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Lost in translation

By Msgr. Richard Antall *

Anyone who has worked in a country where a foreign language is spoken can testify to the difficulty of translating thoughts and words adequately.

I spent 20 years in El Salvador and have my share of stories about priests and nuns who had trouble converting what they meant to say into Spanish. Likewise, the Salvadorans who tried to express themselves in English had difficulty, although this seemed more comic for us than the mistakes we missionaries made.

I remember a fellow who wanted to have a romantic name for his restaurant. He called it Coffee Love's, but I am pretty sure that he meant something like Café Love, or Love's Café, or perhaps Café of Love, but not what he came up with. Something had got lost in the translation.

The difficulties of translation explain why we are getting a new Missal at Advent. A liturgist told a group of priests recently that the effort could be traced to Pope John Paul II, who was listening very closely at a Vespers service in English one day and was surprised because the oration differed so much to the prayer he had said in another language. Differed, that is, not just in the words of another language, but in content.

The story sounds like a story. Experts were well aware of the inadequacy of the translations of the prayers of the Roman Missal into various languages for a long time, actually since they were published. Liturgists studied and compared the language of the prayers in the vernacular and the original Latin prayer with great

care and often found things to comment upon. I have book in Spanish that examines the opening prayer of every Sunday Mass, comparing the Latin with versions in several different languages.

A Benedictine monk analyses translations from the Latin to English for the London Tablet and often reveals the details that the Roman Missal of 1974 sometimes skipped over in the effort to have more “idiomatic” or “culturally accessible” or “fluid” language. (Of course these qualifiers are much like beauty — in the eye of the beholder).

In the article at hand, it is clear that the symmetry of ideas in a preface that intended to specifically mention the first and second comings of Christ was not so evident in the official translation. While it is not the case that, as the Italian saying goes, “Traduttore, traditore” (The translator is a traitor because he betrays in some sense the meaning of the original), the effort for smooth English sentence structure meant knocking out some ideas.

In 2001, an Instruction called “Liturgiam Authenticam” (“Authentic Liturgy”) was emitted by the Congregation for Divine Worship. It called for a revision of the vernacular texts of the translations of the Roman Missal. The language in it was quite strong, really, because it says the inadequate translations have meant an impediment to the Liturgical Renewal promoted by the Second Vatican Council.

Because I was serving in our diocesan mission in El Salvador, I was not abreast of all the painful stages of the process of coming up with an acceptable new translation. There are some priests, and even some bishops who are not (or perhaps were not) exactly keen on the new edition of the Missal.

There were great debates about some parts of it and all kinds of correspondence between the Bishops’ Conference in Washington and the Congregation for Divine Worship in Rome. I have been reading some of the documents of the case and hearing about some

of the meetings and am quite relieved that I am arriving when the dust has settled.

For me, the new Missal is a very logical consequence of the fact that we are Roman Catholics. The Latin Rite is not just a historical connection with the Church in Rome, but is an integral element in our identity. The Roman Missal is the reference point of our worship and reflects, as was said in “Authentic Liturgy”: “theological realities of ecclesial communion and unity.”

The New Missal is really about the unity of the Church in prayer before all other technical considerations. Our prayers are not meant to sound like they were composed on native ground by contemporaries. They echo the voice of the Church down the ages, and while it is a living tradition, it is one that cannot forget its history.

The translations of the prayers in the Missal approved in 1974 were freer translations, like the paraphrased versions of the Bible that are available. The paraphrased versions are good for a start, but eventually, one desires to get closer to the richness of the original. The reasons stated by the Congregation for Divine Worship for a change of translation more than convince me, because I always had a sense that the liturgical books needed a bit of editing.

What surprises me is the strong language of the “Authentic Liturgy”:

“Ever since the promulgation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, the work of the translation of the liturgical texts into vernacular languages, as promoted by the Apostolic See, has involved the publication of norms and the communication to the Bishops of advice on the matter. Nevertheless, it has been noted that translations of liturgical texts in various localities stand in need of improvement through correction or through a new draft.

“The omissions or errors which affect certain existing vernacular

translations – especially in the case of certain languages – have impeded the progress of the inculturation that actually should have taken place. Consequently, the Church has been prevented from laying the foundation for a fuller, healthier and more authentic renewal.”

“Omissions and errors,” says the document, which impede and even “prevent” laying the foundation of a “fuller, healthier and more authentic renewal” of the Liturgy. In January, I finally used one of those machines that tell you how to get from one place to another on a trip to Our Lady of the Genesee Monastery in New York (I am a bit technologically challenged, not just the result of living 20 years in the mission, but it sounds like a good excuse). Every time I made a wrong turn a lady’s voice said, “Recalculating,” which can get on your nerves if you let it, but you are lost without it.

Authentic Liturgy was like that little machine on the dashboard. For ten years, with all kind of back- and- forth consultation, debate and frustration, Holy Mother Church has been saying that we had to renew and refine our books of prayer to make them better expressions of the living Roman Catholic tradition. There was a lot of steering to be done. In Advent, we arrive at the destination as far as the Eucharistic celebration is concerned. I am looking forward to it.

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