

## Some Thoughts on the New Missal

by Alan Morris

Firstly, it's important to realise that translation is not an easy business. Some years ago a priest of our diocese was translating the Gospel into sign language at a Mass for the deaf in the North East. When he came to the sentence, 'Jesus said, "I will make you fishers of men,"' he translated the word 'fishers' with hand gestures indicating a man winding a fishing reel. The congregation, however, rocked with laughter.

After the Mass he asked them what had caused the hilarity. He was told that in the North East the sign for a fisherman was a gesture denoting a man hauling in a fishing net. The man winding a reel was a garden gnome! So Jesus appeared to say: "I will make you into garden gnomes". At Vatican Council II in the early 1960s it was decided to restore the structure of the Latin Mass to a purer and earlier form. In anticipation of its ultimate availability in English, in 1962 the bishops of the English speaking world set in train the process of translating the Latin form of the Mass into English and left the detailed scholarly work to ICEL – the International Commission for English in the Liturgy. ICEL was to produce a translation faithful to the norms suggested in the major document of the Vatican Council on the liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.

It said that "*The rites of worship should be distinguished by a noble simplicity; they should be short, clear and unencumbered by useless repetition; they should be within the peoples' power of comprehension and as a rule not require much explanation*" and, furthermore, "*the full and active participation of all the people is the aim to be considered before all else*". One of the major principles for the translation, suggested by Rome, was that of *dynamic equivalence*. In other words, Latin phrases should be translated into the nearest English equivalent. So, for example, the Romans had a phrase, *festina lente*. It literally means 'hasten slowly'. The nearest English dynamic equivalent would be 'more haste, less speed'.

And so, in a remarkably short time, in 1973 we heard the words of the Mass in English for the first time. Immediately it was recognised that, precisely because the translation had been done in some haste, it would need revision after about 25 years. In addition, it was recognised that, as English is a living language, subject to shifts in meaning over time, adjustments would have to be made. Under the guidance of ICEL this

revision began in earnest in the early 1980s and reached its conclusion with a text, approved by all the bishops' conferences of the English speaking world, and sent to Rome for approval in 1998.

### **Principles of translation**

Although it wasn't actually formally rejected by Rome until 2002, the Vatican made it clear in 1999 that it had changed its mind about the principles of translation. In March 2001 Rome issued instructions in a document entitled, *Liturgiam Authenticam*, that a translation must apply the principle of "formal equivalence" and thereby follow the Latin text in "the most exact manner". These instructions rejected the principle of "dynamic equivalence" thus completely undermining the basis of the translation submitted by the Bishops in 1998.

In addition, *Liturgiam Authenticam* required that the scriptural allusions in the Latin text should be mirrored in the English text. The membership of the ICEL team was then "restructured" and a new translation was produced, applying the principles of formal equivalence. This translation was approved by the English speaking Bishops and delivered to Rome in 2008. In 2010 Rome returned the finalised text to the bishops of the English speaking world with – it is estimated – over 2,000 alterations. And it is that altered text that will become the only valid English text from the start of Advent this year.

Let's just look at one or two issues. As I've mentioned, the English translations must reflect the scriptural allusions in the Latin text. And so, just before communion we will now say, "Lord, I am not worthy for you to enter under my roof," rather than, "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you." The new translation reminds us of the moment when the centurion declines Jesus offer to heal his sick servant in person, saying, "I am not worthy for you to enter under my roof." Those scriptural allusions are precious, and it is good to be reminded of them.

One undoubted gain in returning to a closer rendering of the original must be the change of the prosaic phrase, "from East to West," in the Eucharistic Prayer to the more authentic and poetic, "from the rising of the sun to its setting". Of course this can mean, "from East to West," but it can also mean, "from morning to evening," or, perhaps, from the start of life to its close. The original Latin phrase had a richness of meaning that

unfolded gradually and could be savoured in different ways at different times of life – altogether more desirable. That is the goal of good translation: a poetic richness and vigour in our prayers, so that we are constantly nourished from wells of inexhaustible depth, for our prayers directly condition our beliefs and our beliefs sustain us on our pilgrim journey towards that source of all goodness and beauty we call God.

If the feedback from this and other parishes, and indeed dioceses around the English speaking world, is anything to go by, however, it will be a long time before the ferment of conflicting opinion about the beauty of the new translation dies down. And, perhaps, by then it will be time for another revision, but I suspect that by then I will be long gone and celebrating the liturgy, I hope, in heaven, no longer here on earth.

### **The Credo dilemma**

Now I'd like to tackle just one very important word whose translation has been a source of anxiety. This is not the only word that has caused much discussion but it is one whose translation could cause confusion. I refer to the translation of the word at the start of the Nicene Creed – in Latin "Credo". You may think that the translation of this one word is only of interest to scholars, but I assure you that on the translation of this one word rests a massive weight of theological importance. You see there is a very pithy Latin saying. It goes: *Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi*. Roughly translated, it means, "As we pray, so we believe". In other words, through the constant hearing and saying of prayers – especially at Mass - our very understanding of the Christian faith is formed and informed.

When the Mass was translated into English fully in the early 1970s we were told that, although the Latin word at the start of the Nicene Creed was the singular verb "Credo" – which literally translates as "I believe", the Church in its wisdom had agreed that it would be better if we said "WE believe". Why was this? Well, in the earliest formulations of that creed after the Council of Nicea in 325AD the Greek word used to open the creed had oscillated between the Greek word for "I believe" and the plural "WE believe". Similarly, when the creed was first translated into Latin, the texts again varied between "I believe" and "WE believe". Why? Well, this variety witnesses to a very real dilemma. Are we making this profession of faith as individuals or as a community?

For me, this tension marks one of the great differences between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches on the one hand and the Christian communities deriving from the European Reformation on the other. To put it bluntly, the further down the Catholic or Eastern Orthodox road one travels the more the *community* dimension of faith is emphasized; the further one goes in the Protestant direction the more the *individual* comes to the fore. Those first translators of the Creed into English in the early 1970s decided to emphasize the Catholic community dimension of belief and so for the last nearly forty years we have been affirming that WE believe in one God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.

Did I welcome the 1970s translation of Credo in the plural: “WE believe”? Yes I did. Do I, therefore, regret the return to the stress on the individual emphasis in belief? That’s a difficult question. Suffice it to say that I understand that at different times in the life of the church it is appropriate to give emphasis to different dimensions of our faith; and it may be that now there is a need for a more personal, individualistic emphasis. Be that as it may, there are still areas in our shared Catholic lives where a sense of the importance of the whole community retains a quite profound emphasis.

### **Experience of forgiveness**

I’m thinking firstly of our experience of forgiveness, where that importance of togetherness is clearly brought out in the Church’s provision of Rite Two celebrations of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Here the People of God gather to ponder his word and to experience his forgiveness TOGETHER. Alone, we can all too easily be overwhelmed by a sense of our own personal sinfulness and forget that we belong to the Church which is, in the words of Vatican Council II, a sacrament of God’s purposes of reconciliation with all humankind. Of course, in reality, a healthy understanding of sin and forgiveness balances our personal responsibility with our corporate solidarity.

That balance is maintained in the Old Testament scriptures when the prophet Jeremiah proclaims the Lord’s forgiveness of the people as a whole in these words: “I will forgive THEIR iniquity”. And, by contrast, the psalmist pleads for PERSONAL forgiveness – “Have mercy on ME, God, in your kindness; in your compassion blot out MY offence”. But, when I feel cast down by my personal sinfulness, I’m consoled as I remember the prayer in the Mass just before communion when the priest prays, “Lord,

look not on OUR sins, but on the faith of your Church,” and I believe that God does just that. Similarly, in the most perfect of all prayers – the prayer that Jesus himself gave us – we are constantly reminded that God is OUR Father, who gives US our daily bread. And we ask God that he forgive US OUR trespasses as WE forgive those who trespass against US and we beg him to lead US not into temptation but to deliver US from evil. The Lord’s Prayer is anything but individualistic.

The Greek Orthodox theologian, John Zizioulas, movingly speaks of the communitarian dimension of the Eucharist in this way: *The Holy Eucharist is not the place in which each one encounters God in a “merely” vertical relationship. No, the Eucharist is essentially social and ecclesial and has been preserved – more or less lived – as such in the East. There is perhaps no other event of ecclesial existence in which Christians cease to be individuals and become Church. In the Eucharist, prayer, faith, love and Charity (that is to say all that the faithful practise individually) cease to be “mine” and become “ours” and the entire relationship of humanity with God becomes the relationship of God with his people, with his Church. The Eucharist is not only communion between each person and Christ, it is also communion among the faithful themselves and unity in the body of Christ, “not many bodies, but one body”.* I hope that WE can all gladly say, “Amen,” to that.

There is another word I want to analyse very carefully. It is an utterly crucial word and I know that Catholic clergy the length and breadth of the English-speaking world have been preaching on it recently. Why so important? Well, because the translation of this tiny word goes to the very heart of our Christian faith; and our understanding of the sentence in which it sits forms our basic understanding of Christianity itself.

What is this word? It is the Latin word *multis*. The Latin sentence in which it sits comes immediately after the consecration of the wine when the Latin text says, “quid pro vobis et pro multis effundetur in remissionem peccatorum,” now translated, “which will be shed for you and for many for the remission of sins”.

While it is true that *multis* can be translated as “many” it was previously translated as “all”. Why? Because all mainstream Christian theology holds fast to the fundamental truth that Christ came to save *all* humankind, not just one particularly favoured group. Having said that, there are some parts of the Christian family that do hold that Jesus came to save only the

“elect”, by which they usually mean themselves. Such would be the belief of a very small subset of the Baptist family in England - the Strict and Particular Baptists - not to be confused with the mainstream Baptist family to which – say - Altrincham Baptists belong. When I was doing a major piece of ecumenical work in Cheadle Edgeley, some three years ago now, the Grace Baptist Chapel there would have nothing to do with my two-year project because they didn’t believe that Jesus came to save the Anglicans, Methodists, United Reformed or Salvation Army folk around the corner. That is decidedly *not* what we believe.

### **From all to many**

The potential for misunderstanding this central mystery of salvation is made more acute when the word *all* is replaced by *many*. After all, why change a word if the original translation is satisfactory? Five years ago when I was last in Rome I discussed this with Mgr Philip Whitmore over dinner. Philip was emphatic that he hoped that the team translating the Missal would opt for the translation of *multis* as *all*. And he added that the late Pope John Paul himself was on record as saying that *all* was a perfectly acceptable English rendering of *multis*. However, it has to be said that when the Latin Missal was originally translated into many other modern languages the equivalent word for *all* was not actually chosen. For example, the translation into French has it that Jesus died *pour la multitude* – that is, for the multitude.

In a recent article in *The Tablet* on the translation of the Eucharistic Prayers Fr Nicholas King, a lecturer in Greek and New Testament studies at Oxford said this: *“There is no need here to track the origins of the English, from Hebrew, through Greek into Latin; but it is sufficient to make the point that sometimes a literal translation of the Latin can have a catastrophic effect, and it may be necessary to go back to the languages that underlie our Latin [text], in order to find out what was going on.”* He pointed out that some people argue that *“in order to return to a reverent approach to the Eucharist, it is necessary to get back closer to the original Latin”*. He then continued: *The difficulty with this argument is that the Latin was not original. The Gospel was first proclaimed by Jesus in his native dialect, the impenetrable Galilean Aramaic. In order for it to get anywhere in the Mediterranean world, it had then to be translated into Greek, not the highly sophisticated language of fifth-century Athens, but the workaday*

*common language that enabled people of different native tongues to communicate with each other all over the Roman Empire.*” However, Fr King notices with pleasure that elsewhere, and more than once, in the new text of the Eucharistic Prayers, the translation regards what Jesus has done as affording “*salvation to the whole world*”, so that the rendering of *pro multis* as “for many” is presumably not meant to imply “for some but not for others”.

When Dom Henry Wansbrough came over earlier this year to Cheshire to give a talk on the King James Bible we conversed on this very issue. Dom Henry, who was an adviser to the Holy See on biblical matters, also suggested, like Fr Nicholas King, that it was necessary to go behind the Latin – which, after all, was not the language of Jesus – to the Aramaic that Jesus himself would have spoken. He suggested that Jesus would almost certainly have been using a common Aramaic turn of phrase, “*for the many, and the many, and the many,*” an expression intended to mean “for all”. By condensing this into the single Latin word *multis* the all-embracing intention of Jesus has been lost. In much the same way, when the Book of Revelation tells us that the number counted as saved will be one hundred and forty-four thousand, it doesn’t mean a precise number but actually means a figure too large to count.

We must hang on to with all our hearts and minds and strength to the heart of the Gospel: Jesus is good news without limit for the whole world. Jesus did not come to save the Church alone; no, he came to save the world. The heart of the message that we will proclaim to the world in three weeks’ time is that “*God loved the world so much that he sent his only begotten Son*” to us because that is what you do when you love someone, you want to be with them, and will do anything you can to be at one with them, even if it means dying a terrible death on a cross.

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