

## Reflections on the problem of liturgical translations<sup>1</sup>

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The problem of Bible translations arose from the very beginning of Christianity. Jesus Christ taught in Aramaic, but the text transmitted by the apostolic preaching in the New Testament was written in Greek. Only the Greek version of the Gospel texts has been preserved, unlike the Aramaic version.

For the Old Testament, it is the Greek version known as the Septuagint that is mainly used. It is this version that is quoted by the New Testament and the early Fathers. It differs somewhat from the Hebrew text.

Furthermore, with the spread of Christianity in the Latin world, Latin versions appeared, first in North Africa, later in Rome, then in Italy and the West. These are presented as a copy of the Greek text.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, St Jerome revised these texts and, above all, retranslated the entire Old Testament on the basis of the Hebrew text available to him: this was the origin of the Latin Vulgate, approved by the Roman Church at the Council of Trent. Of this, only the psalter retained the ancient text following the Greek of the Septuagint. But the Greek, Coptic and Slavic East continued to follow the Septuagint version in all the texts of the Old Testament.

When the transition to the vernacular took place, the Reformation followed the Hebrew text for the Old Testament. The same was true in the Roman Catholic Church, where St Jerome's Vulgate was used.

As for liturgical texts in the West, these were written in Latin, the language spoken at the time. It remained unchanged until Vatican II. Thus, Latin remained the language of the Latin Church in the West.

After Vatican II, the new typical books were published in Latin. This is the basic text that French translations must follow.

From the outset, this posed a number of problems. Nevertheless, the first approved versions of the biblical texts were remarkable for their fidelity, such as the French Lectionary of 1964.

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<sup>1</sup> Proceedings VII. Versailles. 8–10 November 2001.

But later, after the global reform, the spirit changed: texts that were easy to understand and immediately comprehensible to the faithful were desired. This was often done at the expense of fidelity to the text and led to an impoverishment.

### **Presentation of the Gospel of the current Mass in English**

The expression *In illo tempore*, 'At that time', which appears in the typical text, has disappeared, although it still appears in the Byzantine rite. In the liturgy, writes the Orthodox theologian Father Evdokimov, the reality evoked – the mystery of Christ celebrated – is mysteriously present:

"If memory already gives us the homogeneous presence of the past as *a recollection*, its frozen image, the liturgical memorial goes further and contains not images of the past, but the events themselves, very present, which become *contemporary* for us. [...] Every liturgical reading of the Gospel places us in the event being recounted. 'In those days', the sacred formula that begins every liturgical reading of the Gospel, means 'sacred time' – *in illo tempore* – the present, the contemporary<sup>2</sup>."

This last expression is sometimes replaced by introductory phrases that are not found in the biblical text, such as:

- "It was after Jesus' death" (2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter – Quasimodo);
- "The third day after Jesus' death" for the story of the disciples of Emmaus (3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter);
- "At Easter time" for the Ascension.

All this "historicises" the text, removes its sacred character and gives the impression that we are about to tell a little story! In fact, if deemed necessary, there is nothing to prevent a brief introduction *before* the proclamation, but without mixing it with the Gospel text.

### **Examination of *the Ordo missae*, the Missal and the Lectionary**

#### 1. Introduction to the penitential preparation

- *Fratres, agnoscamus peccata nostra, ut apti simus ad mysteria celebranda.* "Let us prepare

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<sup>2</sup> Paul EVDOKIMOV, *The Art of the Icon: Theology of Beauty*, Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1991, p. 114.

ourselves for the celebration of the Eucharist, acknowledging that we are sinners." The Latin text is watered down in this translation.

- *Qui sanare venisti contritos corde*, a clear quotation from Luke 4:19, echoing Isaiah 61:1 ff. The last two words are rendered as follows: "to save all men." The condition for forgiveness, the conversion of the heart, is thus ignored.

- "Ad dexteram Patris": simply "raised in the glory of the Father." No mention of the "right hand" of the Father, which appears in the symbol.

- In the *Confiteor*, deletion of *semper* before *Virginem*. The Greek liturgy uses a single term: *aeiparthenos*.

## 2. Conclusion of the prayer

No longer *in unitate Spiritus Sancti*. Simply "with the Holy Spirit". The unifying role of the Spirit, who unites the Father, the Spirit and the praying assembly, is removed.

## 3. Creed

No more "consubstantial" – a term from the Council of Nicaea. This provoked numerous protests at the time, which did not result in any correction.

4. *In spiritu humilitatis et in animo contrito* – soul broken by repentance – becomes: "humble and poor"!

5. The response of *the Orate fratres* is completely abbreviated. Its length will be objected to.

## 6. Eucharistic prayers

First Eucharistic Prayer:

Generally quite faithful, but why remove *aeterna* before *damnatione*?

Second Eucharistic Prayer:

After the *Sanctus*, "rosée" is omitted from the mention of the Holy Spirit.

After the consecration, the prayer reads "gathered by the Holy Spirit into one body" – this refers to a social body. This is an addition to the text, which speaks only of unity. This notion of a "social" body is also subject to discussion – cf. St Paul, where *corpus* often refers to the glorious Body of

Christ, and only secondarily to the social body<sup>3</sup>.

Third Eucharistic Prayer:

"You never cease to gather your people," which is an inaccurate translation of "You never cease to gather a people."

Removal of the reference to Malachi 1:11: "so that from the rising of the sun to its setting, a pure offering may be presented to you." The text of Malachi is replaced by a banal expression: "throughout the world".

The same applies to the term *mandatum* –*cuius* mandate–, rendered by the duller verb "to say". Christ no longer seems to be giving the command, he *is* simply *saying*.

Fourth Eucharistic Prayer:

*In finem dilexit eos*: "to the end" seems rather banal. "Until the end" would have been better, especially since in the same Gospel, a verb with the same root is found in the account of Jesus' death. He says: "It is finished" (Jn 19:30).

*Genimine vitis*: "fruit of the vine" – from Matthew 26:29 – is replaced by "filled with wine", which is just as banal.

#### 7. The embolism of the Pater

The quotation from Titus 2:13, *expectantes beatam spem*, is also omitted and replaced by "hoping for the happiness you promise".

8. In *the Agnus Dei*, the word *peccata* is put in the singular. Of course, it is found as such in Jn 1:29, but the present text is in the plural.

9. In the invitation to communion, *ad Cenam Agni* is replaced by "meal of the Lord".

An example of a completely distorted Preface: the Preface of the Ascension. Here is the literal translation of this text: "The Lord Jesus, the King of Glory, having triumphed over sin and death, ascended to the highest heavens, before the astonishment of the angels – *mirantibus* angelis." According to the Fathers, the astonishment of the angels comes from the fact that they see a human

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<sup>3</sup> See Lucien CERFAUX, *The Theology of the Church According to Saint Paul*, Paris: Cerf, 1965, p. 275.

being entering heaven.

The current version simply refers to "the King of Glory, before whom the angels marvel", a general statement with no connection to the fact of the Ascension.

### **Some other prayer texts**

<sup>1st</sup>Sunday of Advent: the phrase *eius dexterarum sociati* – from Col 3:1 – is removed. *Si consurrexeris cum Christo quae sursum sunt quaerite, ubi Christus est in dextera Dei sedens.*

<sup>Second</sup>Sunday of Advent: *sapientiae celestis eruditio*, the teaching that comes from divine wisdom, becomes simply "the intelligence of the heart" in the English prayer!

<sup>3rd</sup>Sunday of Advent: the prayer contains a strange expression, "Direct our joy towards joy", which we took to be a mistake!

We can only conclude these few examples with a wish: that one day we will see a revision of this "official" version, in the sense of greater fidelity to the official text, which is that of the Church and not of the translators, who modify its meaning under the pretext of adaptation! Any other attitude leads to a watering down and impoverishment of liturgical prayer.