

Rewriting the Liturgy: the theological implications of translation¹

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The transformation of the liturgy of the Catholic Church in the wake of the Second Vatican Council was, by any standard, a landmark event. It represented the unfreezing of a liturgical tradition which had seemed to many to be sacrosanct and immemorial, beyond question or change. Almost a century ago the greatest of all English liturgists, Edmund Bishop, could write without a hint of irony that "With the Missal and Breviary of St Pius V ...the history of the Roman liturgy may be said to be closed".²

Bishop himself was too good an historian to harbour romantic illusions about the timelessness or changelessness of liturgy. He had a highly developed sense of the historical evolution of worship and in fact he was a strong sympathiser and fellow-traveller with the Modernist movement, and its attempt to demythologise the doctrinaire non-historical orthodoxy of post-Tridentine Catholicism. But neither Bishop nor the two generations of liturgists who laboured after him to reclaim for the present the forgotten riches of the Latin liturgical tradition could have dreamed of the cultural and theological revolution which would come upon the Church in the late 1960s and 1970s, a revolution which swept away not only many of the accretions of medieval and baroque liturgical and para-liturgical practice which they so deplored, but many of their own most treasured convictions about the nature of liturgy and liturgical theology. They hoped that the liturgy, duly cleansed of accretion and distortion, would become, in Joseph Jungmann's words, "a school of faith". In the ancient prayers and ceremonies of the Church, Jungmann believed, would be found an endless resource, a great well of wisdom and truth. The Liturgy, as much or more than the definitions of Popes and Councils, embodied the spirit of Catholicism. It had been, he declared,

carried along through the centuries. People have scarcely dared to alter it here and there even a little, to enlarge this feature or to modify that symbol. But for us this edifice is all the more precious because we can thus rediscover in the Church's liturgy the deep thoughts and the great prayer of the primitive Church. For us, the

forms of expression are preserved which belong to that period when an inspired Christianity faced and defeated ancient heathenism, and in which are contained its ever-effective world-conquering powers. The *liturgy* gives us a concise picture of the Christian world of faith in strong simple lines. We see a cosmos within which our life can fit into everything which pertains to it.³

From this side of the flood of change which has swept over both Church and culture in the years since that was written, Jungmann's vision of liturgical evolution and renewal as involving altering "here and there ... a little, to enlarge this feature or to modify that symbol" is charged with irony, and his assumptions about the relationship of the liturgical inheritance to the development of the Church of the present seem naive and unsophisticated. The liturgy here is imagined as an inexhaustible resource and a universal panacea. Whatever the question, the liturgy would have the answer, for in its formation amid the first great struggle with heathenism had been definitively established paradigms from which could be recovered Christianity's "ever-effective world-conquering powers". From a rightly restored liturgy the Church could renew its youth, and would be enabled to face the challenge of the modern world as it had once faced the challenge of the Roman world.

If there seems now more than a little quaintness and unreality about this, it is mainly because the assumptions it embodies about the classic status of the prayers of the liturgy were quickly to encounter resistance not so much within the Church in particular, as within the culture at large, where notions of canonicity and classic status increasingly came and continue to come under challenge. Jungmann's certainty that the wisdom of the ages, distilled into ancient prayers and ceremonies, would equip the Church to confront all the challenges of modern times, carried within it a series of unexamined assumptions — about, for example, the primacy and permanently privileged status of a specifically European historical, linguistic and conceptual tradition which went back to ancient Rome. In the era of Vatican II, it would emerge, such assumptions could no longer be made.

Yet without subscribing to all of Jungmann's ideas, we can hardly deny that some sense of the classical and normative status of the ancient prayers of the Church is fundamental to Catholic Christianity. We cannot re-invent Christianity, and for the members of any Church their perception of the nature of Christian reality is mediated through encounter with the tradition. Jungmann's call to attend in humility to the ancient words and symbols of the liturgy, precisely as ancient, was a reminder that real freedom and spontaneity came not from a forgetfulness of who and what one is, but from an immersion in the

tradition which enabled one to renew and extend it, and so to discover oneself.

A vision much like Jungmann's lay behind the renewal of the liturgy which began under Pius XII, above all the restoration of the Easter Vigil, and it has continued to influence the reforms of the post conciliar period. But with a difference, for it became clear to those involved in the process of liturgical renewal that a far more drastic restructuring and rethinking of the liturgy would be possible than had ever been dreamed of before the Council, and in that perception the neo-classicising, neo-patristic revivalism of many of the founding fathers of the liturgical movement was swept to one side. The results, as I shall argue, have not been uniformly happy.

Far and away the most momentous element in the post-conciliar transformation of the liturgy, of course, was the universal and unqualified introduction of the vernacular into all parts of the Roman Mass, a development which it is safe to say virtually no-one expected or dared hope for before the Council. It was a decision, nevertheless, which was absolutely necessary, and I have no doubt that it was one of the greatest of the transforming blessings which the Council brought. It permitted a level of liturgical participation and comprehension by ordinary Catholics—clergy as well as lay people—which the Church had not experienced since late antiquity, and probably not even then.

That said, however, it seems to me that the actual moment at which the transition to the vernacular occurred could hardly have been less propitious. The post-Conciliar transformation of Catholic liturgy, theology and ecclesiology coincided with a period of profound cultural dislocation in the West. Genuine theological renewal became inextricably entangled with a shallow and philistine repudiation of the past which was to have consequences as disastrous in theology as they were in the fine arts, architecture and city planning. Thus the sub-Christian aridities of neo-scholastic seminary text-books were exchanged for a mess of paperbacks, and pious psycho-babble replaced the smug certainties of the older orthodoxy. There was a widespread and indiscriminating collapse of confidence in Catholic theological tradition, and as a result, some of the least happy developments within the Churches of the Reformation, and indeed within the secular culture of the sixties and early seventies, were eagerly embraced as theologically progressive—signs of the times, stirrings of the Spirit.

The most obvious casualty in all this was a sense of the living reality of tradition. Indeed the concept itself became a flag, which was trampled on by those who saw that the Church needed, and needed desperately, to change, but who imagined the Catholic past not as a

resource for change, but as a hindrance and a burden. And so the flag was increasingly abandoned to self-styled “traditionalists”, who saw in the notion of tradition a charter for reaction, and who found in an uncritical and blanket loyalty to an undifferentiated (though in fact highly selective) past, a corset or a suit of armour, rather than an animating principle.

But while these battle-lines were forming and hardening, the work of transforming and then of Englishing the liturgy was undertaken, and it is to the consequences of that latter process I want to devote the rest of this paper. I shall not be concerned here with the liturgical reforms themselves, but with the theological character of the English version of the Roman Missal published in 1973. This unloved and unlovely document is now, happily, approaching the end of its working life, for a revised translation of the whole sacramentary is currently making its slow way through the machinery of the Episcopal Conferences, and should be in use by the end of the Millennium. That revision has been undertaken in part at least out of an acute sense of the shortcomings of the 1973 version. This, therefore, seems an appropriate moment to attempt an assessment of the theological character and impact of the 1973 Missal. The text itself certainly warrants such an exercise, for it has shaped the liturgical sensibilities and experience of a whole generation of Catholics. For English-speaking Catholics under the age of forty five, it *is* the Roman Liturgy. What I want to do in this paper is to try to assess the extent to which this English Missal succeeded in conveying what Edmund Bishop called “the genius of the Roman Rite”. How far was the 1973 book an act of translation and repristination, which made the resources of the Roman Rite available, and how far was it in fact a failure to achieve just that, and instead the provision of an alternative to the Missal? And since we say that *Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi*, what version of Christian truth is to be found embedded in the 1973 text?

The obvious place to begin such an enquiry might seem to be with the ancient Roman Canon of the Mass, and indeed essential clues to both the successes and the failures of the 1973 Missal can be gained by a close examination of the translation of the Roman Canon which it contained. If we can form a judgement about the faithfulness or otherwise of the English version of this, the central prayer of every Missal for over a Millennium, we will have established some pointers for our enquiry as a whole. The version of the Canon of the Mass included as Eucharistic Prayer 1 in the 1973 Missal was in fact one of the first fruits of the vernacular movement, having been produced in 1967/8, and retained subsequently. It has been singled out for high praise by the

ICEL drafters of the new version of the Sacramentary, in the introductory material recently provided to the Bishops' Conferences, as being "dignified and prayerful", and as having "captured the formality and solemnity of the Latin text".¹ I am bound to say that I take a less favourable view of the matter. The 1973 version, and for that matter the forthcoming revision, involved a series of decisions which in fact ensured that the translation departed very markedly from the specific character of the Latin original. Translating the Canon, of course, was no easy task. The Latin text was in many ways an embarrassment to professional liturgists, because it appeared to lack elements which were held to be fundamental to any good eucharistic prayer. It is essentially a long prayer or rather a patched-together series of prayers, of supplication and blessing, and of almost relentlessly insistent offering, with very little in the way of direct "praise and thanksgiving". It begins, strikingly but puzzlingly, with a resounding "YOU, THEREFORE" (a "therefore" which seemed to worry the liturgists). In addition, it has no epiclesis, it had yards of saints names and the intercessions were broken up into two chunks before and after the words of institution. It is characterised by a whole range of rhetorical devices calculated to turn a translator's hair white—lists, repetitions, the piling up of near synonyms apparently derived from Roman legal terminology.²

The invention of Eucharistic Prayers 2–4 was designed, as everyone knows, to rectify these "defects" in the Roman Canon. But in addition, the English version of the Canon tried to tone down these "faults" in a variety of ways—the lists of synonyms were rationalised, the repetitions eliminated, and the phrase "We come to you with praise and thanksgiving", which has no warrant in the Latin, was inserted to supply what was felt to be a major theological lacuna. Above all, the distinctive and very prominent humility of address to God which is such a feature of the Roman Canon was systematically removed, and qualifying adverbs and adjectives which increased this deference of address—like "most merciful", "holy" "venerable" and so on, were not translated. So, for example, in the opening lines of the prayer the phrase "supplices rogamus ac petimus" was rendered, baldly, "we ask", setting a benchmark for translation practice throughout the rest of the missal. It might, of course be argued that here was a simple adjustment of tone for a democratic age, involving no point of theological substance. But the rhetorical humility of the Latin was not in fact a marginal element in the text: it was heavily emphasised in late antiquity and the Middle Ages by the profound inclination of the celebrant and ministers at this point (as it was later at the "Supplices te rogamus") What appears a minor adjustment because deferential forms don't seem to go too well in

everyday English speech, was in fact a radical departure from one of the most distinctive features of the Latin liturgical tradition, with real and far-reaching theological implications. The shift in rhetorical pitch reflected shifting perceptions of the nature of our relationship with the God addressed. In fact, it could be said, the translation tried hard to tone down precisely those stylistic aspects of the Roman Canon that might be regarded as most characteristic and idiosyncratic about it.

These features of the translation certainly reflected judgements about what was or was not appropriate in direct address to God,—that is, a theological judgement—rather than any intrinsic problem about catching the tone of the original in English. The translators seem to have been opposed to rhetorical repetition, despite the fact that Cranmer had successfully naturalised this aspect of the Roman Canon triumphantly in his prayers: it would have been perfectly possible to reproduce some at least of the effects of the Latin style of the Canon in English. No equivalent, for example, was offered for the adjective “Clementissime”, at the opening of the Canon, despite the venerable liturgical pedigree in English of the phrase “Most Merciful”. The translators would have done well to borrow here the resounding opening of Cranmer’s General Confession “Almighty and most merciful Father”, which would have captured the solemnity of the Latin.

It would be quite unfair to suggest that the ICEL text had no merits, of course. Indeed, at a number of points, it pulled off what seem to me quite brilliant bravura acts of improvisation. Take a particularly difficult section of the canon, the *Quam Oblationem*.

Quam Oblationem tu, Deus, in omnibus, quaesumus, benedictam,
adscriptam, ratam, rationabilem, acceptabilemque facere digneris....

This is a very characteristic example of the rhetorical style of the Latin original, and of the fiendish problems involved in rendering it into meaningful English. Should one aim at reproducing the hypnotic repetitious effect of the string of very abstract adjectives in the original? And how is one to translate words like “adscriptam”, or even more difficult, “rationabilem”? Hovering behind the Latin, of course, is Romans 12/1—“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercy of God, that you present your bodies, a living sacrifice, holy, pleasing unto God, your reasonable service”.

The solution adopted to these difficulties in the translation was drastic but in some ways very good indeed—“Bless and approve our offering; make it acceptable to you, an offering in Spirit and in truth”. Now, “an offering in Spirit and in truth” seems to me a virtuoso rendering of “rationabilem”: but it is not in any straightforward sense

direct translation, and indeed it has the effect of switching the theological reference of the whole passage from Roman 12/1 to John 4/24: God is a Spirit, and he that worships him must worship him in Spirit and in truth—in effect it rewrites, rather than translates, the original. One can defend the rewriting in this instance, but it does need to be recognised as such. . And of course this solution also deliberately sacrifices the hypnotic mantra quality of the Latin.

The shift of theological reference in that passage seems to me largely successful, *if* one once accepts the validity of the procedure—in effect a creative adaptation of the passage rather than a strict translation. All too often, however, such shifts seemed to involve a mere loss of resonance and theological context, rather than an attempt to find equivalents which made more sense in English. Take, for example, the magnificent lines in the prayer of oblation immediately after the words of institution

Offerimus praeclarae maiestati tuae de tuis donis ac datis hostiam
puram, hostiam sanctam, hostiam immaculatam, panem sanctum
vitae aeternae et calicem salutis perpetuae.

Once again, the English version made no attempt to reproduce the solemn repetition in the Latin—“a pure sacrifice, a holy sacrifice, an unblemished sacrifice”, offering instead only “this holy and perfect sacrifice”. But, rhetorical lowering apart, “perfect sacrifice” was in fact a very poor rendering of the Latin word “immaculatum”, a phrase surely meant to recall the dozens of times the word “unblemished” occurs to describe the victims for OT sacrifice, and the coming together in the Vulgate version of Colossians 1/22 of the notion of both a holy and an unblemished sacrifice. The word “unblemished” was presumably rejected as unfamiliar and archaic, but it was precisely its distinctiveness which would have helped underline the biblical resonances and the theological contextualising of the notion of sacrifice implicit in the original. And one can only speculate as to why no translation whatever was offered for the word “puram”.

We can see the same theological shrinkage in the next paragraph of the Canon, the “Supra Quae”, with its resonant evocation of the sacrifices of Abel, Abraham and Melchisidech. The tremendous climax of this section—“sanctum sacrificium, immaculatam hostiam”, was totally suppressed, and once again the key word, “unblemished”, was missing.

There is of course a whole debate about appropriate language registers and the danger of an alienating cultural embarrassment in translation which I can't enter into here, but which it wouldn't be unfair

to sum up in terms of a 1960s preference for unbleached hessian rather than gold brocade. But the meaning is the message, as another sixties figure used to like to say, and I hope I have said enough to indicate that changes in rhetorical register of this sort are never merely matters of what colour paper to wrap the gift in, but do in fact involve significant shifts of meaning.

But in what follows I want to concentrate on the short variable prayers of the propers—what we used to call the Collect, Secret and Post Communion prayers. Though the post conciliar liturgy contains many new prayers, most of these short prayers were taken direct or with light revision from the ancient sacramentaries of the Roman Church, and indeed one of the most attractive and notable features of the Missal of Paul VI is the number of these ancient prayers which it restored to currency. Edmund Bishop had characterised the genius of the Roman Rite in two words, sobriety and sense, and these prayers amply embody those virtues. In marked contrast to many of the longer and more discursive prayers of other rites, especially those of the East, these crisp and often tightly structured prayers offer a unique glimpse of Roman tradition at its most profound and most memorable. Fidelity to the tradition would demand faithfulness in transmitting something at least of the quality of these prayers into the vernacular.

In discussing the distinctive theological merits of the Roman liturgy, Cipriano Vagaggini, one of the key figures in the production of the Post-Conciliar Mass, singled out the notion of a “*sacrum commercium*”, a holy exchange, in the eucharistic offering, which is so central in the Roman canon. Bread and wine, he wrote, “are chosen from among the gifts God has given us and are offered to him as a symbol of the offering of ourselves, of what we possess and of the whole of material creation. In this offering we pray God to accept them, to bless them and to transform them through his Spirit into the Body and Blood of Christ, asking him to give them back to us transformed in such a way that through them we may, in the Spirit, be united to Christ and to one another, sharing in fact in the divine nature”⁶.

Vagaggini was discussing the theological focus of the Roman Canon, but this notion of a “holy exchange” in fact underlies many of the most characteristic prayers of the Roman Rite, and could even be claimed, I think, as one of its defining features. The 1973 Missal’s success or failure in handling this aspect of the Roman tradition will therefore provide a good litmus test for its general theological character.

In the Missal its characteristic form is binary: prayers over the offerings or after communion repeatedly explore the paradox that earthly and temporal things become, by the power of God, vehicles of

eternal life. The Missal is never tired of this dialectic, and prayer after prayer rings the changes on it. Here, by way of a representative example, is the prayer after communion for the eighth Sunday of ordinary time.⁷

*Satiati munere salutari tuam, Domine, miseridordiam deprecamur,
ut, hoc eodem quo nos temporaliter vegetas sacramento, perpetuae
vitae participes benignus efficias.*

This is a remarkable rich prayer in many ways: here I would just draw your attention to the phrase “nos temporaliter vegetas”. “Vegetas” in the Vulgate version of Genesis 9/15 is what souls do to bodies⁸; it is the life force itself, filling inanimate things with motion and growth. So the prayer may be loosely translated

Having fed full on your saving gift, Lord, we humbly beg your mercy:
through this sacrament you make us flourish in this world of time
through this same sacrament, in your goodness,
make us sharers in the life that has no end.

Here now is what the 1973 Missal makes of this.

God of salvation, may this sacrament which strengthens us here on earth bring us to eternal life.

This, I am sure you will agree, is very depressing. Gone is the saving gift, gone the vivid image of diners stuffed full to bursting with good things, gone is the distinctive force of “vegetas”, gone is the contrast and pairing between “temporaliter” and “perpetuae”. Moreover, the whole prayer has been pelagianised. The agent of both the human flourishing and the sharing of eternal life in the original is the Lord himself “you make us flourish, may you make us sharers”. In the translation, it is “this sacrament” which will bring us to eternal life. Of course, it is implicit even in the English prayer that God is ultimately responsible for the effect of the sacrament, but it is only implicit, whereas the Latin insists on it. I don’t think this is a matter of splitting hairs. As we shall see, this shift towards an emphasis on the primacy of human religious activity or experience, at the expense of the Latin Missal’s relentless emphasis on the agency of God, is a striking feature of the 1973 version.

What we have here, then, cannot strictly be called a translation: it is a loose and flaccid paraphrase, which empties out the distinctive content of the original, and which lacks the binary structure which gives the original its force and memorability. Incidentally, one may fairly take the version provided in the new sacramentary as an indicator of its general

character. While it omits important nuances from the prayer, in particular its deference of tone and supplicatory character, nevertheless is a vast improvement on 1973, making the essential point. If it takes some liberties, it is nevertheless a real translation

Merciful Lord, We have feasted at your banquet of salvation.
Through this sacrament
which nourishes our lives on earth,
make us sharers in eternal life.

Take now another example, the ancient Gregorian prayer over the gifts prescribed for the fourth Sunday of Easter.

Concede, quaesumus, Domine, semper nos per haec mysteria
paschalia gratulari,
ut continua nostrae reparationis operatio
perpetuae nobis fiat causa laetitiae.

This is a playful prayer, which takes the idea of the Church's annually repeated celebration of Easter, and moves from the fact of the temporal repetition of the feast, through the unending work of grace which that repeated action mediates to us, to the perpetual joy of heaven which will be its fulfillment—note the progression through three types of endlessness—*semper*, *continua*, *perpetua*. There is also a play here, notice, on the word “operation which can simply mean work, business, performance, but which may also mean specifically a liturgical performance. So a rough translation might run

Grant, we beseech you, Lord, always to rejoice through these Easter
mysteries,
so that the ongoing work/celebration of our renewal
may be to us the cause of unending joy.

The 1973 version, in its very first line, sabotages the play on repetition and endlessness, by refusing to offer any translation of “*semper*”.

Lord, restore us by these Easter mysteries.
May the continuing work of our redeemer bring us eternal joy.

Not only has the threefold variation on the idea of recurrence gone, but an ambiguity has been introduced into the prayer. What, exactly, is meant here by “the continuing work of our redeemer”? It is not securely tied, as the original is, to the annually recurring Easter celebration—to the Easter mass; the whole prayer has lost its focus and energy.

Finally, a simpler example, the straightforward but excellent prayer over the gifts for the tenth Sunday of ordinary time.

Respice, Domine, quaesumus, nostram propitius servitatem,
ut quod offerimus sit tibi munus acceptum,
et nostrae caritatis augmentum.

This prayer once again plays on the dual character of the liturgical offering, exploring quite simply its Godward and its Churchward dimensions. It may be translated

Look with favour, we beseech you Lord, on the service we render
you
so that what we offer may be for you an acceptable gift,
and for us an increase of love.

The 1973 missal once again sabotages the distinctive energy of the prayer.

Lord, look with love on our service. Accept the gifts we bring and
help us grow in Christian love.

There is now no discernible link between the three elements of the prayer, for what we are left with is essentially three disjointed petitions, with the final request for a growth of love in particular completely unconnected by any logic to the two petitions which concern the acceptability of the offering.⁹

So far, I have been focussing on prayers over the gifts or after communion, prayers which, like the Canon, reflect directly on the meaning of the eucharistic action. I have suggested that the 1973 Missal fairly consistently fails to deliver the essential quality of these prayers, but the examples I have given do not suggest much in the way of a theological consistency about the translations. But I did mention the *evident pelagianising tendency at work in the rendering of my first example, the postcommunion prayer Satiati munere salutari*. This pelagianising tendency becomes much more striking if we consider the translations of the collects of the Missal. These collects include some of the greatest prayers of the Latin Church, and have the added advantage of having inspired Cranmer to some of his most marvellous feats of translation: time and again the versions of these prayers in the Book of Common prayer render virtually exactly and fully both the rhetorical force and the theological depth of the Latin originals. Time and again, alas, the 1973 versions subvert both. And here, I do think we can see some of the more facile dimensions of the theological fashions of the 1960s and early 1970s at work.

Let us take as an example the beautiful collect for the eleventh Sunday in ordinary time

Deus in te sperantium fortitude, invocationibus nostris adesto
propitius,

et, quia sine te nihil potest mortalis infirmitas,
gratiae tua praesta semper auxilium,
ut, in exsequendis mandatis tuis,
et voluntate tibi et actione placeamus.

This is an archetypal Roman prayer, with its massive insistence on the trustworthiness of God, and the corresponding frailty of human nature, and its paradoxical combination of an insistence on our helplessness without grace, with a call to the service of God in will and in action. Here is Cranmer's version, not quite perfect, perhaps, but near enough.

O God, the strength of all them that put their trust in thee,
mercifully accept our prayers;
and because through the weakness of our mortal nature
we can do no good thing without thee,
grant us the help of thy grace,
that in keeping thy commandments we may please thee,
both in will and deed:
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

And here, by contrast, is the 1973 version.

Almighty God, our hope and our strength,
without you we falter.
Help us to follow Christ and to live according to your will.

The inadequacy and inaccuracy of this translation almost beggars belief, but there is more here than ineptitude. At every point in the prayer the insistence of the original on the impotence for good of unaided human nature, and on the primacy of grace, is weakened or downright contradicted. God is not now "the strength of them that put their trust in thee", but, much more vaguely, "our hope and our strength": strength is not seen here as proceeding from hope, but as a parallel quality. The stern insistence of the original that without God "mortal frailty can do *nothing*"—"nihil potest mortalis infirmitas", becomes the feeble "without you we falter". Grace is no longer even mentioned, the strong phrase "auxilium gratiae" becoming simply "help us", while the reference to the following of the commandments is edited out, being replaced by a phrase about "following Christ" which has no warrant in the original. The insistence of the original that the external following of the commandments, under grace, can become not merely an external obedience, but a means of pleasing God "both in will and in deed", is thus totally lost, the pairing of our actions and will becoming blurred into an unfocussed reference to the will of God. In short, a magnificently balanced Augustinian meditation on the dialectic of grace and obedience becomes a vague and semi-pelagian petition for help in

case we falter.¹⁰

The same forces can be seen at work in the rendering of the collect for the thirtieth Sunday of ordinary time, another ancient prayer perfectly embodying an Augustinian theology of grace.

Omnipotens sempiterne Deus,
da nobis fidei, spei et caritatis augmentum,
et, ut mereamur assequi quod promittis,
fac nos amare quod praecipis.

In this prayer the paradoxes of grace are celebrated. Faith hope and charity are pleaded for as God's gifts, and the notion of our deserving or meriting the promises of God is turned on its head, for this deserving is itself the fruit of God's gift. Once again, outward obedience must be replaced by the movement of the whole heart and will—we must *love* God's commandments to win heaven, but such love will not be our deserving, for God must create that love within us—"fac nos". Here then is Cranmer's version.

Almighty and everlasting God,
give unto us the increase of faith, hope and charity;
and, that we may obtain that which thou dost promise,
make us to love that which thou dost command;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The paradox has been weakened a little here by Cranmer's protestant discomfort with the notion of deserving or merit,—*ut mereamur assequi* becomes simply "that we may obtain", but this is in every other way a glorious version, which retains the balance and even much of the rhythm of the original. Here is the 1973 rendering.

Almighty and ever-living God, strengthen our faith, hope and love.
May we do with loving hearts what you ask of us
and come to share the life you promise.

Once again, this moves in the direction of a vague semi-pelagianism. With a little help from God—strengthening, notice, *our* faith, hope and love, a possessive use of "our" quite opposite in effect to the Latin's "*da nobis augmentum*": with that little bit of help, then, we will do with loving hearts not what is commanded, notice, but what is "asked", and so, naturally, share God's life. Gone is any reference to God's promise, and the whole point of the original, that we can't do what God wants unless he gives us both the desire and the power to love his commandments, is eroded and lost.

I said that I thought one could clearly see behind many of these changes the influence of some of the more facile aspects of the theological ethos of the late sixties and early seventies. Even when these

tendencies don't go as far in a pelagian direction as in the examples I've just been considering, they are ubiquitous, and the overall effect is the emptying out of the theological tension which is so creative and exhilarating a feature of the ancient Roman collects. Take the Gregorian prayer which is now the collect for the twelfth Sunday of ordinary time.

Sancti nomini tui, Domine,
timorem pariter et amorem fac nos habere perpetuum,
quia numquam tua gubernatione destituis,
quos in soliditate tuae dilectionis instituis.

This is a wonderful prayer, one of the most carefully balanced of all the collects of the Missal, but for that very reason, fiendishly difficult to translate. For once Cranmer's version, for the second Sunday after Trinity in the BCP, though it is very fine in its own right, does not really match the original, so I am thrown back on my own more modest resources.¹¹ A rough translation might run as follows

Grant us, Lord, not only a constant fear of your Holy Name,
but also a constant love of it
for you leave no-one without your guidance
whom you have firmly established in your love.

There are several weaknesses in my version: "Grant us" does not sufficiently convey the starkness of "fac nos habere"—"make us to have", with its strong insistence on God's initiative and the overwhelming nature of his grace, which always achieves his ends. In addition, the word "gubernatio" is far more eloquent in Latin than "guidance" is in English. The latin word is primarily associated with the helmsman of a ship, so that a better version might be "you leave no-one rudderless"—the whole image is one of rescue from aimlessness and loss by God's steady hand at the helm, or the contrast between the solid grounding which the love of God gives us, in contrast to the aimless rise and fall of a ship adrift. Nevertheless, I hope my version brings out some of the excellences of the prayer. As will be evident, it turns on a play between the concepts of love and fear, and behind the prayer there hover a whole host of biblical echoes Psalm 11:1/9–10, "Holy and terrible is his name, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom", 1 John 4:16–18, "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God...there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear", Ephesians 3/17 "being rooted and grounded in love", and so on. Notice, it is absolutely essential for the meaning of the prayer that both fear and love should be explicitly played off against each other, for the prayer moves from the fear of God's holy name, to the greater and more wonderful reality of the love of that name, that is, of God himself, and to the fact

that our salvation, our sense of direction and of being held and guided by God, springs not from fear, appropriate as fear might be before the majesty of his Name, but from his saving mercy in establishing us in his love.

With all these points noted, let us turn to the 1973 version.

Father, guide and protector of your people,
grant us an unfailing respect for your name,
and keep us always in your love.

Once again, I am afraid, this is a fiasco, but this time the clockwork driving the wreckage is clearly visible. The translators have evidently shied away from the idea of the fear of the Lord. This unpleasant concept is simply not allowed into the prayer, becoming instead “unfailing respect”, a laughably wet rendering. Impeccable liberal sentiments are at work here, ushering away the notion that God might be fearsome, blinding the translator to the power of the prayer, which urges its hearers to pass beyond fear, to the real foundation of our hope, the love of God. In what appears to be a foolish attempt to tidy up the prayer by getting rid of unpleasant pre-conciliar notions like the fear of God, the translator has missed the profounder theological insight and poise of the original, which goes beyond well-meaning liberalism to a wondering sense of the graciousness of God who establishes us, beyond all fear, in his love. The result in the translation is a prayer of stupifying blandness and emptiness. And here the new draft Sacramentary also lets us down, getting the tone and register of the prayer wrong. Its version runs

Lord God teach us to hold your holy name
both in awe and in lasting affection,
for you never fail to help and govern
those whom you establish in your steadfast love.

“Awe” is perhaps not as bad as “unfailing respect”, but it still shies away from fear, and thereby fails to connect with its scriptural sources (try saying to yourself, “the awe of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”, “perfect love casts out awe”!) And “lasting affection” is disastrous, the sort of thing one says one feels for a retiring colleague or a favourite dog. Why ever has the translator not rendered this straightforwardly as “love”?

The desire to tidy up the prayers of the Missal theologically, removing what were thought to be outdated or non PC concepts, or to make the prayers more straightforwardly—that is, simplistically—“biblical”, crops up throughout the 1973 translations. The results are not always as disastrous as the example I have just been considering, but I

am bound to say that they seem to me hardly ever adequately to match the Latin originals. Take the uncomplicated collect for the tenth Sunday in Ordinary time.

Deus, a quo bona cuncta procedunt,
tuis largire supplicibus,
ut cogitimus, te inspirante, quae recta sunt
et, te gubernante, eadem faciamus.

This is far from brilliant, but it has a neat turn on the idea of putting good thoughts into actual practice. A rough translation might run:

O God, from whom all good things proceed,
hear our supplications
and grant that, inspired by you, we may think right thoughts,
and guided by you, we may put those thoughts into practice.

The 1973 version of this doesn't even attempt to convey the play on thought and deed here. Instead, it turns the general notion of divine inspiration into the more specific one of the sending of the Holy Spirit, and it doodles around with the final clause, sticking in a flourish about peace—an OK concept in 1973, but which has no equivalent in the Latin. In the same way, I don't know where the wisdom and love in the opening invocation comes from.

God of wisdom and love, source of all good,
send your Spirit to teach us your truth
and guide our actions in your way of peace.

This is harmless enough, but notice that the logic of the original has been shot to pieces. In the original prayer God is first identified as the one from whom everything that is good proceeds, and then that general thought is worked out in the second half of the prayer, which explores the particular truth that he is the source even of our rational and moral activity—when we have good thoughts, it is under his inspiration, and when we do act on such thoughts to do good deeds, it is because we are acting under his governance and guidance. This point is actually blunted by turning “**te inspirante**” into “send your Spirit”, since it is a much more surprising notion that our innermost (and secular) thoughts spring from God's inspiration, than that the Spirit might teach us his truth—which could, after all, take the “religious” form of reading the scriptures or hearing a sermon or listening to this prayer. In general, the unremarkable original has far more going for it than the jazzed up translation. The draft sacramentary, as usual, is very much better here

Almighty God, from whom every good gift proceeds
grant that by your inspiration
we may discern those things which are right
and, by your merciful guidance, do them.

It is often in rendering the quieter and less spectacular prayers of the Missal, with their routine-seeming sentiments, that the theological spin of the 1973 translations becomes most evident. Once again, take an unspectacular collect, that for the third Sunday of ordinary time.

Omnipotens sempiterne Deus,
dirige actus nostros in beneplacito tuo,
ut in nomine dilecti Filii tui mereamur
bonis operibus abundare.

This is a very characteristic Roman prayer, with a very familiar structure—an opening emphasis on the power of God, a plea for his help in which the sovereignty of grace is illustrated in some way, and then a neat turn in which the ideas of our effort and deserving, and God’s freely given grace, are paradoxically interwoven. It is not a great prayer, but it is very close indeed to the core ideas of the Roman liturgy as a whole. A rough version might run

Almighty and everlasting God,
direct our actions in accordance with your will,
so that in the name of your beloved Son,
we may deserve to abound in good works.

As you will see from the inadequacies of my version, this is a tricky prayer to get just right “in accordance with your will” doesn’t quite render “in beneplacito tuo” it is too effort-bound and striving. “So that they may be well-pleasing in your sight”, is archaic but perhaps captures more accurately the element of gratuitousness which is being begged for. Then there is that charged word “mereamur”—The American Jesuit translator Martin O’Keefe has rendered this “that we may be privileged to abound in good works”¹², for which there is a good deal to be said. But at any rate, the overall drift of the prayer, with its little play between the notions of God’s graciousness and our action, should be clear enough. The 1973 version is really rather extraordinary.

All-powerful and ever-living God,
direct your love that is within us,
that our efforts in the name of your Son
may bring mankind to unity and peace.

All sorts of worthy thoughts and fashionably correct sentiments have been imported here. We are no longer praying for the right direction of our actions, but for the direction of God’s love within us, a concept which I suspect is not entirely coherent, at any rate I can’t make much of it. Even more strikingly, however, where the original prayer

asks, fairly modestly, that under God's direction we may abound in good works, the 1973 version asks that "our efforts ... may bring mankind to unity and peace", a megalomaniac ambition as presumptuous as it is unreal, but which, in the context of the political hopes and fears of the early 1970s is perhaps intelligible. This is also, I suppose, the sort of emphasis that might arise from some of the crasser readings of certain aspects of *Gaudium et Spes*, but it is certainly no part of the original prayer. I imagine that another part of the trouble here is that the translators shied away from the undoubted theological prickliness of "mereamur", but what they have ended up with is a far more starkly pelagian sentiment than any even hinted at in the original.¹³

Pelagianism again, you see. Or maybe this is too strong a word, for perhaps all it amounts to is a persistent desire to shift the emphasis on to the experiential dimension of religion, to mark out our appropriation of truth rather than God's revelation of it. In the collect for Trinity Sunday, for example, the claim that the Father, by sending the Word of Truth and Spirit of Sanctification "admirabile mysterium tuum hominibus declarasti" ("you have declared your wonderful mystery to humankind") becomes "Through them we come to know the mystery of your life". Something of the same tendency is at work in the "psychologising" of theological concepts elsewhere in the Missal, as in the notorious rendering in Eucharistic Prayer IV of the Johannine phrase "in finem delixit eos", which represents St John's "eis telos"—"he loved them *to the end*" (which carries the meaning of completion, fulfillment, consummation) "as "he showed the depth of his love"—a shift from the profoundly theological towards the sentimentally psychological.

But in any case I don't want to suggest that the translators were *deliberately* introducing pelagian or other errors into these texts. That they are to be found there is partly the consequence of decisions taken about rhetorical strategy in the translations. The tendency—no, the determination—of the translators to break the complex and tense sentences of the originals into disconnected series of discrete statements often destroys the theological balance as well as the rhythmic and rhetorical structure of the prayers. Again and again the failure to translate the crucial conjunction "ut" is like pulling the lynch-pin joining the carriages of a train. But the fault is not wholly to be laid at the door of the translators. The revision of the actual Latin texts of the Missal for the Missal of Paul VI occasionally shows some of the same sort of theological shifts as those I have been exploring in the 1973 translations. The key example here is the revealing rewriting of the magnificent Gregorian collect formerly prescribed for the fourth Sunday after Pentecost, and now used on the seventeenth Sunday in ordinary time.

This ancient prayer is one of the glories of the Roman liturgical tradition, and it evoked from Cranmer one of his most triumphant translations. I give it first in its ancient, pre-Conciliar form.¹⁴

Protector in te sperantium Deus
sine quo nihil est validum, nihil sanctum:
multiplica super nos misericordiam tuam,
ut te rectore, te duce,
sic transeamus per bona temporalia
ut non ammittamus aeterna.

As I said, this inspired Cranmer to one of his most magnificent efforts, in the BCP collect for the fourth Sunday after Trinity.

O God, the protector of all that trust in thee
without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy:
Increase and multiply upon us thy mercy,
that thou being our ruler and guide
we may so pass through things temporal,
that we finally lose not the things eternal
Grant this, O heavenly Father, for Jesus Christ's sake our Lord.

This is an almost perfect act of translation. Almost, but not quite. The original is profoundly Augustinian, and therefore exquisitely poised. It is a prayer that ruled and led by God, we may pass through the good things of time, so as not to forfeit eternal life. **Transeamus per bona temporalia**—The world and all that is in it are good, yet we must pass through, **transeamus**, not settle down in it. Cranmer does not render the full paradox, because he doesn't quite render the strength of "*bona temporalia*". The original is not world denying, but it emphasises that we are travellers, pilgrims, in a world in which we are not quite at home. That world holds in existence, and is itself good and holy, only because it issues from the hand of God, and its value for us depends on its remaining transparent to Him. The whole imagery of the prayer is that of a great journey, carried out under the protection of God, our leader—*dux*—towards whom we travel in hope, in the world, but not of it.

In the late 1960s, this would not do at all. Sentiments of this sort were held to be life-denying, manichean. As a result, the Latin text itself this ancient prayer was altered.

Protector in te sperantium Deus
sine quo nihil est validum, nihil sanctum:
multiplica super nos misericordiam tuam,
ut te rectore, te duce,
sic bonis transeuntibus nunc utamur
ut iam possimus inhaerere mansuris.

In this version, we no longer pray that we may so pass through the good things of time, that we gain the things which are eternal: instead, we pray that we may so make use, here and now, of transient things, that, as we do so, we may already lay hold on abiding or permanent things. But note the shift from “*transeamus*” to “*utamur*”. There is still some tension in the prayer, in the contrast between the transience of the good things we use, and the permanence of the good things we hope to inherit, but the theology of the prayer has been radically altered, even contradicted. The eschatological dimension, which in the original involves a journeying towards something not of this world, is now “cashed”, into a laying hold now on permanence. The distinctively Augustinian challenge of the original, that we must simultaneously recognise the goodness of the created world, but “pass through” it, is gone. And with it, of course, goes the internal logic of the metaphors of journey, protection, guidance, and leading, on which the original was structured, for the prayer is no longer about a journey at all. With the disappearance of “*transeamus*”, the whole prayer falls apart, the heart has gone out of it.

Here is the 1973 translation, in which these changes in the Latin are even further accentuated:

God our Father and Protector,
without you nothing is holy, nothing has value.
Guide us to everlasting life
by helping us to use wisely the blessings you have given to the
world.

And here the far more faithful version in the draft Sacramentary, brings out more starkly than the 1973 version the nature of the theological transformation which has taken place. The new version runs

O God, protector of those who hope in you,
without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy,
enfold us in your gracious care and mercy,
that with you as our ruler and guide
we may wisely use the gifts of this passing world,
and fix our hearts even now on those which last for ever.

Several things have gone wrong here—“Enfold us in your gracious care and mercy”, for example, is schmalzy and overlush, and lacks the concreteness of “*multiplica super nos misericordiam tuam*”, but it is to the startling phrase “that we may fix our hearts even now” which transfers the last line that I would like to draw your attention—a complete rejection of the “otherworldly” feel of the Gregorian original, and if anything a heightening of the theological mood of a particular

moment in the late 1960s.

It is time to draw to a close. The object of this paper has been twofold: to try to indicate some of the characteristic ideas running through the shorter prayers of the Roman Missal, and then to try to assess the extent to which the 1973 English version succeeded in transmitting these ideas, and the theological ethos they represented and encoded. The verdict must be essentially one of sustained failure to rise to the challenge of the Latin, not merely in its great moments, but also in the humdrum bread and butter ordinariness of the routine prayers of the latin propers. I have tried to show that this failure involves more than a simple artistic or literary insensitivity. In almost all cases the distinctive theology of the prayers has been evacuated, and in many cases it has actually been subverted, and replaced by a slacker, often semipelagian theology, far removed from the spirit of the Roman rite, but redolent of some of the more shallowly optimistic theological currents of the late 1960s.

I hope it has also emerged that an extraordinary proportion of the short collects and related prayers which are the hallmark of the Roman rite present a uniquely concentrated and balanced theology, distilling the essence of the Latin theological tradition in the patristic and early-medieval period. That theology is the birth-right of every Roman Catholic, and, as the wonderful Cranmer versions of many of these prayers show, it also underlies much of what we have in common with our protestant and Anglican fellow Christians. For fifteen hundred years these prayers encoded a whole theological ethos and piety within the liturgy, yielding their meaning in repeated hearings to anyone who cared to listen attentively to them. Despite their brevity, most of these prayers, even the simplest of them, are nuanced and many-layered, and do in fact repay repeated and close scrutiny.

As will have become clear, the same cannot be said for the English versions which have been in use since 1973. The voice of the Collects and related prayers of the Missal, so nuanced, so full of an enlightening theological tension, so charged with a sense of the paradoxes of grace—this was a voice the Church needed in the generation after the Council. It was a voice that was not heard. For a whole generation the splendour of that dimension of the Latin liturgical tradition has been buried behind unworthy and vapid substitutes posing as translation. The seriousness of this substitution can hardly be exaggerated. *Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi*: the balance and nuance of the latin prayers was a necessary element in the balance and flexibility of theological understanding within the Catholic community. If these model prayers are thin and crude, so will be the people's imagining of God. The collapse of Latin in schools and

universities has raised the stakes, for it has meant that the survival of much of our tradition increasingly depended on good translation, and good translation is what we have been denied.

But whatever the reasons, there has been tragic loss. The economy, balance and nuance of the Latin prayers has largely gone from English-speaking Catholic theological culture. The seminaries are full now not only of students with no latin, but of teachers with no latin. For them there is simply no direct access to the heart of our theological tradition, the Missal. It is a situation which I confess I find it difficult to think or speak about without bitterness, for this was a loss which was not necessary. Catholics pride themselves on their attentiveness to tradition, but we have come to place the weight of that tradition too much in conformity to the current directives of ecclesiastical authority, too little in the costly and laborious work involved in transmitting the insight and inspiration of the past as a resource for the future. The Missal of 1973 represents a massive and avoidable failure not merely of translation, but a failure of *episkope*, a failure of oversight on the part of those charged with the responsibility of passing on “the Catholic faith, which comes to us from the Apostles”. The Church is poorer, possibly permanently poorer, because of it.

Of course, one needs to keep a sense of proportion. There is more to liturgy than words, and despite all that I have said, the splendour of the liturgy shines out again and again, even through the drab and imprecise words into which it has so often been rendered. The liturgy nowadays perhaps operates with a narrower range of symbolism and with a smaller repertoire of words, but the average Catholic has a surer grasp of those symbols, and a readier understanding of the words, than was possible before the arrival of the vernacular. Though those touched by the Liturgical movement before the Council had access to a marvellous range of bilingual missals, and liturgical commentaries, which opened up some of the riches of the tradition to the educated, Catholic devotional culture in general fed as much or more off para-liturgical and extra liturgical devotions—the Station of the Cross, the Rosary—as off the liturgy. Above everything, the scriptures, which the new liturgy has opened up effectively to the laity for the first time in the history of the Church, were a closed book. For all that I have said, therefore, the situation now is very much healthier than it was before the Council.

Moreover, a new translation of the Missal is currently nearing the end of a process of scrutiny by the various English-speaking Episcopal conferences. As should be clear from the examples I have given you, the new versions have their problems, and will no doubt find their critics. They nevertheless demonstrate throughout a seriousness of engagement

with the originals which was almost wholly lacking in 1973. The translators of the new versions certainly seem aware of the intrinsic value of the texts they handle, and more concerned to do justice to both the form and the content of these wonderful prayers. We must wait in hope.

These new translations will help those who wish to do so to go to school to the Roman Rite in the way that the Missal of 1973 not only did not encourage, but actually prevented. But I doubt if they will have the impact they might once have done. We have got out of the way of attending to the fine detail of such prayers, for in the versions familiar to most people, they did not deserve such attention. It may be that new versions have come not merely a generation late, but a generation too late. The reform of the liturgy has moved on, and there is more between us and these prayers than a twenty-five year hiccup. The new Sacramentary will not only include the new and very much better translations of the ancient collects I have been considering but, as an alternative to them for every Sunday of the three year cycle, specially composed English opening prayers which gather up the themes of the day's readings. What I have seen of these prayers is, at one level, extremely encouraging. They seem sensitively put together and in many places rise to real eloquence. There is, moreover, precedent for them in the prayers for the readings in the Easter Vigil. It seems likely that in many parishes, perhaps in most, they will come to displace the ancient collects altogether, as the new Eucharistic prayers—more of which, I gather, are on the way—have displaced in many parishes the Roman Canon. With these developments, understandable and defensible as they may be, a fundamental move away from a commitment to the pedagogy of tradition, the attentive, and prayerful reception of words and rites which have shaped the Church's ethos for almost two millenia, will have been taken. In some important sense, we may be witnessing the dissolution of any coherent sense of a distinctive "Roman Rite". For a whole generation, because of the imposition on our worship of shoddy workmanship, we have had to ignore the Collects of the Missal, one of the glories and one of the deep resources of our tradition. It would be a supreme irony if, at the very moment at which usable versions of them become officially available, the tide of liturgical change should sweep past them, or even sweep them away.

- 1 This is the text of a paper read at the conference *Beyond the Prosaic* at Westminster College Oxford in July 1996. Edited extracts from the paper were printed in *The Tablet* of 6th July 1996, pp. 882–3.
- 2 Edmund Bishop, *Liturgica Historica*, (Oxford 1918) p 17.
- 3 Joseph Jungmann, *Pastoral Liturgy*, (London 1962) p 335.

- 4 International Commission on English in the Liturgy. *The Sacramentary, Segment Three: Order of Mass I*. (August 1994) p 29.
- 5 For a highly influential discussion of the “defects” of the Roman Canon, see Cipriano Vagaggini, *The Canon of the Mass and Liturgical Reform*. (London 1967) pp 90–107.
- 6 Vagaggini, *The Canon of the Mass and Liturgical Reform*, p 88.
- 7 For convenience, both the Latin texts and the 1973 ICEL versions are taken from *The Gregorian Missal for Sundays*. Solesmes 1990.
- 8 et recordabor foederis mei vobiscum, et cum omni anima vivente quae carnem vegetat.
- 9 The draft Sacramentary here is undistinguished, but once again registers the crucial point:
 Look kindly, Lord upon our worship and praise,
 that our offering may be acceptable to you,
 and cause us to grow in your love.
- The insertion here of “and cause us” seems to me to weaken but does not obliterate the parallelism with “sit tibi munus acceptum”.
- 10 Once again, the draft sacramentary is an improvement:
 O God, the strength of all who hope in you,
 accept our earnest prayer.
 And since without you we are weak and certain to fall,
 grant us always the help of your grace,
 that in following your commands
 we may please you in desire and deed.
- If one were minded to quibble, it could be argued that “weak and certain to fall” is not an exact rendering of the starker “nihil potest mortalis infirmitas”, but the overall success of the translation seems clear.
- 11 O Lord, who never failest to help and govern them whom thou dost
 bring up in they steadfast fear and love;
 keep us we beseech thee, under the protection of thy good providence,
 and make us to have a perpetual fear and love of thy holy name.
 through Jesus Christ our Lord.
- 12 Martin D O’Keefe, S.J.. *Oremus. Speaking with God in the Words of the Roman Rite* (Institute of Jesuit Sources, St Louis, 1973) p 84.
- 13 The draft Sacramentary is disappointing here
 Almighty and eternal God,
 direct all our actions according to your holy will,
 that our lives may be rich in good works,
 done in the name of your beloved Son...
- The trouble with this is that “in nomine dilecti Filii tui” becomes here simply the name in which we do our good works, whereas in the Latin it is because of his Name and its saving power that we are able to do the good works.
- 14 I quote the text as edited by H A Wilson, *The Gregorian Sacramentary under Charles the Great*. (London, Henry Bradshaw Society, 1915) p 169, but have modernised the punctuation.