

NOVATE
VOBIS
NOVALE

The FURROW

A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Liam Bergin

*In Italiano: on
the Italian
translation of the
Roman Missal*

May 2021

In Italiano: on the Italian translation of the Roman Missal

Liam Bergin

The new Italian translation of the Roman Missal has had a gradual rollout with the possibility of celebrating with the new texts from the First Sunday of Advent 2020 to their obligatory use from Easter Sunday 2021. The Missal represents a generous embrace and maturing reception of the reforms of Vatican II that have received renewed stimulus under the pontificate of Pope Francis.

THE JOURNEY

The helpful study guide produced by the Italian Bishops' Conference to accompany the translation notes that the publication of the new edition of the Roman Missal offers a propitious occasion to reflect on the “irreversible”¹ journey of liturgical reform which has been undertaken.² This is the third Italian translation of the Missal.³ The first, published in 1973, was an expedient rendering of the Latin text of the new rite of the Mass. The second, promulgated in 1983, represented a significant development of post-conciliar liturgical reform in Italy and offered not just a vernacular translation of the original but included many texts that were newly composed to facilitate a more contemporary expression of faith and worship. These included a number of alternative greetings and prayers that were not in the Latin text, including creative options for the introductory rites, the penitential act, the introductions to the “Our Father” and to the sign of peace, and the final dismissal. Unlike the

- 1 Pope Francis used the word “irreversible” in his 2017 address to participants in the 68th National Liturgy Week in Italy. See http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/august/documents/papa-francesco_20170824_settimana-liturgica-nazionale.html.
- 2 Conferenza Episcopale Italiana, “Un Messale per una Chiesa in Cammino” in *Un Messale per le nostre Assemblee. La terza edizione del Messale Romano: tra Liturgia e Catechesi* (Roma, 2020), 17.
- 3 This article is greatly indebted to Goffredo Boselli, *Le nozze dell’Agnello: Guida alla nuova traduzione del Messale* (Milano: Edizione San Paola, 2020).

Liam Bergin is a priest of the Diocese of Ossory. He teaches Sacramental Theology at Boston College.

THE FURROW

editio typica tertia of 2002, its amended *reimpressio emendata* of 2008, and its English translation of 2011 (hereafter, EM11) where the lack of alternatives is striking, the third Italian translation (hereafter, IM20) retains and expands these options.

The second translation also offered collect prayers for Sunday Masses based on the three-year lectionary cycle and corresponding communion antiphons inspired by the gospel text of the day. These are also retained in the new translation. The effect is to strengthen the relationship between Word and sacrament insisted upon by Vatican II as the faithful are nourished from the two tables that are now drawn closer together in this liturgical act.⁴ As Pope Benedict XVI noted, “Word and Eucharist are so deeply bound together that we cannot understand one without the other: the word of God sacramentally takes flesh in the event of the Eucharist.”⁵ The Italian Bishops’ Conference had already approved a new translation of the Bible (CEI Bible) that was published in 2008. Some of the changes introduced in IM20 follow the revised scriptural text.

LITURGICAM AUTHENTICAM

The Italian translations have not encountered the same controversy as their English and other language counterparts. The so called “dynamic equivalence” inspired by *Comme Le Prévoit*, Paul VI’s 1969 guidelines for the translation into the vernacular, was easier from Latin to Italian where language and syntax have a closer correlation. For example, the first Italian translation already had “I believe...” in the Creed and the response “and with your spirit.” Nor is the Italian ecclesial landscape marred by the cultural wars that have beset the English-speaking church. Certainly, there were and there are theological, liturgical and pastoral differences of opinion among Italy’s bishops on the reception and application of the reforms of Vatican II (remember the impasse between Cardinal Siri of Genoa and Cardinal Benelli of Florence?). However, the Italian Catholic Church has not experienced the extremes that have beset the church in the United States and Australia in particular.

Vox Clara is a case in point. This group (ironically, perhaps tellingly, with a Latin name) was established by the Congregation for Divine Worship (CDW) in 2001 to advise on the translation of liturgical texts into the English language. The specific competences of the episcopal conferences, the CDW, the International Committee

4 A similar effort by ICEL in 1998 has never been approved for liturgical use by the Holy See. No new original texts were composed for EM11 except for three “dismissal” formulae at the end of Mass.

5 Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* (2010), 55.

on English in the Liturgy (ICEL)⁶ and *Vox Clara* were often obscure and contentious.⁷ Earlier that year the CDW had issued *Liturgicam authenticam*, a document “on the use of vernacular languages in the publication of the books of the Roman liturgy.”⁸ This document 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.”⁹

In 2009, with the assistance of *Vox Clara*, the Congregation returned a translation approved by the 11 episcopal conferences who sponsor ICEL with some 10,000 changes from that submitted by the conferences.¹⁰ While the Italian bishops had exchanges and debates with the CDW, IM20 knew no such obstacles.

The Italian Episcopal Conference had previously approved a translation of the Missal in 2012 (by 189 votes to 4). However, this did not receive the recognition (*recognitio*) of the Congregation required by *Liturgicam authenticam*. In their presentation of IM20, the bishops agreed that the requirements of a literal translation, a plaster-cast of the Latin (“*un calco del latino*”), did produce a text that was more faithful to the original. However, they add, it also gave rise to considerable criticism of the literary quality of the texts, their comprehensibility and, above all, their suitability to be proclaimed or sung by those for whom they were destined. Indeed, the bishops noted, a trial period of “celebrative verification” confirmed the problems that had already emerged during the translation process.¹¹

MAGNUM PRINCIPIUM

The situation changed with the publication of Pope Francis’s *Magnum principium*¹² in 2017. In this *motu proprio* Francis restored the responsibility of preparing, translating and approving liturgical texts to each episcopal conference. The CDW was now to confirm (*confirmatio*) rather than to recognize the translations

6 According to its website, ICEL was established in 1963 by eleven episcopal conferences “to prepare English translations of each of the Latin liturgical books and any individual liturgical texts in accord with the directives of the Holy See.”

7 See Liam Bergin, “Translations Matter – on Pope Francis’s *Magnum principium*,” *The Furrow* 68 (2017), 603-610.

8 Find text at https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20010507_liturgiam-authenticam_en.html

9 LA 20. For a conservative critique of *Liturgicam authenticam* see Peter Jeffery, *Translating tradition: a chant historian reads Liturgicam authenticam* (Collegeville, MN., 2005).

10 See Gerald O Collins & John Wilkins, *Lost in Translation: The English Language and the Catholic Mass* (Collegeville, MN., 2017), 32.

11 “Le novità nel Rito della Messa e nelle Preghiere Eucaristiche” in *Un Messale per le nostre Assemblee*, 107.

12 Find text at <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2017/09/09/170909a.html>

THE FURROW

undertaken by the local bishops. The Italian bishops responded by revisiting the translation they had approved in 2012, comparing it with the second translation from 1983, and then approving the final text of IM20 almost unanimously (by 195 votes to 5) at an extraordinary assembly in 2018.

In presenting the more significant changes in IM20, the Italian bishops draw attention to a number of criteria that undergird the new translation. These include the decision not to change the responses of the faithful and the invitation to prayer made by the priest, the correction of some texts in line with their newly approved version of sacred scripture, greater fidelity to the original texts, retouches that improve the text that were drawn from the almost forty-year experience since the previous translation in 1983, and coherence with other liturgical books that had been translated in the intervening period.

PENITENTIAL ACT

While the *editio typica* and the EM11 have just one option as an invocation in the Penitential Act – “You were sent to heal the contrite of heart: Lord of mercy ...” - with 7 other options given (but difficult to find) in the appendix at the end of the missal, IM20 has a total of 17 invocations available directly in the text and arranged according to liturgical season. Interestingly, the post-conciliar Italian responses “*Signore, pietà; Cristo pietà; Signore pietà/Lord have mercy; Christ have mercy; Lord have mercy*” are replaced by the ancient Greek refrain “*Kyrie, eleison; Christe, eleison; Kyrie, eleison*” which had persisted in the text of the Mass when the first vernacular translation from Greek into Latin was made in the fourth century.

Inclusive “*fratelli e sorelle/brothers and sisters*” is introduced in the *Confiteor* as it is in other places where the Latin *fratres* appears. *Homo (homines)* continues to be translated as “*uomo (uomini)/man (men)*” as, for example, in the *Gloria*, the Creed and in Eucharistic Prayer IV. The Creed also holds “*della stessa sostanza del Padre/of the same substance as the Father*” avoiding the unfortunate “*consubstantial*” of EM11.

GLORIA

In the *Gloria*, the line “*in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis/on earth peace to people of good will*” which was translated as “*pace in terra agli uomini di buona volontà/peace on earth to men of good will*”) is now rendered as “*pace in terra agli uomini, amati dal Signore/peace on earth to men, loved by the Lord.*” While this

iteration is inspired by the new CEI translation of Lk 2:14 “*che egli ama*/which he loves,” it does not correspond identically to the biblical text. This discrepancy, the bishops explain, is to maintain a similar syllable count in both translations to allow the new to be sung to existing melodies.¹³

EUCCHARISTIC PRAYERS

IM20 reflects an episcopate that is emboldened by Pope Francis and *Magnum principium*. The retention of “*per tutti*” (for all) in the words of consecration over the wine cup is a good example. While English, French and Spanish translations use the narrower “for many” championed by Pope Benedict¹⁴ and others as a more literal translation of the Latin “*pro multis*,” the Italian bishops, previously under pressure to change it and with “*pro molti*” already in the CEI bible, held firm to a translation that underlines God’s mercy as all-embracing, with a wording that is more in keeping with Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom and with the subsequent vision of Vatican II.¹⁵

LORD’S PRAYER

Perhaps the most discussed aspect of IM20 is the change to the Lord’s Prayer. The penultimate petition originally translated the Latin “*ne nos inducas in tentationem*” as “*non ci indurre in tentazione*/lead us not into temptation.” The new translation reads “*non abbandonarci alla tentazione*/do not abandon us to temptation.” While Pope Francis had spoken about the change in a television interview¹⁶ in 2017, this change is not to be attributed to him as some commentators have done. This wording is already found in the new translation of the CEI Bible. A similar change has been made by the French¹⁷ and Spanish¹⁸ bishops. The German bishops have decided not to change their translation for

13 “Le novità nel Rito della Messa e nelle Preghiere Eucaristiche” in *Un Messale per le nostre Assemblee*, 107.

14 See Pope Benedict’s 2012 Letter to the German bishops at http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20120414_zollitsch.html.

15 Yet, in 2017, Pope Francis notes that “The ‘many’ who will rise for eternal life are to be understood as the ‘many’, for whom the blood of Christ was shed.” See http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2017/documents/papa-francesco_20171103_omelia-suffragio-defunti.html.

16 The programme can be found at <https://www.tv2000.it/padrenostro/video/padrenostro-settima-puntata-non-ci-indurre-in-tentazione/>

17 The former “*ne nous soumetts pas à la tentation*/lead us not into temptation” now reads “*ne nous laisse pas entrer en tentation*/do not let us fall into temptation.”

18 The text reads “*no nos dejes caer en la tentacion*.”

THE FURROW

“philosophical, exegetical, liturgical and, not least, ecumenical” reasons. The translation has also remained unchanged in EM11. Before EM11, English-speaking Christians had common texts for the *Gloria*, the Creed and the *Sanctus*. This is no longer the case even as Saint Pope John Paul II’s *Ut unum sint* had encouraged Christian churches to compose agreed texts for the prayers they hold in common.¹⁹ While the ecumenical impact of this change in Italian is not insignificant, because of the greater numbers of non-Catholic Christians who pray in German and English, any unilateral attempt to alter the wording in these languages of a prayer we have in common should be avoided.

EXCHANGE OF PEACE

A significant change is introduced in the manner by which the congregation is invited to exchange peace. IM20 moves from “*scambiatevi un segno di pace*/offer each other a sign of peace” to “*scambiatevi il dono della pace*/offer each other the gift of peace.” This new translation seeks to be more faithful to the Latin “*offerte vobis pacem*” and to highlight the fact that it is not a sign of peace that is exchanged but the divine gift of peace itself. This peace is then exchanged through a gesture or sign that may take on cultural variations.

INVITATION TO HOLY COMMUNION

The invitation to communion is significantly reworked to follow the Latin text more faithfully. The first part, (“*Ecce Agnus Dei, ecce qui tollit peccata mundi*/Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sins of the world”) is found on the lips of John the Baptist in the opening chapter of the Fourth Gospel (Jn 1:29) and was already in the Tridentine Missal of Pius V. The second part, (“*beati qui ad cenam Agni vocati sunt*/ blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb”) echoes the vision announced by the angel in the Book of Revelation (19:9) and was newly inserted into the invitation in the Missal of Paul VI. Both the new English and Italian translations explicitly mention “the supper of the Lamb/*cena dell’Agnello*.” Not only does this reflect a more exact rendering of the original Latin but it serves to accentuate two theological points.

First, the eucharist is a sacrificial meal. Catholic eucharistic theology since Trent had focused on the sacrificial character of the Mass that was called into question by the Reformers. This is readily witnessed in the language used such as altar, priest, offering

19 Gerald O Collins & John Wilkins, *Lost in Translation*, 14-15.

and victim. The biblical and liturgical *réssourcement* in the period prior to Vatican II retrieved some of the meal motifs that had been inadvertently eclipsed in the previous centuries such as community, table, celebration, host. The first vernacular translations in the immediate post-conciliar period emphasized the recently restored meal aspect of the eucharistic feast (“Lord’s Supper/*cena del Signore*”). But, the eucharist is both meal *and* sacrifice. The new translations acknowledge this with their explicit mentioning of the supper of the sacrificial Lamb as proposed by the Latin text.

Second, the new English and Italian translations serve to underline the eschatological dimension of the eucharistic banquet. Theological approaches to the Eucharist tend to focus on the past, on the supper in the Upper Room. Yet, recent theological reflection points as much to the *future* as to the past.²⁰ The Eucharist is not just a remembrance of things past but a foretaste and herald of what is to come. The catechetical imagination traditionally gathers people around the Last Supper table recalling the events of two thousand years ago. Reference to the “supper of the Lamb” anticipates the future and invites us to pull up our chairs to the eschatological feast!²¹ That is why the elements of the eucharistic celebration – language, music, architecture, vestments, decoration – should underline the fact that “the heavenly world penetrates our world and is present when the Eucharist is celebrated.”²² It is striking that the *editio typica* omits a phrase from Rev 19:9 which reads “blessed are those called to the wedding feast of the Lamb.” Inclusion of the “wedding feast” in the liturgical invitation to holy communion would further highlight that our participation in the Eucharist is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. It is notable that the new French translation of the Missal does precisely that.²³

DISMISSAL

IM20 restores “*Ite, missa est*” as one of the nine dismissals at the concluding rite. It reminds the congregation of the origins of the

20 The work by Dermot A. Lane is significant. See his “Eucharist as Sacrament of the Eschaton: A failure of imagination?” in *50th International Eucharistic Congress: Proceedings of the International Symposium of Theology* (2013), 399-412, and *Theology and Ecology in Dialogue: the Wisdom of Laudato Si* (Dublin, 2020).

21 On the fortieth anniversary of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* in 2003, Pope John Paul II wrote an apostolic letter with the title *Spiritus et Sponsa* taken from Rev 22: 17. He notes that the liturgy “opens a glimpse of Heaven on earth, and the perennial hymn of praise rises from the community of believers in unison with the hymn of heavenly Jerusalem” (16).

22 Walter Kasper, *Sacrament of Unity: The Eucharist and the Church* (New York, 2004), 126.

23 The text reads “*Heureux les invités au repas des noces de l’Agneau.*” See Boselli, 59-61.

THE FURROW

name “Mass” as an ancient sending forth of the assembly, the Body of Christ that is to proclaim the Lord from the rising of the sun to its setting.

JOURNEY ENDED; JOURNEY BEGUN

The publication of the IM20 represents a point of arrival and, necessarily, a point of departure. As a point of *arrival*, the text bears witness to the liturgical and pastoral journey that the Italian church has made in the post-conciliar period. It represents the best of a pilgrim people that has embraced ongoing liturgical and pastoral reform, initiated by Vatican II and reinvigorated by the magisterium of Pope Francis. Firmly rooted in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, this third translation grows organically from its two predecessors as it includes prayers that have emerged over the past fifty years. EM11, by comparison, shows itself to be much more hesitant in embracing legitimate developments that had taken place over the same period.

As already noted, the Italian bishops had a trial period of “celebrative verification” during the translation process. This served not only to identify problems with the emerging text but also to allow for consultation with and reaction from laity and clergy. When faced with the stringent requirements of *Liturgicam authenticam*, the Italian bishops took the long view and waited for the more favourable circumstances that *Magnum principium* would offer. This was not the case when EM11 was prepared and the fundamental role of episcopal conferences was diminished and, in some cases, ignored.

One of the more controversial aspects of IM20 concerns the 23 illustrations in the text.²⁴ Commissioned from the contemporary artist Mimmo Palladino, the plates (he prefers not to call them works of art) are striking in their simplicity. Palladino explains, “I think they are signs. Signs that intend to accompany the written words and that want to be intelligible on several levels. The Missal is a powerful tool, if we may say so. It contains words that lead us towards the absolute through the memorial of the death and resurrection of the Lord. So, it doesn’t need decorations but graphic signs that can visually translate what you read there.”²⁵ The bishops chose not to decorate IM20 with illustrations from the noble canon of Italian art but, in a move that is truly sacramental, to offer signs that draw the reader from the word to the Paschal

24 The illustrations can be found at https://it.aleteia.org/slideshow/illustrazioni-messale-cei-2020/?from_post=525831

25 From an interview in *Avvenire* (12 September, 2020). <https://www.avvenire.it/chiesa/pagine/palladino-i-miei-segni-darte-che-arricchiscono-il-messale>

Mystery and to the gift of salvation that the eucharistic liturgy represents.

By their very nature, vernacular translations must undergo revision as living languages change. A new translation, then, is also the point of *departure* for its own replacement. In the document issued following the fifth national gathering of the Italian Church at Florence in 2015, the bishops noted:

The task of liturgical reform is not behind us, because the Council is an event that continues even today to generate newness in the liturgy as in the whole life of the Church. To this end, we must continue to walk, without uncertainty or second thought of the liturgy comes the renewal of the Church.²⁶

IM20 is not perfect but it does represent a significant step forward on the ongoing journey to provide a translation that draws the best from the tradition while presenting prayers, old and new, that both reflect and invigorate the life of the church. If the vitality of the Italian church is to be assessed on the basis of this new translation there are indeed signs of hope that the communities that have already been transformed by celebrating these sacred mysteries will continue to walk together in faith, hope and love. It is a challenge that other national churches could well emulate.

26 Quoted in Boselli, 8-9.

Women and Ministry. I believe the heart of this question is so much more significant than simply giving women more power, or status as some might see it. I believe at the heart of this question is not just past history. Our reflection on this question needs to be grounded fundamentally in our responsibility, our call as church, to be faithful to Jesus' mission that he passed on to ALL of us, baptized in Christ-to live in his Spirit, to be bearers of his grace in our world today.

– D. MICHAEL JACKSON, ed., *The Diaconate in Ecumenical Perspective* (Durham: Sacristy Press) p. 72.