

Language, one or many, in the Liturgy since Vatican II

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A strange and haunting memory comes back to me as I begin this paper. It was a bright cool summer morning in the Laurentian mountains along the St. Lawrence River. I was kneeling in a simple primitive chapel where the young chaplain of a boys' camp in the bush was celebrating the quiet weekday Mass. It was probably in 1950, and I was not quite out of my teens. As the priest came to say "Per omnia sæcula sæculorum," and then launch into the Pater Noster, I realized that I had mentally recited the whole silent Latin Canon of the Mass with him, without once looking down at the text of my Latin-and-English daily Missal. As a liturgically-saturated graduate of a Cathedral Choir School and possessed of a good memory, I was not hard pressed to learn the Roman Canon in Latin by heart. Mind you, I say in Latin! Such had been the power of Roman Catholic culture over me that I easily gave precedence to her sacred language. As for reciting the same Canon by heart in English, simply impossible! For, as you know, almost every English missal and prayer-book presented a different English version of that weighty and ancient prose.

Today, 27 years after that golden moment in 1950, I cannot say the Mass in English by heart. Not even the shortest of the new Eucharistic Prayers. I even confess that there are one or two short silent prayers of the Mass that I still say in Latin. But I have forgotten the Roman Canon. Other priests are not so retarded. You have surely seen one or other of those warm, extroverted, shining-eyed presidents of the New Mass who says the whole Eucharistic Prayer No. 3 (or is it No. 2 or No. 4?) with his unblinking eyes riveted constantly on the congregation. You don't dare turn around to see if there is a TV prompter on the back wall. He has his new missal – or maybe missalette. But he never looks at it.

So here now is a greying forty-fivish cleric who has forgotten the Latin Mass and can't remember the English Mass. He has been effectively inoculated against remembering by nine years service on ICEL, the International Commission on English in the Liturgy. During that time, so many drafts, and revisions, and corrections, and semi-final readings, and final versions have passed before his bloodshot eyes that the memory nerve has been effectively deadened.

How different it all was in the old Latin days! There was only one Latin version, and how sacrosanct it was! Ah true, a few odd groups like Carmelites and Carthusians had a slightly different wording of the Confiteor, or of this or that. But the vast majority of Roman Catholics had only one text, and that Latin Liturgy, dead language though it was scoffingly called, got rather deeply rooted in our living hearts.

Well, then: some questions arise. After all the dust of translation settles, do we now in English as then in Latin, have a single version of the new Liturgy? Is this the intention of the Holy See? And if it has not been achieved, what are the conflicting or rival English versions? How did these arise? and will they all survive in the long run?

To the first question: Is there just the one English version of the new Liturgy? To answer that, let me say that the ICEL translation of the Liturgy is overwhelmingly in possession around the English-speaking world. Admittedly there are other translations, but they are conspicuous by being few. To consider just the new Roman Missal, ICEL is the official English version in every country as far as I know, and only in the British Isles is there another version, locally produced, which is approved alongside ICEL for I believe a limited few years only, and which I think predated ICEL.

To the second question: Was a single English version of the Liturgy the wish of the Holy See? Yes, emphatically. Let me document this briefly:

1964 was the year of the first English in the Mass, the year when the nose of the vernacular camel entered the tent of the Church. (Pity the Latin Master!) On October 16 of that year, Cardinal Lercaro wrote a letter to the presidents of all the Episcopal Conferences which share a common language. He urged unity in the liturgical translations for those conferences. (See

Notitiæ I, p. 195.)

On November 10, 1965, Pope Paul VI spoke to the International Congress on (Liturgy) Translations in Rome. I was present. In paragraph 9 of his speech, he seconded Cardinal Lercaro with these words: “Cardinal Lercaro, President of the Consilium for Liturgy ... asked above all that in countries speaking the same language there should be a *unity* in the liturgical texts, *avoiding a multiplicity of translations...*” (Italic type are mine.)

Four years later in 1969, on January 25, the Consilium issued a detailed instruction on what had by now become a big business in the Church, the translation of liturgical texts. Section 2b reads as follows: “When a common language is spoken in several different countries, international commissions should be appointed by the conferences of bishops who speak the same language to make one text for all.” And again it cites the Lercaro letter of 1964.

Section 41 of the Instruction says: “Distinguish between the texts which are said by one person and heard by the congregation, and those intended to be *recited or sung by all*. *Uniformity* is obviously more important for the latter category than for the former.”

In the same year 1969, on October 20, appeared the Instruction on the gradual application of the *Missale Romanum*. Section 4 reaffirms the need for unity of liturgical translations by these words “The translation of the Ordo Missae (Ordinary of the Mass) should be one and the same for all countries which use the same language.” Here the text refers back to the Lercaro 1964 letter and the January Instruction of 1960. Then it continues: “This (i.e. unity of translation) also applies to other texts which call for the direct participation of the people.”

Could the mind of the Church be clearer? Only one translation of the Liturgy per language, especially of the people’s parts.

However, by 1970, some difficulties in attaining this unity had come to the surface in the Portuguese and Spanish-speaking nations. So a further document appears: a letter from Cardinal Gut of the Congregation for Divine Worship to episcopal conferences having a common language. The date is February 6. Once again the author explicitly recalls all the preceding documents since the letter of Cardinal Lercaro in 1964. Then he makes a definitive addition to the Instruction of 1969 (January 25) in 3 points:

1. There is to be a single translation
 - a) in all parts of the liturgy which involve the direct participation of the people. Such, he says, are acclamations, responses, dialogs.
 - b) in the Mass, for parts pertaining to the Ordinary.
 - c) in the Divine Office, for the psalms and hymns and intercessions at Lauds and Vespers.
2. For other liturgical texts, a single translation is recommended. But if genuinely necessary (*ubi vera necessitas exstet*), a Conference may modify the single translation, or retranslate it.
3. The texts mentioned in No. 1 above must be approved by all the Conferences involved before Rome will confirm this approval.

Cardinal Gut concludes by pointing out that these fresh regulations do not lessen the importance of the mixed international commissions (such as ICEL) but only facilitate procedure. He expresses the wish that the Commissions may bear even greater fruit. Let me quote his exact words in English translation:

This Sacred Congregation greatly desires that the activity of the Mixed Commissions may carry through with yet more beneficial results.

Notice the drift of these pronouncements. Almost every one recapitulates the preceding ones, back to that landmark letter of Cardinal Lercaro in 1964. In 1970, after encountering some real difficulties in Spanish and Portuguese, the policy is nonetheless reaffirmed: one translation per language remains a must for the main texts of the Liturgy, and remains a serious recommendation for all other texts, with deviation only “*ubi vera necessitas exstet*.”

We have answered our second question. Yes, the Holy See does desire only a single translation per language.

We can go even further, and say the Holy See desires a single translation per *several* languages in the case of regions with many dialects. For on June 5, 1976, Cardinal Knox, prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Sacraments, wrote a four-page letter to the presidents of episcopal conferences. Speaking mainly for countries with a multiplicity of local dialects, he urged that the number of liturgical languages not be increased to excess, and that widely

understood expressions be preferred to local terms. He points out that this appropriate unity of speech in Liturgy will in a given country help popular participation, the preparation and printing of liturgical altar books, and the publication of liturgical aids for the people. He asks that previous customs or permissions be amended, if they are in discrepancy with this unity ideal.

Our third question is this: What in fact are the rival or conflicting non-ICEL liturgical translations in the English-speaking world that impede the full realization of Rome's intended single translation?

There are three major conflicting texts: One of these is the English *funeral rite*, used in England and Wales.

A second is the Chapman *psalm refrains and alleluia verses of the Lectionary*, used in the British Isles. These psalm refrains, along with the ICEL version, are also used in Canada.

A third is the English-language *Breviary* used in the British Isles, Australia, and New Zealand, and perhaps unofficially in other countries outside North America.

A fourth text should be mentioned: The National Liturgical Commission *Roman Missal* produced in the British Isles shortly before the ICEL version came out. This British version is still approved, I think till 1980. The ICEL Roman Missal is now also approved in the British Isles, and is rapidly gaining the widest acceptance.

It is surely noteworthy, then, that the rites for Baptism, Penance, the Eucharist, Confirmation, Marriage, Holy Orders, Religious Profession, Anointing and Care of the Sick, all these and a host of lesser related liturgical texts and documents are used round the English-speaking world practically exclusively in the one single translation of ICEL, as desired by the Holy See. This is a solid Catholic achievement, and it has come about during the mere 13 years since the first vernacular translations were approved in 1964.

Nevertheless, substantial exceptions mar this harmonious picture. While that English funeral rite is a celebration of only occasional occurrence in a given locality, those psalm refrains and alleluia verses occur in every single Mass that is said everywhere. And the breviary or divine office, as you know, is a gigantic portion of the prayer life of the Church. In these three areas, – funeral,

lectionary, and breviary – the English-speaking Roman Catholic world has fallen short of the Vatican objective of a single translation.

And so we come to our fourth question: How did these other versions arise? The question is important. If they arose because of differing English usage in different countries, then perhaps the Roman ideal of unity is a chimeric dream. The Englishman will have his petrol, the American his gas, and so forth. – But in fact we are going to see that this sort of incidental difference in English usage has nothing to do with the existence of these three rival translations.

First, the funeral rite.

In April 1971, Bishop Wheeler of Leeds had sent to the dozen ICEL bishops a memorandum of complaints regarding ICEL. Some of these touched particularly on the funeral rite. It regretted the changing of the traditional phrase “Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord.” It objected to “short staccato and jerky sentences” which “wear badly.” It wanted *anima* to be always translated by *soul* rather than by other more personalist words. These and numerous serious other criticisms of ICEL were answered in a patient, detailed four-page letter on April 30 (1971) by the then chairman of ICEL, Cardinal Gray of Edinburgh. I am sure the Yorkshireman was not fully appeased by the Scot. At that time on ICEL we were all uncomfortably aware of the personal frictions between ICEL secretariate (in Washington) and certain English bishops and publishing houses. One can hardly document the influence of such intangibles. But the London *Times* of July 7 (1971) produced a comment. Let me quote (from Clifford Longley’s report): “The Vatican is anxious to see a uniform translation in use throughout the Anglo-Saxon world, and in the interests of this uniformity, the English bishops have accepted for the time being ICEL’s English texts with the exception of the requiem (i.e., the funeral rite). Wanting specially to preserve a dignity of language and an understanding of death familiar to British Roman Catholics, they have virtually abandoned the ICEL version, and are now drafting their own. Cardinal Heenan... (will) appeal to Rome for permission to adopt this homegrown version of the funeral service.”

Bishop Wheeler, the ICEL prelate for England, wrote at the time (*The Catholic Herald*, May 7, 1971), “England and Wales

would always want to act in total liaison with Scotland and Ireland... It would be a serious decision for England and Wales to “go it alone”... It may prove necessary to set up our own team of translators, etc., but not until the acceptance of a common vernacular has been proved impossible.”

In fact, the ICEL funeral rite translation was rejected by England and Wales’ hierarchy. As far as I know, this was the only outright rejection ever of an ICEL text by a hierarchy. It happened at a time when I felt deeply that ICEL’s main problem was its difficult relationship with England. Happily this relationship has since improved. I do not believe ICEL’s translations have been faultless or the best possible. But with brotherly give-and-take it is possible to achieve much greater agreement.

And now to the Lectionary texts.

The psalm refrains and alleluia verses of the Roman Lectionary were brought out in a different version by Geoffrey Chapman Publishers of London, in 1969, only a matter of weeks or perhaps months before the ICEL version. Chapman was then a major Catholic publisher for the British Isles. If his lectionary contained his own version of the psalm refrains and Gospel verses, he would not need to deal with ICEL over royalties. And if he could act quickly, his lectionary would appear first and he could enjoy a better market. These Chapman-sponsored psalm refrains and alleluia verses were quickly approved by the English hierarchy. One must conclude that in so doing, the bishops did not advert to the Roman guideline of one translation per language. More difficult to understand is the confirmation of this approval by the Vatican. I might point out that approval by the hierarchy and confirmation by the Holy See are two required steps for all liturgical translations.

In order to simplify his translation task, Chapman had his psalm refrains simply copied from the corresponding line of the psalm in one particular translation – that of the Grail. As you may know, most psalm refrains are drawn from or based on a line of the psalm in question. ICEL on the other hand made a fresh translation of the refrains from the Latin. They did this because English translations of the psalms are many, and it would have been unfair to favour one of them. Thus we have the following ICEL refrain from psalm 94: “If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.” In the Chapman-Grail version, it reads as in the Grail

translation of that psalm: “O that today you would listen to his voice; harden not your hearts.” The difference is slight. But we are dealing with a text that a) is repeated some five times by the people, and b) should ideally be sung. Even a small difference of words can upset the congregation. And it can make a given melody impossible. Unity of translation is a profound desideratum in psalm refrains.

At any rate, the Canadian bishops, along with probably every anglophone hierarchy outside the British Isles, approved the ICEL lectionary texts (i.e. refrains and verses) in early 1969. And these promptly entered into use in Canada. Two years later in 1971, the Chapman psalm refrains, minus the alleluia verses, travelled to Canada. At their spring meeting that year, the Canadian bishops approved the (Chapman) Grail refrains. Once again, the conclusion would appear that a group of prelates did not advert to the Vatican ruling that there was to be only the one, i.e. the ICEL translation of the liturgy.

Let us turn now to the Divine Office or Breviary. It is also called the Liturgy of the Hours.

In 1970 on All Saint’s Day, Pope Paul VI signed an Apostolic Constitution, entitled “*Laudis canticum*,” which promulgated the new *Liturgia Horarum* or Divine Office. The latter was not yet published in commercial or usable format, but the Pope decreed that it could be used as soon as publication was achieved. He also wrote therein: “Meanwhile the episcopal conferences *should see to the preparation* of editions of this liturgical work in the vernacular.”

The ICEL translation of this breviary was finally published in 1975. This 5-year gap between the Pope’s Apostolic Constitution on the subject and its English-language implementation is not a credit to the diligence or effectiveness of ICEL. And so we are not surprised to see that on December 18, 1973 Archbishop Dermot Ryan of Dublin had given his imprimatur to an earlier translation of this same breviary, produced “under the supervision of a Committee appointed by the four Episcopal Conferences” of Australia, England and Wales, Ireland, and Scotland. This last intelligence is conveyed on the credit page of the published book, which appeared in 1974, a year before the ICEL version. The non-ICEL version was also approved for New Zealand.

Why did that English-language committee proceed to take up

the enormous task of breviary-translating when its sponsoring countries and bishops knew very well that ICEL was there and was the proper agent for the task? I do not possess any documentation for this question, but it was common knowledge on ICEL's Advisory Committee (of which I was an active full member from 1965 to January 1, 1974) that many bishops, particularly in England, were impatient to have the new breviary, and were disappointed by the inaction of ICEL. True, ICEL was constantly busy about other tasks. But the breviary was rightly seen by others as a matter for urgent priority. Furthermore the early 1970's were, as we have seen, a time of strained relations between the English hierarchy and the ICEL secretariate. So it is not hard to understand why the British Isles, with help from Australia, decided to go ahead on their own in translating the breviary.

One might ask: if the non-ICEL breviary came out first and was a decent effort, why did not ICEL adopt or sanction it, and save itself the trouble and cost of a duplicate effort? This would also save the conflict of the two versions we now in fact suffer. Well, this question was faced by ICEL. Without the benefit of written records, I distinctly remember that the Executive Secretary, Fr. John Rotelle, raised this question at one of our meetings. Our mood was rather tired at the time, and I think I was the only person to reply. I argued for ICEL to proceed with its own translation, because many of the short phrases in the breviary (antiphons, responsories, and the like) would duplicate identical ones in other rites of the liturgy, and these should naturally be translated in the same English words in both places. My argument was not opposed. Without, I recall, any formal vote, we agreed to carry on and translate the breviary.

At another point around that time, I recall that one of our most esteemed members, Fr. Godfrey Dickmann, o.s.b., carried personally, on behalf of ICEL, an invitation to the non-ICEL breviary authority that we combine our efforts into a single project for one breviary. This invitation was declined, so we were told. I assume there is some documentation at ICEL secretariate on this episode.

Finally ICEL tried to at least reduce the impact of this conflict by agreeing to use only the Grail psalter in its breviary. For this was the psalter already adopted by the non-ICEL version. This would enable both books to be used side by side at least for the psalms,

which are the bulk of the group texts in the breviary.

The final question which we proposed at the start of this paper was: Will all these conflicting versions survive in the long run?

I confidently predict that unity, not conflict, will survive and grow in the English liturgical texts of the Roman Catholic Church. I make this prediction for several reasons.

The first reason is religious and theological. Unity is a mark of the Church, and a fruit of the Holy Spirit. It is unthinkable for me that the Roman Catholic Church would encourage or long tolerate the perpetuation of needless and slight differences in the language of our prayer, and especially of prayers recited in common. In the old Latin days, we were told that the Latin liturgy was a guardian of the Church's unity, not to mention her doctrinal integrity. This should also be true of English in our modern world, where it is the chief international language.

The second reason is the standing, explicit, and oft-repeated position of the Church today, which has been detailed in this paper. There is to be only one translation of the liturgy per language, especially in the people's parts, and deviations are to be allowed only for true necessity, "ubi vera necessitas exstet." It is true that Rome has tolerated the intrusion of these conflicting liturgical versions. This tolerance is wiser than rigidity. It does not mean the policy is being reversed, but only applied more patiently. It is a recognition that we are sinners, and not always capable of full and immediate unity and concord.

The third reason for my optimism is the great inconvenience and trouble caused by the differing translations.

The USA Bishops, and its Committee on Liturgy, were sued in October 1976 for 750,000 dollars by Costello Publishing Co. of Long Island, because this publisher was prevented by them from selling the non-ICEL breviary in the USA.

I recall a conversation with an executive of Geoffrey Chapman Publishers in London in which that person pointed out the difficulty over selling their lectionary in certain foreign countries because these had approved the ICEL, not the Chapman translation of the psalm refrains and alleluia verses.

Canadian Catholics cannot buy a daily missal because the editions published in England, Ireland, Australia, and U.S.A. do not entirely conform to the translations currently approved in Canada,

and no Canadian publisher has ventured to produce such a book.

For six years, from 1970 to 1976, I worked as editor of the Canadian missalette “Living-with-Christ” published by St. Paul University in Ottawa. An enormous extra burden was thrust on us by the differences in official translations among different countries.

Canadian pastors cannot buy altar books published in England or the USA, and vice-versa, because of conflicting wording in these books. Musical settings composed for one version cannot travel to another country which has another version.

Finally there is the exasperation of ordinary Catholics at having to face small but upsetting differences when they go to Mass in a different country.

And so, despite our sinful propensity to division, I am confident that our punishment by the consequences will help drive us into the arms of unity.

A fourth evidence that acceptance of ICEL will increase is the expanding policy of ICEL to commission musical settings for its translations where music is called for. In this area, ICEL has already published its music for:

1. The Roman Missal – ministerial chants and the people’s responses.
2. The Breviary – principal antiphons, responsories, etc., along with about 185 selected extant hymns.
3. The Rite of Funerals.
4. The Baptism of Children.

In preparation at this time by ICEL are the following:

5. Newly commissioned hymn texts for various needs, with new or old tunes.
6. A selection of some 200 extant hymns and tunes in the public domain for general and seasonal use.
7. Chants for Holy Communion outside the Mass.
8. Chants for the Ordination of Priests.

It seems clear that a sound and attractive musical setting will make an ICEL text all the more secure and desirable, and lessen the advantage of any rival text that lacks music.

A fifth sign of hope is the continuing chorus of support for unity by Church leaders.

Bishop Emmett Carter, past-chairman of the ICEL episcopal board, wrote in the *Catholic Register* (Toronto) of March 17, 1973: After regretting the change from *And with your spirit* to *And also with you*, he added these words : “But I'd rather have it someone else's way in common with the whole English world than my way in isolation. Catholicity has a price in every dimension – not least of all in the liturgy.”

Fr. John Rotelle, executive secretary of ICEL, wrote these words: (letter to Fr. Elvins, Association for English Worship, Arundel, Eng. ; July 9, 1976) “The Holy See has continued to promote common translations for countries sharing the same language... The example of English-speaking Catholics, using a common language in their liturgical worship, the world over, is a powerful evidence of and witness to the one communion of the Roman Catholic Church.” In the same letter, Fr. Rotelle again recalls the Roman unity guidelines starting with the Lercaro letter. And he notes that international liturgy commissions “are also functioning at the behest of the French, German, and Dutch hierarchies,” presumably for the purpose of securing a single translation in each of those three languages.

Fr. Leonard Sullivan, director of the National Liturgical Office in Canada, published an open letter on October 22, 1974 on the new breviary. Affirming that the non-ICEL breviary will not be recommended in Canada, he writes: “Canada is a constituent member of ICEL, and is committed to ICEL's translation of the Mass, the sacraments, and the Hours (breviary). The revival of liturgical prayer will not be made easier if two versions of the (breviary) are in circulation.”

This emphatic pro-ICEL statement from the National Liturgical Office is especially welcome, since its policy has been less consistent in the past. The incumbent was the principal proponent of the Grail Lectionary refrains in Canada, securing them in a string of important liturgical books: hymnal, lectionary, and Sunday Mass Book. Nevertheless, the addition of these non-ICEL refrains, the exclusion of certain ICEL missal chants, and the omission of incidental portions of the funeral rite are the only exceptions to a total Canadian adoption of the whole ICEL production.

The last evidence I might bring for the expected growth of liturgical unity is the active intention of ICEL to do an “eventual revision of the entire ICEL corpus of translations, to introduce corrections and improvements, and to establish consistency throughout.” (1976 Report of Episcopal Board to Member Conférences, p. 7.) This revision will surely strengthen the quality and appeal of ICEL versions and lessen the credibility of any variant contender. In this paper concerning ICEL’s translations, I have not touched on their quality. Let me only say that in a good many passages, revision will be most welcome. I am on record at ICEL as a strong and persistent critic of many of its translations.

Finally we should mention the ecumenical dimension. You may be aware that we are already praying an achieved single ecumenical translation for the whole anglophone Christian world of the Gloria, Creed, Holy holy, Magnificat, Te Deum, and a number of other prayers. These are the work of ICET, The International Consultation on English Texts, a body of Christian leaders of whom ICEL is a part. ICEL is at present actively discussing a common ecumenical psalter and lectionary. I remember that these topics used to crop up at our ICEL meetings even in the 1960’s. Difficult as they surely will be to achieve, a common psalter and lectionary present an inspiring and insistent challenge. What a great boost for the Church tomorrow if we could accept that challenge and emerge victorious! I leave you to imagine the unifying impact on the world if all English-speaking Christians were hearing the same Biblical versions and singing the same words in the psalms. *Ut omnes unum sint!*