What are the Translation Rules?

In February of 1997, Pope John Paul II directed the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, the Vatican’s office for overseeing the Sacred Liturgy in the Latin Church, to prepare and publish new norms for the translation of the texts of the Roman Liturgy into the various languages of the people. The letter of the Cardinal Secretary of State to the Prefect of the Congregation, then Cardinal Jorge Media Estevez, encapsulated the principles of the new norms in words that were incorporated into n. 20 of the new Instruction finally published on March 28, 2001: “…the original text, insofar as possible, must be translated integrally and in the most exact manner, without omissions or additions in terms of their content, and without paraphrases or glosses. Any adaptation to the characteristics or the nature of the various vernacular languages is to be sober and discreet.”

While the situation varied from one language to another, translations of the liturgical texts into English in particular had been found to be deficient in precisely the terms being expressed here. The texts were easily readable, but often departed from the exact sense of the Latin texts, often omitting terms such as “sacred”, or “soul”, sometimes adding terms for explanation or perceived relevance, and frequently opting to sacrifice the interconnectedness of different clauses in favor of the simplicity brought about by breaking a larger complex sentence into several smaller ones.

The new norms stipulate that the texts should be translated in a precise manner even if the original texts may be worded differently from the patterns of everyday speech. After all, there is much spiritual and doctrinal wealth in the texts that have been handed down from past ages, and the participant in the Sacred Liturgy can be seen in many ways as analogous to a child who is formed in prayer by listening to the prayers of his or her mother.

Often the language of the Liturgy incorporates biblical words or expressions, and the new translations are to preserve this quality with care. The same can be said for plays on words in the Latin that may convey a theological message; some means must be sought in
the translated text to accomplish the same goal. In imitation of biblical language, the Church’s liturgical prayers often employ expressions speaking of God in concrete terms: mentioning his “arm” in referring to his power, or his “face” in referring to the regard that he has for believers. Even though people may not speak this way today, such language is vivid and memorable, and is retained in the new translations. The response heard at the beginning of Mass and several times during it, namely “And with your spirit” (similar to expressions sometimes found in Saint Paul’s letters) is not something that is likely to be heard in everyday English either, but it is expressive of the sacred reality of the celebration in which the priest or deacon and the people are exchanging far more than a simple greeting.

In the new translations, it is reasonable to expect a certain sensitivity to the way that people may hear a certain word like “man” as referring to males rather than to both genders, but this sensitivity cannot be made into an absolute rule where a higher theological value is at stake: for example, the title “Son of Man” for Jesus Christ requires an understanding of that same word in a more traditional manner, and the title is simply too important to be omitted. Where traditional usage cannot be omitted without loss of important content, one would do well simply to avoid any unnecessary taking of offense.

The new norms for translation require that the connections between the various parts of sentences and longer prayers should be evident in the translation as they are in the Latin, and this necessarily means that there will be longer sentences and much more use of subordinate clauses. While the resulting prayers may be more difficult to grasp completely on a single hearing, they are far richer in their content and can provide much material for reflection, yielding deeper insights each time they are proclaimed and heard.

The norms now in force for liturgical translation generally require more involvement from the Holy See than some may have envisioned in the past, but this is because the Liturgy in a given country does not simply belong outright to the believers there. It is first of all the Roman Liturgy, shared with those local Churches whose evangelization took place within the Latin Church. Moreover, the Liturgy unites believers of all places (and even of all times!), and the translation of liturgical texts in one place can easily affect believers in another, as when the Holy Father visits and uses those texts, or when they are broadcast internationally. The new norms therefore encapsulate the character of the liturgical texts as a precious treasure that believers in different parts of the world must pray in unison and protect in common.
Reflection Questions:

1. Why does the Church stress the importance of translating the original text in an “exact manner without omissions or additions”?

2. How will the new translations help the Church pray with one voice?

3. Why is it important that my voice become one with those of my brothers and sisters in Christ during the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy?

4. The Church encourages the faithful to take part in the Sacred Liturgy in both mind and body. Do I feel that I am fully participating in the Liturgy now? How will the new translation lead me to a full and active participation in the liturgy?

Prayer:

Father,
For your glory and our salvation
you appointed Jesus Christ eternal High Priest.
May the people he gained for you by his blood
come to share in the power of his cross and resurrection
by celebrating his memorial in this Eucharist,
for he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. Amen.