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Translations
Matter

– *On Pope Francis's*
Magnum principium

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Magnum principium, Pope Francis’s *motu proprio* on the translation of liturgical texts, decentralizes the process of preparing and approving translations of liturgical books and restores this responsibility to each Episcopal Conference.¹ The “great principle” from which the document takes its name is “the full active participation of all God’s holy people in these liturgical celebrations, especially in the Eucharist” as advocated by the Second Vatican Council (*Sacrosanctum concilium* 41). This two-page document has implications that go well beyond immediate liturgical concerns and touches on the church’s identity, the relationship between the local churches and the Roman Curia, inculturation, ecumenism, and the Church’s witness to the Kingdom of God.

In his 2013 document “The Joy of the Gospel” Pope Francis had written that “Excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church’s life and her missionary outreach” (*Evangelii gaudium* 32). *Magnum principium* addresses this state of affairs and offers another instance whereby Pope Francis calls the Church to live the vision proposed by Vatican II.

Pope Francis acknowledges “difficulties have arisen” in the important task of producing texts for worship that both express the one Catholic faith and also facilitate the active participation of believers in these sacred rites. In particular, tensions emerged between the competence and role of local churches and the central Vatican authority. This new document underlines that the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments (CDW) is “absolutely necessary.” Among its roles is to confirm translations, to assure their conformity with Catholic faith and to recognize adaptations or significant changes to the original text that the Episcopal Conferences might propose.

Magnum principium came into force on October 1, 2017. What

1 The Apostolic Letter in the form of *motu proprio* was issued on September 9, 2017. The text and the official commentary can be found at <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2017/09/09/170909a.html>

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difference, if any, will it make to the person in the pew? Before investigating possible ways forward, some history and context might help.

“DYNAMIC EQUIVALENCE”

Liturgical texts are published in Latin by the Holy See and, since the Second Vatican Council, are subsequently translated into many of the vernacular languages spoken around the world. The Council entrusted this responsibility to the Episcopal Conferences, who would, in turn, seek recognition of the translated texts from the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments.

The guidelines for translation were set out in *Comme Le Prévoit*, issued in 1969 by the Consilium for Implementing the Constitution on Sacred Liturgy.² The purpose of liturgical translations, it notes, is “to proclaim the message of salvation to believers and to express the prayer of the Church to the Lord.”

To achieve this end, it is not sufficient that a liturgical translation merely reproduce the expressions and ideas of the original text. Rather it must faithfully communicate to a given people, and in their own language, that which the Church by means of this given text originally intended to communicate to another people in another time. A faithful translation, therefore, cannot be judged on the basis of individual words: the total context of this specific act of communication must be kept in mind, as well as the literary form proper to the respective language. (*CLP* 6)

This is what happened when the first translations of the Mass appeared after Vatican II. The Latin edition, the *editio typica*, was promulgated in 1970. The English translation was undertaken by a commission, the International Commission for English in the Liturgy (ICEL), established by eleven English-speaking Episcopal Conferences. The approach taken by ICEL has been described as “dynamic equivalence,” an attempt to render the original Latin in a style that reflected contemporary idiom and linguistic culture. The early translations and the norms that guided them were prepared quickly and under great pressure. There were mistakes and inadequacies that needed to be corrected in both later. This point should not be overlooked.

In the subsequent translation of other liturgical texts, debate arose as to whether there should be a more literal word-for-word rendering of the Latin text. ICEL translations that had received the necessary two-thirds approval vote at Episcopal Conferences

2 The text can be found at http://natech.org/NCR_Online/documents/comme.htm

increasingly failed to receive official recognition from the Vatican.

In 2002 a new Latin *editio typica* of the Roman Missal was approved by Saint Pope John Paul II and was published by the CDW. The letter of presentation states that this new edition was “to take account of the more recent documents of the Apostolic See and especially the new Code of Canon Law and to meet the various needs for emendation and augmentation.” This now needed to be translated into the vernacular.

In 2001, the Congregation issued *Liturgiam authenticam*, a document “on the use of vernacular languages in the publication of the books of the Roman liturgy.”³ The approach was noticeably different. *Liturgiam authenticam* called for translations that were to reflect the Latin text “in the most exact manner, without omissions or additions in terms of their content, and without paraphrases or glosses” (LA 20). Furthermore, “the translations should be characterized by a kind of language which is easily understandable, yet which at the same time preserves these texts’ dignity, beauty, and doctrinal precision” (LA 25). While some proposed that *Liturgiam authenticam* was “a direct, organic development of the vision of the council fathers,” *Magnum principium* suggests that Pope Francis does not agree.

In the same year the Congregation also established *Vox Clara*, a group to advise on the translation of liturgical texts into the English language. The specific competences of the Episcopal Conferences, the Congregation, ICEL and *Vox Clara* were often obscure and sometimes contentious. In 2009, for example, the 11 Episcopal Conferences who sponsor ICEL approved a translation of the new missal with the required 2/3 vote and forwarded it to the CDW. With the assistance of *Vox Clara*, the CDW returned this text with reportedly up to 10,000 changes from that submitted by the Conferences. No dialogue or discussion took place before the radically changed text was returned as the final approved text that did not even envisage a further vote of the Conferences. *Magnum principium* does not countenance such unilateral vetting or control.

RECIPROCAL TRUST

Pope Francis’s new document clarifies where the responsibility for the translation of liturgical texts lies and calls for “a vigilant and creative collaboration full of reciprocal trust” between the Episcopal Conferences and the Congregation. In keeping with the intention of Vatican II, Pope Francis states that the Episcopal

3 The text can be found at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20010507_liturgiam-authenticam_en.html

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Conference is “to prepare and publish, after prior review of the Holy See, translations of the liturgical texts.”

In the official commentary on *Magnum principium*, Archbishop Arthur Roche, secretary to the Congregation, notes that, in defining the roles and competencies of the Apostolic See and the Conferences of Bishops, Pope Francis has called for “a spirit of dialogue” in the translation of liturgical texts and in any eventual adaptations that could touch on rites or texts. Archbishop Roche states that the confirmation of the Congregation is not to be considered as “an alternative intervention in the process of translation”, but rather as an authoritative act by which the Congregation “ratifies the approval of the bishops.” Clearly, then, the work of translation once more belongs to the Conferences and not to the Congregation.

Pope Francis notes that a faithful translation “cannot always be judged by individual words.” In proposing that “it is necessary to communicate to a given people using its own language all that the Church intended to communicate to other people through the Latin language” *Magnum principium* moves away from a slavish literalism to embrace the genius of modern languages as had been proposed by *Comme le Prévoit* back in 1969.

RESTORED COMPETENCE

So where do we go from here? Pope Francis has firmly placed the ball in the bishops’ court. This restored competence inevitably brings more responsibility. While the English-speaking Conferences are fortunate to have the advice of the scholars who serve on ICEL, each Conference cannot abdicate its own responsibility to this group. The Irish Episcopal Conference is offered a new opportunity to engage fully with the work of ICEL and to contribute to the formation of liturgical texts and translations particularly when draft texts are sent to each member of the Conference for comment. This is pain-staking work that demands personnel and resources. The liturgical tradition of the Irish Church has its own accent and richness that needs to be heard. It is not enough just to participate in a final vote for approval. Recent history suggests that that can already be too late.

Magnum principium surely renders redundant advisory bodies like *Vox Clara* that oversaw the recent, controversial translation of the Mass texts into English. It will be interesting to see how future translations develop in the light of *Magnum principium*. Will the translation of the Liturgy of the Hours, currently in preparation, be presented for approval without sufficient review? Let us hope that the new translation will be more *Te Deum* than *Miserere*.

Meanwhile, some advocate a recall of the 2011 translation of the Missal; others point to the catechetical effort and monetary expense

that has already been invested. But clearly there is dissatisfaction and growing agreement that it needs revision. “We’ve tried it, we’ve lived with it, we think it needs correction,” is the judgment of Archbishop Wilton Gregory of Atlanta.

COMPANION VOLUME

One immediate possibility is to revisit the 1998 translation that was prepared by ICEL with a view to producing a small companion volume that could address the more notable shortcomings of the 2011 Missal. This would leave the texts substantially unchanged, particularly the dialogue between priest and people, but would add other possibilities that are generally lacking in the new translation. Such a companion volume should consider:

- Collect prayers: ICEL has prepared a collection of collect prayers for every Sunday, holy day and major feast of the three-year cycle. These prayers are written in a contemporary idiom and are inspired by the particular scripture texts for each celebration.
- Invitations to pray: The 2011 Missal either lacks alternatives or makes those that exist hard to find. (The Rite of Blessing and Sprinkling of Holy Water as an alternative to the Penitential Act is one instance.) It gives fewer options than ICEL 1998. There is just one option for the invitation to the *Our Father*. ICEL 1998 offers five where the rubric introduces the invitation by noting: “With hands joined, the priest then sings or says one of the following invitations to the Lord’s Prayer in these or similar words.” The 2011 Missal also eliminates the “similar words” option in the introductions to the penitential rite, the sign of peace and the solemn blessing. These alternatives ought to be restored.
- Inculturation: The issue of inculturation has proven difficult. Indeed, recent translations into the English language see no difference in how that language is spoken from Auckland to Achill or from Nairobi to Newark. Pope Francis’s document offers the opportunity for Episcopal Conferences to faithfully propose cultural changes or adaptations which are not included in the *editio typica*. Understandably, these adaptations or significant changes to the original text that the Episcopal Conferences might propose would require the recognition of the CDW.
- Marriage: The Irish Episcopal Conference has yet to submit the English translation of the new Rite of Marriage for approval.

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There is great unease with the texts (particularly the prefaces and nuptial blessings) in the 2011 Missal. The opportunity now presents itself to make new translations of these texts or, perhaps better still, to propose new texts for the recognition of the CDW. Pope Francis's *Amoris laetitia* has given us a rich source of theology and metaphor that celebrate the gift of married love. It would be opportune to have a preface and nuptial blessing that would draw on the rooted yet poetic imagery of this document.

- Creation: Pope Francis's *Laudato Si* has opened up a more cosmocentric approach to our common home where all of creation is interconnected and the destiny of one is tied irrevocably to the destiny of all. The Celtic spiritual tradition has always treasured an integral view of creation. A preface that reflects the mystery of creation would be a worthy addition to the liturgical prayer of people in Ireland and beyond.
- Inclusive language: While the Latin word "*homines*" may be inclusive of women and men, the English word "men" simply isn't and no argument to the contrary is going to make it so. In the Creed, for example, while people may yet get accustomed to "consubstantial" there is a growing antipathy to "for us men and for our salvation". We can affirm the unique and specific mystery of salvation by professing that "he came down from heaven and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and became man" but let us equally uphold the universality of saving grace that is offered "for us men and women." Many celebrants avoid Eucharistic Prayer IV because of the exclusive language in the translation. It is time to restore these powerful prayers to their proper place.

ECUMENICAL OPENESS

In the first decades after Vatican II contact with other Christian churches had resulted in agreed texts for common prayers used in the liturgy. *Liturgiam authenticam* put an end to that with its surprising statement that "great caution is to be taken to avoid a wording or style that the Catholic faithful would confuse with the manner of speech of non-Catholic ecclesial communities or other religions, so that such a factor will not cause them confusion or discomfort" (LA 40). Before the 2011 Missal many Christians had common texts for the *Gloria*, the Creed and the *Sanctus*. This is no longer the case. This unforeseen ecumenical backstep has caused confusion and hurt in Catholic and non-Catholic quarters.⁴ John Wilkins wonders how agreed translation could cause "confusion or

4 Maxwell E. Johnston, *The Church in Act: Lutheran Liturgical Theology in Ecumenical Conversation* (2015) 246ff, surveys Protestant and Catholic responses.

discomfort” to Catholics after Saint Pope John Paul II’s *Ut unum sint* had encouraged agreed texts for the prayers Christian churches have in common.⁵ The publication of *Magnum principium* may well be a catalyst to recommit to removing all obstacles, linguistic or otherwise, that prevent Christians from praying together.

LANGUAGE MATTERS

The liturgy, we are constantly reminded, “is the source and summit of the life of the Church.” The liturgy expresses our faith in God who is Father, Son and Spirit. The liturgy gives shape to the Body of Christ that is transformed into what it celebrates and consumes. Liturgy is *teologia prima*. Here we learn that God is love and mercy; here we are reassured that we are daughters and sons of the Father; here we are challenged and nurtured to see all as sisters and brothers of one Lord; here the Kingdom is revealed as a power that transforms all creation.

That’s why liturgical language matters. The God of Jesus Christ is “Abba, Father” who is revealed in parables of bread-making, net-mending, coin-searching, in language that is understood by all. Pope Paul VI notes that liturgical language “should be that in ‘common’ usage, that is, suited to the greater number of the faithful who speak it in everyday use, even ‘children and persons of small education’.” That is not to make it colourless or banal. While lofty invocations that “graciously beseech” and “humbly implore” may remind us of our “wicked deeds” and “sustain us in our frailty” they risk conjuring up a transcendent God who may well obscure the Incarnate Lord who encouraged his disciples to “ask”, “seek” and “knock” so that the “door would be opened.”

Liturgiam authenticam notes that “the words of the Sacred Scriptures, as well as the other words spoken in liturgical celebrations, especially in the celebration of the Sacraments ... express truths that transcend the limits of time and space” (LA 19). In the villages, hills and valleys of Galilee Jesus taught the people that the reign of God was dawning in their midst. He spoke of the reign of God as healing for the sick, hearing for the deaf, new sight for the blind, freedom for prisoners, good news for the poor. He revealed a deeper communion with God through ordinary human realities. In Matthew’s Gospel alone he speaks of mothers, fathers, husbands, wives, widows, sons, daughters and children; alms, bankers, burglars, coppers, debts, deposits, employment, merchants, money, gold, silver, purses, taxes, tenants, thieves and wages; birds, cattle, chickens, donkeys, fish, foxes, goats, hens, moths, oxen, pigs, sheep and snakes; corn, fields, figs, flowers, flour,

5 See Gerald O’ Collins, SJ & John Wilkins, *Lost in Translation: The English Language and the Catholic Mass* (2017).

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grapes, loaves, logs, plants, reeds, roots, salt, seed, thistles, thorns, trees, vineyards, weeds, wheat and harvest; banquets, weddings, brides, bridegrooms, dancing, pipes, dinners and feasts; and that still leaves boats, clothes, fires, floods, footwear, gales, haversacks, lamps, nests, nets, oil, rain, reapers, shepherds, splinters, sunset, tunics, woodworm and yeast. This is the language of the Scripture. Should it not also be the language of worship?

While the Church has many things of great importance to deal with – economic divide, homelessness, immigration reform, the protection of human life, care of the earth, diminishing number of young people – it would be foolish not to prioritize the translation of liturgical texts. Liturgical language shapes the Church, the Body of Christ. The language used fosters the Church’s own self-identity and its mission in the world. It forms a Spirit-filled community of women and men who join the Son in giving praise and thanks to the Father and who seek to establish signs of the Kingdom until He comes again.

In an address earlier this summer, Pope Francis remarked that while the liturgical reform is “irreversible”, “there is still work to do in this direction.”⁶ *Magnum principium* represents a significant invitation for all to take a step forward. It reminds us that translations do matter.

6 On the “reform of the reform” see John F. Baldovin SJ, *Reforming the Liturgy: A Response to the Critics* (2008).

Divine Light. One of my images of the divine is that it is the light in some form, and that the divine light works very tenderly with human freedom. If you don’t believe that the light is there, you will experience the darkness. But if you believe the light is there, and if you call the light towards you, and if you call it into whatever you’re involved in, the light will never fail you.

– JOHN O’DONOHUE, *Walking on the Pastures of Wonder* (Dublin: Veritas) p.32.