New Blackfriars

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Comment: *The New Translation*

'Without real necessity, successive revisions of translations should not notably change the previously approved vernacular texts of the Eucharistic Prayers which the faithful will have committed gradually to memory', according to *Liturgiam Authenticam* (§ 64), issued in 2001 by the Congregation for Divine Worship, the rationale for the new translation of the Roman Missal. Priests, who have celebrated Mass in English since 1974, though unlikely to be envisaged at this point in the CDW instruction, may perhaps include themselves. For those who have Eucharistic Prayer II by heart, for example, the changes do not always seem really necessary. Indeed, in the light of the CDW document on how to translate from Latin into the vernacular, the revisions turn out sometimes to be idle tinkering, and not always closer to the original.

Eucharistic Prayer II, as approved in 1974, opens as follows: 'Lord, you are holy indeed, the fountain of all holiness, /Let your Spirit come upon these gifts to make them holy'. The Latin runs: **'**Vere Sanctus es, Domine, fons omnis sanctitatis. / Haec ergo dona, quaesumus, Spiritus tui rore sanctifica'. Compare the revised text: 'You are indeed Holy, O Lord, the fount of all holiness, /Make holy, therefore, these gifts, we pray, by sending down your Spirit upon them like the dewfall'.

The revision sticks to the Latin order, in the sense that 'Lord' moves to the middle of the first line. The vocative 'O', not in the Latin, presumably makes the language more 'sacral' as the CDW instruction desiderates. The word 'fountain' gives way to 'fount'. In Lewis and Short, the first meaning of *fons* is 'spring, fountain, well-source'. Why the cardinals and their language experts, gathered in some high-ceilinged Vatican *salone*, changed to 'fount', we shall never know. Powerful enough in sixteenth-century verse — 'Slow, slow, fresh fount, keep time with my salt tears' (Ben Jonson) — the word 'fount' has long since decayed into pseudo-poetic diction.

On the other hand, if the image of the fountain is curtailed, the new translation retrieves that of the dew. Why the experts in Washington DC, who created the 1974 text, left out the dew, is another mystery. Perhaps they felt it would evoke the wrong associations: 'Like the dew on the mountain, /Like the foam on the river, /Like the bubble on the fountain. /Thou are gone, and for ever' (Scott) — suggesting something fleeting and impermanent. In Latin *ros* means 'dew':

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'dewfall' and, for that matter, the 'sending down' of the Spirit, are not word-for-word translations. Not really a natural English expression, the dewfall refers, in some American regional dialects, to the time in the evening when the dew appears. Taken literally, 'Spiritus rore tui' translates as 'by the dew of your Spirit'— which means that this graphic, rather challenging, metaphorical identification of the Spirit with the dew is dissolved into a simile: 'your Spirit . . . *like* the dewfall'.

Translation never pleases everyone. The most notable change in Eucharistic Prayer II comes in the phrase 'We thank you for counting us worthy to stand in your presence and serve you' — 'gratias agentes quia nos dignos habuisti astare coram te et tibi ministrare' — which now runs: 'giving thanks that you have held us worthy to be in your presence and minister to you'. Of course *astare* means 'stand at or near (someone)', and then *via* 'stand by' comes to mean 'assist'. Since only the priest should be standing at this point, 'stand' has been replaced with 'be'— rather a colourless word in English but perhaps we are meant to inject a bit of existentialist-ontological oomph.

Funnily enough, in the anaphora in the early third-century Apostolic Tradition, from which Eucharistic Prayer II was created, the text runs: 'to stand before you and to serve *as your priests*' (my emphasis). A century later, at the First Council of Nicaea (held in 325), Canon XX goes as follows: 'Since there are some who kneel on Sunday and during the season of Pentecost, this Holy Synod decrees that, so that the same observances many be maintained in every diocese, one should offer one's prayers to the Lord standing' — a decree which has long been ignored in the West by Catholics but which remains in force in the ancient Churches of the East (they think it appropriate to stand, except on penitential occasions, if you believe in the Resurrection). It's more than just translation that never pleases everyone.

Fergus Kerr OP

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