

REFLECTION

What's In A Word?

by Guillermo de Carndonagh

I was reading a short story recently where the German phrase "doch noch ein glas" was weakly translated as "I'll have another." While not technically incorrect it surely does fail to convey to the reader the emphasis and intensity of the original. Since modern English does not contain non-obscene intensifiers like "doch" the phrase borders on the untranslatable. This lack of equivalence is a very common problem in translation. Some times it is better just to leave the phrase untranslated.

One of the words in the Mass that always strikes me as being weakly translated is "Eleison." This vestige of the original Greek Mass retained in the Roman is conventionally translated as mercy. In modern English mercy raises images of everything from mercy flight helicopters, to that of a slave begging for mercy under the lash. A better translation that would convey the sense of acclimation in the original language would be "you are the merciful one." But even this fails to convey all the subtle aspects of the word.

The root of the word is the same as that for oil. This in turn has connotations of; fullness, healing, blessing, and strengthening. The Church born at the Eastern end of the Mediterranean uses oil for all of these things following the lead and mind set of her birth culture. Oil is used to anoint the newly baptized and confirmed; exorcising and conveying the Spirit. It is used to anoint the sick seeking healing, and to strengthen the dying. In monarchies the king, like young David is anointed with oil. And the hands of our priests are consecrated to their Holy tasks with oil.

Greek myth and poetry is rich with references to mythic fields of peace and plenty whose names are also drawn from the same root. To the native speaker imbued with this culture the mercy of Eleison is one of abundance and peace a healing oil pouring forth. And so the Lord is invoked with acclimation as the source of these great gifts.

The next time you are praying a litany that uses the phrase "Lord have mercy" try as a substitute the original Kyrie Eleison recalling its rich meanings and connotations.

"Save, O lord, and have mercy upon my spiritual father {name} and by his holy prayers forgive me my transgressions.

Kyrie Eleison

Save, O lord, and have mercy upon those who envy and affront me, and do me mischief, and do not let them perish through me, a sinner.

Kyrie Eleison" Excerpted from the morning prayer of Eastern Church.