New Blackfriars

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Comment: *The New Roman Missal*

On 4 December 1963 the Second Vatican Council overwhelmingly approved the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. The Latin language was 'to be preserved in the Latin rites'; but the document permitted the 'competent territorial ecclesiastical authority' to 'decide whether, and to what extent, the vernacular' might be used (§36). Since it might 'frequently be of great advantage to the people', the use of the vernacular could be introduced, specifically 'in readings, directives and in some prayers and chants' (ibid). That intriguing list of examples indicates what the bishops envisaged.

Some theologians marvelled at the extent to which the decision was devolved on the bishops. According to Professor Joseph Ratzinger, for example, in his *Theological Highlights of Vatican II* (1966), this 'decentralisation of the liturgical decision-making' was a 'fundamental innovation', with 'more significance for the theology of the episcopacy and for the long-desired strengthening of episcopal power than anything in the Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, itself'.

Anyway, with this newly granted authority, the eleven English-speaking bishops' conferences established the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL), a small team of good Latin scholars, mostly lay men, based in an office located in Washington DC. They were soon offered guidance by the Vatican document *Comme le prévoit* (1969), which describes translation as 'dynamic equivalence', the aim being to render the meaning of the Latin in idiomatic English. Completed in 1972, and approved by the bishops' conferences, the translation was endorsed by the Holy See in 1973, and we began to celebrate Mass in English. For most of us, of course, Mass in the vernacular was a much more radical rupture with our inheritance than the qualified restoration of episcopal authority.

From the outset there was discontent about Mass in English. The majority of us, including most of the clergy, adapted quite happily. Yes, a significant minority never understood why Latin was so rapidly abandoned in most of our churches. A larger minority — people who paid close attention to the text or followed it in their missals (a declining practice, admittedly) — began to deplore more and more openly what seemed to them the banal and pedestrian language of the English Mass. Finally, in 1982, at the behest of the bishops, ICEL undertook a thorough revision of the text. Engaged

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with other evidently more pressing things, most Catholics did not even know that this was going on; the few who were interested were able to receive gratis beautifully printed drafts on which to comment. Not everyone found the proposed revisions an improvement. Bruce Harbert, for example, writing in *New Blackfriars* (December 1996), described ICEL as 'something of a tyranny, which individual bishops' conferences are in effect powerless to resist'; and complained that ICEL collects were 'unmemorable', flawed by a 'cuddle-factor' and revealing a 'propensity towards Pelagianism'. These were by no means uncommon comments.

The ICEL revision was completed in 1997; the English-speaking bishops' conferences approved and the text was submitted for ratification by the Holy See in 1998. On 16 March 2002 the Congregation for Divine Worship formally rejected it.

A year earlier, the CDW document *Liturgiam Authenticam* had overturned ICEL's translation principles, by insisting now on 'formal equivalence': every word in the Latin replicated in the vernacular; syntax, punctuation and capitalization patterns reproduced as literally as possible; no surrender to 'inclusive language'; and 'great caution' taken 'to avoid a wording or style that the Catholic faithful would confuse with the manner of speech of non-Catholic ecclesial communities or of other religions'.

The ICEL team was entirely reconstituted, with Bruce Harbert (now Monsignor), plucked from teaching dogmatic theology at Oscott, as the new executive director of ICEL.

In April 2002 the CDW established Vox Clara, a dozen senior English-speaking bishops, with Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor representing the UK, who were to supervise a completely new translation in line with the principles of *Liturgiam Authenticam*. This translation was approved by the CDW in June 2008; by early 2010 the eleven episcopal conferences had agreed; and on 25 March 2010 the Holy See granted its *recognitio*.

Addressing the Bishops of England and Wales, and Scotland, at Oscott College on 19 September 2010, Pope Benedict XVI thanked all of them for the contribution they made, 'with such painstaking care, to the collegial exercise of reviewing and approving the texts' — thus welcoming the new translation of the Roman Missal which will be introduced this month in all Catholic churches.

Fergus Kerr OP

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