.