Why a Revised English Translation?

The Second Vatican Council published sixteen major documents on different areas of the Church’s life, but most people will likely remember the Council primarily because of its decision to allow the celebration of Mass and the other Sacraments in the language of the people. The reason for this provision is given in n. 33 of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum Concilium: “when the Church prays or sings or acts, the faith of those taking part is nourished and their minds are raised to God, so that they may offer Him their rational service and more abundantly receive His grace”.

Changes are never easy, especially in the context of the sacred where the stability of texts and of customs is emblematic of the unchanging realities so essential to worship itself. For this reason some were upset when the use of Latin gave way to the vernacular, though many others were glad now to be able to understand the words of the Sacred Liturgy. For the same reason, some may now be confused about the introduction of a new translation of the Roman Missal into English. Apart from the unsettling nature of change in itself, one sometimes hears expressions of alarm as if the new translation somehow constituted a retreat from the liturgical reforms that the Council envisioned.

On the contrary, the new translation is intended precisely to move forward the very goal that the Council expressed. The important decisions require many years – sometimes even centuries – for their full implementation. A circular letter to Bishops’ Conferences provided some initial guidelines in 1969, but in 2001 the Holy See published new and more precise directives on how to implement the Second Vatican Council’s directives for the vernacular translation of the Roman Liturgy, in the form of the Instruction Liturgiam authenticam. As with any human undertaking, it should not be found surprising that the first attempts ever made at translating the Latin prayers of the Liturgy – as well as the principles on which those translations were based – were found by the Holy See and the Bishops to be imperfect after the passage of sufficient time for reflection.
The earliest English-language translations of the liturgical texts made after the Council were characterized by the attempt to craft the language of prayer so that it would sound natural on the lips of English speakers, as if these were words coming spontaneously from their own hearts as they came together to worship the Lord. As those texts were examined in retrospect, however, especially as compared to their Latin originals, the vernacular texts clearly failed to convey sufficiently many of the concepts, the attitudes, the poetry, the dignity, the biblical allusions, and the theologically or catechetically significant expressions of the original Latin texts. In many cases, rather than being an actual translation of the Latin texts, the English prayers were relatively independent compositions inspired by the Latin texts of the Roman liturgical books. Any failure to convey the full content of the Latin texts was reason for serious concern because the Church’s liturgical prayer has always been one of the means by which she teaches believers, forming their faith as she teaches them to express it in worship.

Besides the biblical readings, the liturgical prayers are actually one of the sources on which homilists may preach (GIRM, n. 65). The Latin prayers actually contain much solid material for doing so, and the infrequency with which English-speaking Catholics have heard anyone preach on the liturgical prayers until now helps to illustrate the need for a new translation that will contain more of the spiritual and doctrinal depth of the original Latin prayers.

**Reflection Questions:**

1. Do I actively participate at Mass? Am I truly raising my mind and heart to God in prayer and song?

2. Why does the Church think that a revised English Translation is needed at this time?

3. How do the prayers used during the celebration of Mass form my faith?

**Prayer:**

Father,
By the blood of your own Son
you have set all men free and saved us from death.
Continue your work of love within us,
that by constantly celebrating the mystery of our salvation
we may reach the eternal life it promises.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. Amen.