

Observations on the English-language Translation of the Roman Missal

From: <http://www.praiseofglory.com/letterenglish.htm>

Rome, 16 March 2002

His Excellency,  
President of the Conference of Bishops

Your Excellency,

After some time to reflect upon contacts in recent months with the Presidents of a certain number of Conferences of Bishops in whose territory the Liturgy of the Roman Rite is habitually celebrated in English, this congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments addresses the present letter to you and to your brother Bishops regarding the translation of the *Missale Romanum*, *editio typica altera*.

Obviously the promulgation of the *editio typica tertia* would have necessitated a number of adaptations to the translation in any event. Even so, as many have already correctly surmised, there are additional substantial reasons for which this Congregation is regrettably unable to accord the *recognitio* to this text in the form in which it was submitted. A summary of the principal reasons may be found in the Observations enclosed with the present letter. Though these are extensive, they are not intended to be exhaustive, even in a generic sense. It has become apparent in the course of this Dicastery's examination that a truly exhaustive presentation of the inadequacies of the translation would best be made in the form of an integral annotated or reworked text, and in the continued anticipation of a Mixed Commission operating under statutes approved by this Dicastery in accordance with the *Instruction Liturgiam authenticam*, such an instrument would not yet be feasible.

This Congregation has been prepared from the beginning to spare no efforts in arriving at a solution to this difficulty that would have avoided the present impasse. A decision was made to maintain an optimistic assessment of such a prospect, even though the unfeasibility of the present Mixed Commission's collaborating with this Dicastery in an effective and timely resolution of such fundamental problems had long been clear. In practical terms, the Congregation nourished the hope that a truly renewed structure for English language liturgical translation would be in a position to collaborate with this Dicastery in a way that the present Commission evidently could not - even if perhaps not because of any lack of good will on the part of certain key collaborators, but rather because of an evidently insurmountable divergence as regards fundamental principles of liturgical translation. This consideration was one of the primary reasons for which this Congregation asked the Conferences for such a renewal of that structure.

As of the present date, the member Conferences of the Mixed Commission known as the International Commission on English in the Liturgy have taken a number of steps in response to the Congregation's request for such a restructuring of the Commission. Certain procedures have been set in place which - while falling short of those for which the Congregation continues to ask - would not be without positive effect in terms of the formulation of new translations. Unfortunately, however, such measures have not yet resulted, as the Congregation had hoped, in a fresh group of experts and administrators appropriately positioned to collaborate with the Holy See in the implementation of new norms represented by the *Instruction Liturgiam authenticam*, as approved by the Holy Father on March 20, 2001, for the appropriate emendation of texts already in progress.

The feasibility of resolving the problems in a manner that would involve the participation of the present Mixed Commission has been impeded by the fact that as of the present date the Conferences have not succeeded in making the necessary adjustments to the Commission's personnel, nor have all of the provisions requested by this Congregation and now required by the *Instruction Liturgiam authenticam* been included within its statutes. Certain Bishops have indicated further that the conferences are inhibited from making such changes

as a result of contractual arrangements binding in civil law. While the problems in the proposed translation of the Missale Romanum have been evident to the Congregation for some time, the inflexibility of the structural problems hindering their effective resolution has admittedly come as somewhat of a surprise to it. The Congregation's delay in giving a response regarding the translation of the Missale Romanum has been interpreted by some as a stalling strategy aimed at thwarting the eventual publication of a new English-language translation of that liturgical book. In fact, nothing could have been further from the truth. Even so, it has become increasingly apparent that the negative consequences of further delay by the Congregation in providing a definite response regarding the liturgical translation in question have clearly overtaken the hopes for a solution that justified such a delay, and therefore the moment has come for the present communication.

This Dicastery had hoped to communicate its findings regarding the translation in question together with a concrete and realistic proposal for a future collaboration with the Conferences aimed at the resolution of the problems through the instrumentality of a renewed Mixed Commission. To this end, it has considered various options and continues to do so. In any event, it would clearly be preferable to incorporate within an eventual solution the best elements of the work that has already been done. Nonetheless the Congregation has determined that it is no longer feasible to delay the present communication, even in the continued absence of such a proposal. This Dicastery wishes to state also that it would also have no objection if the content of the attached Observations were to be made public, with or without the contents of the present letter.

The Congregation considers it a duty to express its thanks to those Bishops whose efforts have been dedicated in a particular way to a resolution of these issues of English-language translation of liturgical texts of the Roman Rite. It also wishes to assure the Conference of Bishops that it will give all due consideration to any proposals that the Conference may wish to offer for the resolution of the present difficult situation, so that the translation of the Missale Romanum to be published may conform to the present norms for liturgical translation and the heritage of the Roman Rite be more effectively preserved and transmitted to the faithful of your country in the English language.

With every prayer and good wish, I remain,

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Jorge A. Cardinal Medina Estévez  
Prefect

[Archbishop] Francisco Pio Tamburrino  
Secretary

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Observations on the English-language Translation of the Roman Missal

I. General observations regarding the layout of the book, the disposition of its texts, and the inclusion of newly composed texts

A. The word "Sacramentary", evidently chosen to distinguish this book containing the prayers of the Mass, on the one hand, from the Lectionary, on the other, seems nevertheless to have had the adverse effect of furthering a mistaken conception of this "Sacramentary" as a new and somewhat autonomous liturgical book for the English-speaking world. The term "Sacramentary" is not characterized by a linear historical development, and the present book also contains antiphons and other elements that were not in the ancient or medieval books commonly designated sacramentaries, at least in academic usage. Accordingly, the Congregation asks that from now on the book be referred to in

English as The Roman Missal, and that the official use of the word Sacramentary be discontinued in reference to it.

B. The ordering of the texts has departed almost entirely from that of the Missale Romanum, where such ordering often has significant theological and catechetical implications. In some instances, the Commission's stated goal of avoiding repetition of prayers by means of such restructuring seems to have been formulated without sufficient attention to the positive effects of such repetition in terms of the congregation's progressive comprehension and assimilation of their conceptual and spiritual content.

C. The proposed text would change significantly the structure of the Ritus initiales for Masses celebrated on Sundays, Feasts, and Solemnities. It would thus appear to exclude that the Actus paenitentialis be used together with the Gloria, as prescribed by the Missale Romanum for the majority of the Sundays of the liturgical year. In any event, the disposition of prayers in the Missal is not at the discretion of the translators, and the ordering of the texts, including the integral structure and sequence of the Ritus initiales, should be restored to that of the editio typica [tertia]. In addition, the Missal should be published as a single book for use on all days of the year, without fragmentation into parts.

D. Certain texts included in the project, such as the seasonal introductions and the hagiographical notes in the Proper of Saints, by virtue of their genre as well as their bulk, should not be published within a liturgical book. At times, their very content militates against such an intention. For example, the statement that [St.] Jerome "began work on a new Latin translation of the Bible, known as the Vulgate", is historically inexact, since he selected and compiled existing texts of the Vetus Latina for many parts of the Bible, while his characterization as "irascible and intolerant" is hardly an appropriate appendage to the prayers prescribed for his liturgical Memorial. In the same vein, one might cite the inappropriateness of the reference to Santa Claus in commemorating St. Nicholas, or the unexplained statement that St. Callistus I "served a sentence as a convict", or the assertion that St. Pius V's "excommunication of Queen Elizabeth I of England hardened the split between Catholics and Protestants." While there is an admitted distinction between a liturgical and a hagiographical text, these are neither. The present Observations are not the context in which to address question of the veracity of these statements; it is sufficient to point out that that they are out of place in the Missal.

E. The use of explanatory rubrics that import material from other liturgical books and documents, such as the Caeremoniale Episcoporum, would have the effect of reducing or eliminating recourse to these documents themselves, and would also inhibit the freedom of the Holy See to act in matters where the normal avenue of implementation of a given initiative would be precisely those documents. Such a procedure of compilation is not within the scope of the translator's task.

F. Consistent with the principles enumerated above regarding the book's structure, and also with the communications sent by this Congregation well over a decade ago to the various Conferences (e.g., Prot. n. 866/88, 24 June 1988, as well as to the Executive Secretary of the Mixed Commission, Prot. n. 410/88, 18 June 1988, acknowledged by him 10 days later), in addition to other instances in the meantime in which this Dicastery has publicly taken the same position, the Congregation must insist that the texts newly composed by the Mixed Commission be excluded from the Missal. Supporting this decision are several serious concerns, namely:

that the procedures set forth in the 1994 Instruction *Varietates legitimae* be upheld as regards adaptations to liturgical books for the sake of inculturation;

that the proliferation of original texts not hinder the meditation of the faithful and of their pastors on the riches already found in the prayers of the Roman Liturgy;

that the desire for constant variety, typical of many consumerist societies, not come to be regarded in itself as constituting a cultural value capable of serving as a vehicle for authentic inculturation;

finally, that the characteristic structure and function of the traditional Roman Collects, their sobriety, and their reflection of the tension between the transcendent and the immanent, not be jeopardized by compositions that may be superficially attractive by virtue of their emotional impact, but lack the spiritual depth and the rhetorical excellence of the body of ancient prayers, which were not mass-produced at a given moment but grew over the course of many centuries.

## II. Examples of problems in grammar, syntax, and sentence structure

A. The Structure of the Collects: Relative clauses often disappear in the proposed text (especially the initial *Deus, qui . . .*, so important in the Latin Collects), so that a single oration is divided into two or more sentences. This loss is detrimental not only to the unity of the structure, but to the manner of conveying the proper sense of the posture before God of the Christian people, or of the individual Christian. The relative clause acknowledges God's greatness, while the independent clause strongly conveys the impression that one is explaining something about God to God. Yet it is precisely the acknowledgement of the *mirabilia Dei* that lies at the heart of all Judaeo-Christian eucharology. The quality of supplication is also adversely affected so that many of the texts now appear to say to God rather abruptly: "You did a; now do b." The manner in which language expresses relationship to God cannot be regarded merely as a matter of style.

B. The unfortunately monotonous effect of placing the vocative "Lord" always at the beginning of the prayers has already been cited by the Congregation in connection with previous texts submitted for its approval. However, this tendency can also be observed in the present text.

C. For those Latin texts characterized by the extensive use of relative clauses, ablative absolutes, participial phrases, etc., the English text often fails to convey the precise nature of the relationship between clauses, so that the sense of the whole is lost (e.g., in particular the Prefaces: e.g., *De SS.ma Eucharistia I: "Qui verus aeternusque Sacerdos, formam sacrificii perennis instituens, hostiam tibi se primus obtulit salutarem"*, where the failure to convey the relationship between clauses of the Latin obscures the unity of the Eucharistic Sacrifice with that of Calvary. Likewise many of the Collects: e.g., Collect, Wednesday of the 7th Week of Easter, where the relationship between "*Sancto Spiritu congregata*" and "*toto sit corde tibi devota, et pura voluntate concordet*" is obscured in the English. The Latin text, taken globally, has conveyed with precision certain theological realities and tensions involving salvation history and the inherent dynamism of the ecclesial life of grace, which should not be lost in the vernacular text, however challenging and difficult it may be to convey them.

## III. Examples of problems related to questions of "inclusive language" and of the use of masculine and feminine terms

A. In an effort to avoid completely the use of the term "man" as a translation of the Latin *homo*, the translation often fails to convey the true content of that Latin term, and limits itself to a focus on the congregation actually present or to those presently living. The simultaneous reference to the unity and the collectivity of the human race is lost. The term "humankind", coined for purposes of "inclusive language", remains somewhat faddish and ill-adapted to the liturgical context, and, in addition, it is usually too abstract to convey the notion of the Latin *homo*. The latter, just as the English "man", which some appear to have made the object of a taboo, are able to express in a collective but also concrete and personal manner the notion of a partner with God in a Covenant who gratefully receives from him the gifts of forgiveness and Redemption. At least in many instances, an abstract or binomial expression cannot achieve the same effect.

B. In the Creed, which has unfortunately also maintained the first-person

plural "We believe" instead of the first-person singular of the Latin and of the Roman liturgical tradition, the above-mentioned tendency to omit the term "men" has effects that are theologically grave. This text -"For us and for our salvation"-no longer clearly refers to the salvation of all, but apparently only that of those who are present. The "us" thereby becomes potentially exclusive rather than inclusive.

C. After the Orate, fratres, the people's response *Suscipiat Dominus sacrificium de manibus tuis* . . . has been distorted, apparently for purposes of "inclusive language": "May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands for the praise and glory of God's name, for our good, and the good of all the Church." The insertion of the possessive *God's* gives the impression that the Lord who accepts the sacrifice is different from God whose name is glorified by it. The Church is no longer his Church, and is no longer called holy -- a flaw in the previous translation that one might have hoped would be corrected.

D. For the Church, the neuter pronoun "it" is always used, instead of "she". So designated, the Church can appear to be a mere social aggregate, deprived of much of the mystery that has been emphasized especially in relatively recent teaching by the Magisterium. The pronoun "it" does not seem to refer properly to the reality of the Church, portrayed by Divine Revelation as our Mother and Christ's Bride.

#### IV. Examples of problems in vocabulary, wording and other aspects of content

A. Instead of "Collect", a traditional Roman term that is both venerable and expressive, the translators continue to use the term "Opening Prayer", which does not express the same reality and, in fact, is simply incorrect. Likewise, "Prayer over the Gifts" does not seem to specify sufficiently the sense conveyed by the term "Oblata" in this context in reference to oblata that are themselves taken "*de tuis donis ac datis*." A designation such as "Prayer over the Offerings" would be preferable.

B. "Opening Song" does not translate "*Cantus ad introitum*" or "*Antiphona ad introitum*" as intended by the rites. The Latin is able to express the musical processional beginning of the Liturgy that accompanies the entrance of the priest and ministers, while "Opening Song" could just as well designate the beginning number of a secular musical performance.

C. The Congregation in the course of its various contacts and consultations has encountered widespread - indeed, virtually unanimous - opposition to the institution of any change in the wording of the Lord's Prayer. More than one reader cited poignantly the experience of having seen this prayer coming to the lips of Christians who had otherwise appeared unconscious, its familiar wording having been learned by them from infancy. By contrast, the Mixed Commission's justification for its changes, in its Third Progress Report on the Revision of the Roman Missal, seem inadequate and somewhat cerebral.

D. The word "presbyter" often continues to be used instead of "priest", for example in the Proper of Saints. The Holy See's position on this matter was made clear in a letter of the Congregation for Divine Worship to the Conferences of 20 September 1997. At the same time, many titles are used there which do not appear at all in the *Missale Romanum*. In the titles of the celebrations the designation "Saint" is consistently omitted, contrary to the established tradition of the Church. One example of these tendencies: "6 October: Bruno, presbyter, hermit, religious founder."

E. The rich language of supplication found in the Latin texts is radically reduced in the translation. Words and expressions such as *quaesumus*, *exoramus*, *imploramus*, *praesta* . . . *ut*, *dona*, *concede*, etc., have been collapsed more or less into the terms "ask" and "grant," transferred almost always to the last line of the prayer, resulting in a corpus of prayers that is relatively monotonous and impoverished with respect to the Latin. In addition, these factors render the imperative verbs in the body of the orations somewhat abrupt and presumptuous in tone, so that the oration seems to be a command rather than a prayer addressed to God. Again, there is more than style at stake here.

F. The language often lapses into sentimentality and emotionality in place of the noble simplicity of the Latin. A focus on transcendent realities in the Latin prayers too often shifts in the English prayers to a focus on the interior dispositions and desires of those who pray. The overuse of the word "hearts" when the word is not present in the Latin text weakens the use of the term on those occasions where it actually occurs. Likewise, the overuse of the term "sharing" flattens and trivializes the content conveyed by the Latin words *participes* and *consortes*.

G. For *patena*, *calix*, etc., the translators avoid the use of specifically sacral terminology, and use words commonly employed in the vernacular for kitchenware. In an already secularized culture, it is difficult to see what legitimate purpose could be served by a deliberate desacralization of religious terminology. There do exist in English words for these items having sacral connotations, such as "paten" and "chalice", but these are assiduously avoided in the translation. The Congregation views this tendency with regret, especially in conjunction with certain other tendencies enumerated in these Observations, by which the sense of the transcendent is not only inadequately conveyed, but actively obscured.

H. The word *unigenitus* is often translated simply as "only", so that Jesus is called the "only Son" of God. The distinction between the terms "only" and "only-begotten" is often crucial in the liturgical prayers, which unfold within a Trinitarian dynamism precisely by virtue of our own adoptive sonship.

I. Frequently there are important words translated either in an inadequate manner, or not at all. Among them are: *devotus* (-e, -io), *dignor*, (*in-*)*dignus*, *famulus*, *ineffabilis* (-iter), *maiestas*, *mens*, *mereor*, *novitas* - *vetustas*, *offero*, *pietas*, *placatus*, *propitius*, *supplices*, and many others, besides those mentioned elsewhere in these Observations. The challenge posed by the translation of certain of these concepts into contemporary English underscores a cultural fact that is at the same time perhaps the strongest indication of the necessity of doing so, even when the result must be a text that will have to be clarified by good catechesis.

J. The text exhibits some confusion on the part of the translators regarding the intended sense of the words *caelestis* and *caelorum* which, in the original text, refer at some times to heaven as such, but at other times to heavenly realities experienced now. Confusion on this point hinders the text in its capacity to convey the eschatological tension at issue in the Latin text.

K. In the conclusions of the Prefaces, the enumeration of the heavenly choirs (*cum Thronis et Dominationibus*, etc.) is often omitted in favor of the singular term "angels". The reason for this tendency of the text in many places to make gratuitous alterations is not clear.

L. In the text, in particular the Eucharistic Prayers, many significant biblical expressions and allusions continue to be obscured, as do significant allusions to events or notable features of a given Saint's life or works.

M. In order to assist the faithful to commit various parts of the sacred text to memory and to appropriate the text more deeply without the jarring inevitably created by the dissonance of diverse translations of the same passage, those texts taken directly from Sacred Scripture, such as the antiphons, should reflect the wording of the same approved version used in the Lectionary for which the Conference has received the recognition of the Holy See. Only those textual adjustments should be made which are necessitated by the manner in which the *editio typica* has employed the official Latin text (e.g., sometimes adding a vocative such as "Domine" or condensing two verses). For the sake of such unity as regards the biblical text, it is appropriate and preferable that this element of diversity be maintained among the versions of the Roman Missal eventually to be published by the various Conferences.

N. Since it is already permissible, as specified by the *Institutio Generalis*, to use other sung texts in place of the antiphons given in the Missal, the Conference may wish to publish separately a set of such texts, and perhaps

some of the antiphons prepared for the present project may eventually qualify for inclusion in such a publication. The Congregation would not be opposed to such a measure provided that the texts chosen be doctrinally sound. However, in the case of texts from Sacred Scripture, it is the sacred text itself that should determine the qualities of the music to which it is to be set, rather than vice-versa. This principle does not seem to have been followed consistently in the antiphons given in the part of the project that the translators have labeled the "Antiphonal". The antiphons to be printed in the Missal should appear within the Mass formularies, as in the current editio typica.

#### V. The distinction of liturgical roles

A. In the vast majority of the cases in which the priest prays in the third person for the people (and again, the Eucharistic Prayers are notable in this regard) the translators have opted instead for the first person plural. Such a choice obscures the distinction of roles that is evident in the Latin text, and in particular the priest's role as intercessor and mediator vis-à-vis the people for whom he prays in an unselfish manner. The priest is thus submerged within an amorphous congregation that prays for itself. Obscured at the same time is the important notion of offering the Mass on behalf of others or for their benefit. These are crucial issues. Even at a purely literary level as well, this procedure augments the monotony of the translation.

B. The rubrics and notes have been completely re-worked in ways that obscure the distinction of hierarchical and liturgical roles. A few examples:

- In the Prayer over the People for the Ritual Mass of Confirmation, the translators seem to have wished to alter the universal and constant discipline of the Latin Church according to which the Bishop is the ordinary minister of the Sacrament. In place of the Latin, *Deinde Episcopus, manibus super populum estensis, dicit:*, one finds instead, "The priest sings or says the following prayer with hands outstretched over the people."

For the Chrism Mass of Holy Thursday, it is suggested that those laypersons who exercise a ministry to the sick, to the catechumens, and to families of children being baptized and confirmed, take their places with the Bishop during the Mass. On the other hand, the intentional focus of this celebration on the sacramental priesthood is obscured somewhat.

In the Order of Mass, where the Latin rubric reads, "*Tunc sacerdos incipit Precem eucharisticam,*" the translators have altered it to read instead, "The priest leads the assembly in the eucharistic prayer." Such an alteration -for it cannot be termed a translation- obscures the true nature of the Eucharistic Prayer as a presidential prayer, in which the people participate by listening silently and reverently and by making the acclamations prescribed by the rite.

C. Another example of the translators' having altered texts (or, in this case, maintained a deficient wording) to the detriment of the distinction of roles between priest and people is the prayer *Orate fratres, ut meum ac vestrum sacrificium . . .*, which becomes "Pray, brothers and sisters, that our sacrifice . . . as if the congregation and priest both offered the sacrifice in an indistinct manner.

D. Given the Latin tradition that very closely links the words "*Mysterium fidei*" to the words of institution, it is inappropriate for the deacon to give the invitation to the Memorial Acclamation. The translators, with no authorization, have introduced this change. The same importance traditionally attached to the words "*Mysterium fidei*" precludes its replacement by other formulae, even though the Congregation appreciates the practical considerations motivating the translators to offer alternative introductions to the Memorial Acclamation. It is perhaps useful to observe here that the Congregation considers the translation "Great is the mystery of faith" a good one for rendering in English the precise meaning and purpose of the Latin phrase in its liturgical context.

E. The translation of "*Et cum spiritu tuo*" as "And also with you" has become

familiar in the English-speaking world, and a change in the people's response would no doubt occasion some temporary discomfort. Nevertheless, the continuous literal translation of this response in all major liturgical traditions, whether Semitic, Greek, or Latin as well as in virtually every other modern language, constitutes a historical consensus and an imperative that can no longer be set aside. The present translation inappropriately situates the exchange on a purely horizontal level, without any apparent distinction in the roles of those who speak; the literal translation in its historical context has always been understood in relation to the crucial distinction of liturgical roles between the priest and the people. Weighty considerations such as these necessitate that the English translation at last be brought into conformity with the usage of the other language groups, and with the tradition, as is also prescribed now in the Congregation's recent Instruction *Liturgiam authenticam*.