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Gerald O'Collins

Translating
Vatican II

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In recent years the heat has been on defects in biblical and liturgical translations. Versions of the sixteen documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) have escaped a scrutiny that is long overdue.

Before he leaves this earth for eternal life with God, Pope Francis aims to re-establish (or establish?) the central place of the Council in the life of the Church for the twenty-first century. That involves our having confidence in the available translations of the Vatican II documents. By and large, our confidence is justified, but not always so.

Leisure time over Christmas and New Year gave me the chance of taking down from the shelves of my house library and examining four well known translations of Vatican II documents: the 1966 translation edited by Walter Abbott, a 1988 edition of the translation edited by Austin Flannery, the 1991 bilingual edition (in English and the original Latin) produced by Norman Tanner, and the 2009 *Vatican Translation* published by the Vatican Press.

Taking the versions in chronological order, I checked them on how they rendered four passages in the Council’s documents, found respectively in *Dei Verbum* 12 (the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation); *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 18 (the Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests); *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 7 (the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy); and *Lumen Gentium* 16 (the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church).

Among other things, these passages spoke of ‘the living tradition of the whole Church (*vivae totius Ecclesiae Traditionis*)’ (DV 12); of a form of biblical prayer traditionally called ‘*lectio divina*’ (PO 18); of Christ being ‘supremely (*maxime*)’ present under the Eucharistic species (SC 7); and of the work of Satan in deceiving people (LG 16).

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THE LIVING TRADITION

When interpreting the Scriptures, Vatican II urged us to take into account ‘the living tradition of the entire Church’, as the Abbott translates accurately DV 12. Tanner and the *Vatican Translation* also correctly follow suit, whereas Flannery simply omits ‘living’ when rendering the passage as ‘taking into account the Tradition of the entire Church’.

Does this omission matter very much? The phrase ‘living tradition’ has its background in the nineteenth-century Tübingen school of theology and the trail-blazing work of Johann Sebastian Drey (on living tradition) and Johann Adam Möhler (on organic tradition). It is also a phrase that conjures up the mindset of John Henry Newman and inspired me when writing *Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

Describing tradition as ‘living’ is more than a matter of borrowing from some great theologians of the past. It fits in with the image of tradition as a living stream flowing from the well-spring of divine revelation that the Constitution on Divine Revelation had developed in the previous chapter (DV 9).

LECTIO DIVINA

When setting forth in PO 18 various spiritual means for supporting the life of priests, the Council expressly recommended ‘*lectio divina*’, a prayerful mulling over the inspired Scriptures. This particular method of prayer goes back to Origen in the second century, was taken up in the Benedictine tradition, taught by St John of the Cross and many others, and enjoyed a second spring in the twentieth century. It is dispiriting to report that Abbott, Flannery, and the *Vatican Translation* all failed to pick up the specific reference and spoke of ‘spiritual reading’ in general.

The three translations were not alone in this mistake. I do not know anyone who has remarked on the fact that, for the first time in church history, a general council had used the precise, technical term ‘*lectio divina*’.

Tanner’s version recognized that the document was not speaking of spiritual reading, which might include the works of St Teresa of Avila, St Francis de Sales, and the letters of Abbot Chapman. Tanner’s translation proposed ‘faith nourished by the [prayerful] reading of God’s word’. By definition, *lectio divina* is just that, the prayerful reading of Scripture’. Vatican II wanted priestly spirituality to be ‘nourished’ precisely by ‘*lectio divina*’ in the classical sense. Tanner’s version describes what ‘*lectio divina*’ is about. We would be better advised to use that Latin expression, as

we do for the ‘Gloria’, the ‘Sanctus’, the ‘Agnus Dei’ and other ancient prayers or methods of prayer.

THE EUCHARISTIC PRESENCE

We come now to *two* important cases that bear very significantly, respectively, on the sacramental life of the Church and her view of those who are not baptized but belong to other faiths.

In an eloquent, now classical, passage on the various ways in which we experience in the liturgy the presence of the crucified and risen Christ, the liturgical constitution recalled the supreme example, his presence in the Eucharist (SC 7). The (Latin) adverb used by the Council is a superlative derived from *magnus*, ‘*maxime*’, which carries here the meaning of ‘supremely’, ‘above all’, or ‘as greatest of all’. The meaning of ‘*maxime*’ is not to be reduced to that of the less emphatic ‘*praesertim*’ (‘especially’ or ‘in particular’).

Elsewhere, in different contexts, and apropos of different matters, the liturgy constitution and other documents of Vatican II use ‘*praesertim*’. Here in SC 7 the Council adopts the stronger adverb ‘*maxime*’.

Astonishingly, Abbott, Flannery (at least in 1988) and the *Vatican Translation* all talk of the presence of Christ, ‘especially’ under or in the eucharistic species. More is at stake here than a mere lapse into false translation.

Tanner proposes that Christ is ‘present *most fully* under the eucharistic elements’. This translation has the merit at least of preserving the superlative character of what is stated. But it is hard to justify the switch from the realm of greatness (*magnus*) to that of fullness (*plenus*). They are not the same thing. What is great is not necessarily full, or more importantly, vice versa. What is the fullest in a series is not necessarily the greatest in that series.

I leave it to readers to express their dismay at this misrepresentation of what the Second Vatican Council taught about the intensity of the Eucharistic presence, a misrepresentation that derives also from the official Vatican publishing house.

THE SUCCESS OF THE DEVIL’S DECEPTIONS

A final example comes from the translation of an adverb (‘*saepius*’) in *Lumen Gentium* (no. 16) concerned with the extent of diabolic success in blocking the divine offer of salvation. Abbott renders the adverb correctly: ‘rather often’ people can be deceived by the Evil One. Tanner catches the comparative nature of the word by rendering it ‘more often’.

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The *Vatican Translation* surprisingly waters down the force of ‘*saepius*’, misreading it as if it were the straight equivalent of ‘*saepe*’: ‘But often men [!] [are] deceived by the Evil One’.

Flannery’s mistranslation credits the adverb with a superlative meaning and could prove damaging: ‘very often [people are] deceived by the Evil One’. In my experience, this false translation has been invoked to suggest that a majority of human beings will not be saved and hell will be heavily populated.

CONCLUSION

This article has put on display *four* mistranslations of Vatican II documents. Perhaps these errors were corrected in later editions or printings. In fact, the 1996 edition of Flannery set right its version of SC 7: Christ is present ‘most of all in the eucharistic species’.

Moreover, I want to express my warm thanks to the editors and translators who produced these translations and repeatedly ‘got things right’. Nevertheless, in a few places these versions can lead people astray.

Those readers who know Latin can check for themselves the degree of accuracy achieved, using the original texts of the Council available on the Vatican website. Others will have friends or acquaintances who read Latin and can help them with such checking.

Beyond question, fully accurate translations of the Vatican II documents by themselves will not remedy everything. But they promise to clarify the vision and practice for which Pope Francis has been calling.

Eastern Thought. From his early days, Thomas Merton cast his sights towards faraway green hills in the expectation of hues that were fresher and greener. From infancy, he was accustomed to frequent interchange with the cultures of a number of countries and continents. It is perhaps not surprising that his literary and religious interests knew no boundaries either.

– BISHOP FINTAN MONAHAN, *Peace Smiles, Rediscovering Thomas Merton* (Dublin: Veritas), p.71.