

PHILIP ENDEAN

# Worship and power

After years of preparation, the new English translation of the Missal will be used in American churches from Advent next year. How it has come to be adopted reveals much about the nature of the Church, says a leading Jesuit, and its continuing cloak of secrecy

**B**it by bit, the Catholic Church has been edging towards the moment when the new English translation of the Roman Missal will be in use in English-speaking countries around the globe. On 30 April 2010 the Holy See gave its *recognitio* to what was thought to be the final text, while on 20 August the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops released an updated version of the Ordinary with confirmation that Americans will start using it in Advent 2011. Yet the text is apparently still being revised in Rome. Matters remain unclear.

There are problems here about what counts as good translation. There are also serious questions about how authority is being exercised. In some ways, there are overlaps with the clerical-abuse scandal. Of course, the objective damage done by bad liturgy is as nothing to the moral wrong of children being violated. But in both cases authority has dealt high-handedly and secretly with the sacred, the intimate, the vulnerable. High officialdom has been evasive; lesser authority has tacitly colluded. What the situation needed was salutary English plain speaking.

How the new translation came about is now well known: the rejection of a 1998 version by Rome (despite the overwhelming support of the anglophone bishops' conferences); the changing of the translation ground rules with the Congregation for Divine Worship's (CDW) 2001 instruction, *Liturgiam Authenticam*; and the sacking of the staff of the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (Icel).

The published accounts of this process by Bishop Maurice Taylor, then the episcopal chairman of Icel, are all the more telling for their dignified and charitable understatement. But "abusive" would not be too strong a word to describe the exercise of authority here.

The best advocacy for the new translation that I have seen, from Archbishop Mark



Coleridge of Canberra and Goulburn – who has also written well on the abuse crisis – refers to “an extraordinary level of consultation” in the preparation of the new translation. Perhaps, but I was myself involved in a couple of peripheral ways, and I was instructed to maintain strict secrecy when, through my then provincial, I was asked to comment on a draft of the Ordinary.

Crucially, nothing that challenged *Liturgiam Authenticam* seems to have been taken seriously. Even Archbishop Coleridge has to concede that the process of producing this document, “which provided the hermeneutical base of the new translations, was confidential”. Bishop Taylor notes that his fellow bishops had overwhelmingly passed the 1998 translation, but let the CDW proceed “without any complaint or question”.

This situation hardly inspires confidence or trust. Given that there are also strong objective arguments against *Liturgiam Authenticam*, we have a serious problem. How are responsible Catholics to cope? The standard answer to that question is: “trust the authority of the Church’s office-holders; give them the benefit of the doubt; make the best of the situation.” But it is just such moves that have proved so catastrophic in matters to do with sexual abuse. Why are we to suppose them appropriate in this liturgical context?

In a message sent to the Vox Clara committee (set up a year after *Liturgiam Authenticam* to monitor English texts) just

before giving his final *recognitio*, Pope Benedict himself acknowledged the difficulties ahead, and pointed to the need for both sensitivity and catechesis in implementing the change, given that “many will find it hard to adjust to unfamiliar texts after nearly 40 years”.

Much is being promised by way of “catechesis”. In a press release following the *recognitio*, Bishop Arthur Roche, the present chairman of Icel, spoke of an interactive catechetical DVD, *Become One Body, One Spirit in Christ*. The online promotional video radiates reassurance: all we are doing is handing on what the Lord Jesus Christ gave to his Apostles; the Mass itself is not changing; we are merely adopting a more sacral register.

Such soothing statements, cutting long and disputed stories very short, are of course in one sense entirely appropriate to the task of “catechesis”. Basic information needs to be got across to people who have other things to do with their lives than to study theology. In fact the new translation represents an eminently challengeable set of policy changes.

Bishop Roche’s press release refers to the new translation as “a text of the highest quality that can truly be called a work of the Church”. But a new translation can only be regarded as “a work of the Church”, and judged to be “of the highest quality”, if we know that widespread consultation and experiment have taken place. When the matter being put forward is controversial, “catechesis” becomes mere spin.

We need Pope Benedict’s sensitivity as well as “catechesis”. Many will feel bereaved, losing an approach to liturgy that has become loved and familiar, and a difficult process needs to be faced openly and honestly. When Church authority instructs us priests to prepare for the new translations, it may think it is saying “this change is a necessary correction to liturgical excesses of previous decades”, or “fall in and obey for the good of the Church”, or even “don’t desert the people of God at a moment of need – help them make the best of a bad job”.

But other associations are also inevitable: “as victims of abusive power relations that we are only beginning to perceive, we ask you to join us in passing that culture on”. On my bad days, when this message is dominant, I see no way of continuing to preside at Mass in English with any integrity, once imposition

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day comes round. If we are to negotiate the change well, reactions of this kind need to be addressed seriously.

How might sensitivity mark the impending transition? Let me suggest four guidelines that might help all concerned.

First, acknowledge the wider issues at stake. There are good linguistic arguments on both sides as to whether we should say "and also with you" or "and with your spirit". But the choice here is also, and more centrally, about how to express the particular role of the ordained within the Church as a whole.

In general, the new translation's significance has to be situated within the conflicts underlying everything in Vatican II and its aftermath: how the Church deals with change; the relationship between Rome and local churches; how the Church addresses contemporary culture. Options about translation often imply controversial positions on more intractable human and spiritual issues. If Rome's real agenda when liturgical change is in question is that the English-speaking Churches got Vatican II wrong (or indeed the other way round), we should have that conversation openly. Arguments about ecclesiology are not conducted well in code.

Secondly, acknowledge conflicting concerns. The decisions of translation are normally judgement calls between conflicting goods. Non-inclusive "man" appears in the new text, whereas the 1998 text had sought to improve the 1973 one by avoiding it. This is not because our translators are unreconstructed sexists, but because in some contexts the alternatives are judged by some to be unsatisfactory, both linguistically and theologically. The final judgement call, whichever way, should not be read as rejection of the differing concerns, but rather an option that one is more important.

Similarly, the fact that the Lord at Communion is to enter "under my roof" is not only the recovery of a scriptural echo but also something of an archaism. In the UK, where the King James Bible still has its influence on ordinary speech, the scriptural consideration should probably prevail; elsewhere, the case seems far more doubtful.

Prudential decisions of this kind are, of course, the role of legitimate authority. But many people at the moment do not trust the hierarchy enough to accept a decision different from their own preferences – a relational difficulty that needs to be tackled by all involved. A first step might be that we desist from name-calling. It is distressing to read of eminent figures rubbishing our present liturgical idiom as the language of a barbecue, and anticipating the new version "putting paid to 'parish tea-party liturgy'" (*The Church in the World, The Tablet*, 29 May). Such talk only encourages others in the bad habit of calling any Latin Mass a "gospel-avoidance-event".

Thirdly, recognise that reverence and accessibility are theologically complementary. Vatican II's liturgy document speaks of the rites radiating a "noble simplicity" (n. 34). To be true to the Gospel, the liturgy needs to be both dignified and straightforwardly intelligible. It is as un-Christian to choose between these as to opt for Christ's being either divine

or human. Orthodoxy could be defined as the refusal to fall into such ways of thinking. If the introduction of a new text can be described as one side "winning" some kind of competition between gospel values, things have gone badly wrong.

Fourthly, only say in public what you actually believe. Archbishop Coleridge's lecture in support of the new translation reads as the work of an intelligent, knowledgeable and pastorally grounded man who has engaged with the issues, and is speaking with personal conviction. He also acknowledges that the process has been badly handled.

Even though I don't agree with his overall argument, those features of his text lead me to take him seriously, and to think about what he says. If the new translations are to be introduced successfully, we need a sense that our competent leaders really believe in them, and are commending them out of intelligent conviction rather than instinctive deference.

That said, at no point – on this or any other subject – should pastoral ministers teach or preach anything to which they cannot personally assent. Still less should they come under any pressure from their superiors so to do. Defending what you do not believe will be far more harmful to the Church than any public disharmony. Surely we have learnt by now the dangers of keeping up appearances "for the good of the Church".

Pastoral sensitivity to different voices is also a recognition of the truth that those voices may be expressing. And therefore – this is a paradox that a pluralist vision can never avoid – these guidelines disallow, absolutely, understandings of truth as coming only from one source. They would lead us somewhere different from where we now are, on much else as well as on liturgical matters. Moreover, the theology informing such procedures is sound, whereas its opposite is not.

Christian fidelity is not the monopoly of ecclesial conformists. The Church is integral to the life of grace, but always in a way pointing beyond its present achievement: it gives us "a sacrament and instrumental sign" of a reality greater than itself: "intimate union with God and ... the unity of all humanity" (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 1). In the pilgrim Church, ideological purity is no sign of theological wisdom.

This new translation, both in its content and in the manner of its imposition, represents a retreat from the salutary, evangelical reform of church style and mood that Vatican II represented. Those of us who experienced pre-conciliar Catholicism as abusive received Vatican II as a powerful reassurance that the Church was mending its ways. That gave us hope and liberation. It will be a scandal, in both the common and the theological senses of the word, if – at a level that really hurts – the new translation takes that reassurance back.

■ Philip Endean SJ teaches theology at the University of Oxford. The understanding of Vatican II here draws on the magisterial work of John O'Malley SJ, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Harvard University Press, 2008). For other sources and further reading, see [www.philipendean.com/littrans.htm](http://www.philipendean.com/littrans.htm)

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