



Ancient Prayers, New Translation

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On November 27, 2011, the English speaking Catholic Church in the United States will begin using a new translation of the prayers that are used at Mass. To help parishes prepare for this coming change, a series of announcements beginning with this bulletin insert will be published in parish bulletins. Please check the bulletin regularly to keep up with the forthcoming changes.

Translating the Mass

It is no secret that the English speaking world is anticipating some changes in the liturgy. A new translation of the Mass is on its way and it will affect the way English speaking Catholics pray the Mass. But why is this happening now and what is the thinking behind these changes? To answer these questions, we need to go back to the reform of the liturgy which began at the Second Vatican Council (1962 – 1965).

When Pope John XXIII assembled the bishops of the world for the Second Vatican Council, his primary goal was to renew and update the Church. Because the faith of the Church is most clearly expressed through its liturgical celebrations, the first thing the bishops did was to renew the liturgy. This process began with the first document promulgated by the Council: *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*. Even though it was written over 40 years ago, it still stands today as the most authoritative document on the liturgy in the Church. It called for a new approach to liturgical celebrations centered on the desire to engage those present at the liturgy in full, conscious and active participation.

Fewer and fewer people have a living memory of the Mass before Vatican II, but certainly one of the most recognizable differences since then is that it is no longer required to celebrate the Mass in Latin. The Mass may now be celebrated in languages such as English. Allowing liturgy to be celebrated in the language of the people was one significant way of encouraging fuller participation at Mass.

It was a massive undertaking after the Council to both reform the liturgical texts and to translate them from Latin into contemporary languages. First, changes had to be made to all of the liturgies of the Church to simplify them and bring them closer to their origins. Secondly, these new texts which were composed in Latin needed to be translated into the local languages of the world.

The English speaking bishops at the Council decided to create an organization called the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL). It was (and continues to be) their responsibility to translate all of the liturgical books of the Church into English.

Translating liturgical texts is a complex process; it is not just translating words, it is translating concepts and ideas. Sometimes words in one language do not convey the same meaning when they are translated into another, and no two languages are structured the same way in terms of syntax or grammar. How could these complex elements be handled by the translators of the liturgical texts?

To guide the translators, Pope Paul VI produced a document entitled *Comme le prévoit* in 1969. He based this document on a principle of translation known as “dynamic equivalence.” Essentially this means that it is not as important to translate *words* from one language to another as it is to translate *ideas* from one language into another. This was the basis of the translations made by ICEL from Latin into English in the 70s, 80s and into the 90s.

In 2001, Pope John Paul II revisited the topic of translations and promulgated a new document entitled *Liturgiam Authenticam*. This document changed the principles for the translation of liturgical texts. It called for the use of “formal equivalence” which means that the translation from Latin into English needs to be more literal. This is different from what we are currently used to, so when new translations are published, they will sound different to the ears of English speaking Catholics.

Over the next seven weeks, there will be a series of Questions and Answers on the new translation printed in the parish bulletin. Please take some time each Sunday to read them. They will help readers to understand why and how this new translation came about.