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INSTRUCTION ON TRANSLATION OF
LITURGICAL TEXTS

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INSTRUCTION ON TRANSLATION OF LITURGICAL TEXTS

1. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy foresees that many Latin texts of the Roman liturgy must be translated into different languages (art. 36). Although many of them have already been translated, the work of translation is not drawing to a close. New texts have been edited or prepared for the renewal of the liturgy. Above all, after sufficient experiment and passage of time, all translations will need review.

2. In accordance with article 36 of the Constitution **Sacro-sanctum Concilium** and n. 40 of the Instruction of the Congregation of Rites **Inter Oecumenici**, the work of translation of liturgical texts is thus laid down: It is the duty of the episcopal conferences to decide which texts are to be translated, to prepare or review the translations, to approve them, and "after approval, that is, confirmation by the Holy See" to promulgate them.

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 (Letter of Cardinal Lercaro to the presidents of episcopal conferences, dated October 16, 1964).

3. Although these translations are the responsibility of the competent territorial authority of each country, it seems desirable to observe common principles of procedure, especially for texts of major importance, in order to make confirmation by the Apostolic See easier and to achieve greater unity of practice.

4. The Consilium has therefore thought fit in this declaration to lay down, in common and non-technical terms, some of the more important theoretical and practical principles for the guidance of all who are called upon to prepare, to approve, or to confirm liturgical translations.

I

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

5. A liturgical text, inasmuch as it is a ritual sign, is a medium of spoken communication. It is, first of all, a sign perceived by the senses and used by men to communicate with

each other. But to believers who celebrate the sacred rites, a word is itself a "mystery." By spoken words Christ himself speaks to his people, and the people, through the Spirit in the Church, answer their Lord.

6. The purpose of liturgical translations is to proclaim the message of salvation to believers and to express the prayer of the Church to the Lord: "Liturgical translations have become . . . the voice of the Church" (address of Paul VI to participants in the Congress on translations of liturgical texts, November 10, 1965). 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.

7. Thus, in the case of liturgical communication, it is necessary to take into account not only the message to be conveyed, but also the speaker, the audience, and the style. Translations, therefore, must be faithful to the art of communication in all its various aspects, but especially in regard to the message itself, in regard to the audience for which it is intended, and in regard to the manner of expression.

8. Even if in spoken communication the message cannot be separated from the manner of speaking, the translator should give first consideration to the meaning of the communication.

9. To discover the true meaning of a text, the translator must follow the scientific methods of textual study as used by experts. This part of the translator's task is obvious. A few points may be added with reference to liturgical texts:

10. (a) If need be, a critical text of the passage must first be established so that the translation can be done from the original, or at least from the best available text.
11. (b) Latin terms must be considered in the light of their uses — historical or cultural, Christian or liturgical. For example, the early Christian uses of 'devotio' differs from its use in classical or more modern times.

The Latin 'oratio' means in English not an oration (one of its senses in classical Latin) but a 'prayer'—and this English word bears different meanings such as prayer of praise or prayer in general or prayer of petition. 'Pius' and 'pietas' are very inadequately rendered in English as 'pious' and 'piety.' In one case the Latin 'salus' may mean 'salvation' in the theological sense; elsewhere it may mean 'safety,' 'health' (physical health or total health), or 'well-being.' 'Sarx-caro' is inadequately rendered in English as 'flesh.' 'Doulos-servus' and 'famula' are inadequately rendered in English by 'slave,' 'servant,' 'handmaid.' The force of an image or metaphor must also be considered, whether it is rare or common, living or worn out.

12. (c) The translator must always keep in mind that the "unit of meaning" is not the individual word but the whole passage. He must therefore be careful that his translation is not so analytical that it exaggerates the importance of particular phrases while it obscures or weakens the meaning of the whole. Thus, in Latin, the piling up of 'ratam, rationabilem, acceptabilem' may increase the sense of invocation. In other tongues, a succession of adjectives may actually weaken the force of the prayer. The same is true of 'beatissima Virgo' or 'beata et gloriosa' or the routine addition of 'sanctus' or 'beatus' to a saint's name, or the too casual use of superlatives. Understatement in English is sometimes the more effective means of emphasis.
13. (d) To keep the correct significance, words and expressions must be used in their proper historical, social and ritual meanings. Thus, in prayers for Lent, 'ieiunium' now has the sense of 'lenten observance,' both liturgical and ascetic; the meaning is not confined to abstinence from food. 'Tapeinos-humilis' originally had "class" overtones not present in the English 'humble' or even 'lowly.' Many of the phrases of approach to the Almighty were originally adapted from forms of address to the sovereign in the courts of Byzantium and Rome. It is necessary to study how far an attempt should be made to offer equivalents in modern English for such words as 'quaesumus,' 'dignare,' 'clementissime,' 'maiestas,' and the like.

14. The accuracy and value of a translation can only be assessed in terms of the purpose of the communication. To serve the particular congregations who will use it, the following points should be observed in translating:

15. (a) The language chosen 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" (Paul VI in the Allocution cited). However, the language should not be 'common' in the bad sense, but "worthy of expressing the highest realities" (*ibid.*). Moreover, the correct biblical or Christian meaning of certain words and ideas will always need explanation and instruction. Nevertheless no special literary training should be required of the people; liturgical texts should normally be intelligible to all, even to the less educated. For example, 'temptation' as a translation of 'tentatio' in the Lord's prayer is inaccurate and can only be misleading to people who are not biblical scholars. Similarly, 'scandal' in the ordinary English sense of gossip is a misleading translation of the scriptural 'scandalum.' Besides, liturgical texts must sometimes possess a truly poetic quality, but this does not imply the use of specifically "poetic diction."

16. (b) Certain other principles should be observed so that a translation will be understood by the hearers in the same sense as the revealed truths expressed in the liturgy, viz:

17. (1) When words are taken from the so-called 'sacral' vocabulary now in use, the translator should consider whether the everyday common meaning of these words and phrases bears or can bear a Christian meaning. These phrases may carry a pre-Christian, quasi-Christian, Christian or even anti-Christian meaning. He should also consider whether such words can convey the exact Christian liturgical action and manifestation of faith. Thus in the Greek bible, the word 'hieros' [*sacer*] was often avoided because of its connection with the pagan cults, and instead the rarer word 'hagios' [*sanctus*] was substituted. Another example: The proper meaning of the biblical 'hesed-eleos-mise-

ricordia,' is not accurately expressed in English by 'mercy' or 'pity.' Again, the word 'mereri' in classical Latin often signifies 'to be worthy of something.' But in the language of the liturgy it carries a very different meaning from the ancient meaning: "I do something because of which I am worthy of a prize or a reward." In English the word 'to deserve' when used by itself retains the stricter sense. A translation would lead to error if it did not consider this fact, for example, in translating 'Quia quem meruisti portare' in the hymn **Regina caeli** as "because you deserved to bear . . ."

18. (2) It often happens that there is no word in common use that exactly corresponds to the biblical or liturgical sense of the term to be translated, as in the use of the biblical 'iustitia.' The nearest suitable word must then be chosen which, through habitual use in various catechetical texts and in prayer, lends itself to take on the biblical and Christian sense intended by the liturgy. Such has been the evolution of the Greek word 'doxa' and the Latin 'gloria' when used to translate the Hebrew 'kabod.' The expression 'hominibus bonae voluntatis' literally translated as 'to men of good will' (or 'good will to men' in order to stress divine favor) will be misleading; no single English word or phrase will completely reflect the original Latin or the Greek which the Latin translates.

Similarly in English there is no exact equivalent for 'mysterium.' In English, 'mystery' means something which cannot be readily explained or else a type of drama or fiction. Nor can the word 'venerabilis' (as "in sanctas et venerabiles manus") be translated as 'venerable,' which nowadays means 'elderly.'

19. (3) In many modern languages a biblical or liturgical language must be created by use. This will be achieved rather by infusing a Christian meaning into common words than by importing uncommon or technical terms.
20. (c) The prayer of the Church is always the prayer of some actual community assembled here and now. It is not sufficient that a formula handed down from some other time or region should be translated verbatim, even if accurately, for liturgical use. The formula trans-

lated must become the genuine prayer of the congregation and in it each of its members should be able to find and express himself.

21. A translation of the liturgy therefore often requires cautious adaptation. But cases differ:

22. (a) Sometimes a text can be translated word for word and keep the same meaning as the original, for example 'pleni sunt caeli et terra gloria tua.'

23. (b) Sometimes the metaphors must be changed to keep the true sense, as in 'locum refrigerii' in northern regions.

24. (c) Sometimes, the meaning of a text can no longer be understood, either because it is contrary to modern Christian ideas (as in 'terrena despiciere' or 'ut inimicos sanctae Ecclesiae humiliare digneris'), or because it has less relevance today (as in some phrases intended to combat Arianism), or because it no longer expresses the true original meaning "as in certain obsolete forms of *lenten penance*." In these cases, so long as the teaching of the Gospel remains intact, not only must inappropriate expressions be avoided, but others found which express a corresponding meaning in modern words. The greatest care must be taken that all translations are not only beautiful and suited to the contemporary mind, but express true doctrine and authentic Christian spirituality.

25. A particular form of expression and speech is required for spoken communication. In rendering any liturgical text, the translator must keep in mind the major importance of the spoken or rhetorical style, or what might, by extension of the term, be called the literary genre. On this matter several things should be noted:

26. (1) The literary genre of every liturgical text depends first of all on the nature of the ritual act signified in the words — acclamation or supplication, proclamation or praying, reading or singing. Each action requires its proper form of expression. Moreover a prayer differs as it is to be spoken by one person or by many in unison; whether it is in prose or in verse; spoken or

sung. All these considerations affect not only the manner of delivery, but also the choice of words.

27. (2) A liturgical text is a 'linguistic fact' designed for celebration. When it is in written form (as is usually the case), it offers a stylistic problem for translators. Each text must therefore be examined to discover the significant elements proper to the genre, e.g., in Roman prayers the formal structure, **cursus**, dignity, brevity, etc.

28. Among the separate elements are those which are essential and others which are secondary and subsidiary. The essential elements, so far as is possible, should be preserved in translation, sometimes intact, sometimes in equivalent terms. The general structure of the Roman prayers can be retained unchanged; the divine title, the motive of the petition, the petition itself, the conclusion. Others cannot be retained: the oratorical **cursus**, rhetorical prose cadence.

29. It is to be noted that if any particular kind of quality is regarded as essential to a literary genre (e.g., intelligibility or prayers when said aloud) this may take precedence over another quality less significant for communication (e.g., verbal fidelity).

II

SOME PARTICULAR CONSIDERATIONS

30. Among liturgical texts, Sacred Scripture has always held a special place because the Church recognizes in the sacred books the written voice of God (Constitution **Dei Verbum**, 9). The divine word has been transmitted to us under different historical forms or literary genres, and the revelation communicated by the documents cannot be entirely divorced from these forms or genres.

In the case of biblical translations intended for liturgical reading, the characteristics of speech or writing are proper to different modes of communication in the sacred books and should be preserved with special accuracy. This is particularly important in the translations of the psalms and canticles.

31. Biblical translations in the Roman liturgy ought to conform "with the Latin liturgical text" (Instruction, September 26,

1964, 40a). In no way should there be a paraphrasing of the biblical text, even if it is difficult to understand. Nor should words or explanatory phrases be inserted. All this is the task of catechesis and the homily.

32. In some cases it will be necessary that "suitable and accurate translations be made into the different languages from the original texts of the sacred books. And if, given the opportunity and the approval of Church authority, these translations are produced in cooperation with the separated brethren as well, all Christians will be able to use them." (Constitution **Dei Verbum**, 22). Translations approved for liturgical use should closely approximate the best versions in a particular language.

33. Some euchological and sacramental formularies like the consecratory prayers, the anaphoras, prefaces, exorcisms, and those prayers which accompany an action such as the imposition of hands, the anointing, the signs of the cross, etc., should be translated integrally and faithfully, without variations, omissions or insertions. These texts, whether ancient or modern, have a precise and studied theological elaboration. If the text is ancient, certain Latin terms present difficulties of interpretation because of their use and meaning which is much different from their corresponding terms in modern language. The translation will therefore demand an astute handling and sometimes a paraphrasing, in order to render accurately the original pregnant meaning. If the text is a more recent one, the difficulty will be reduced considerably, given the use of terms and a style of language which are closer to the concepts of modern man.

34. The prayers (Prayer, Prayer over the Gifts, Prayer after Communion, and Prayer over the People) from the ancient Roman tradition are succinct and abstract. In translation they may need to be rendered somewhat more freely while conserving the original ideas. This can be done by moderately amplifying them, or, if necessary, paraphrasing expressions in order to concretize them for the celebration and the needs of today. In every case pompous and superfluous language should be avoided.

35. All texts which are intended to be said aloud follow the laws proper to their delivery and, in the case of written texts, their literary genre. This applies especially to the acclamations where the act of acclaiming by voice is an essential element. It

will be insufficient to translate only the exact meaning of an idea unless the text can also be expressed by sound and rhythm.

36. Particular care is necessary for texts which are to be sung:

- (a) The form of singing which is proper to every liturgical action and to each of its parts should be retained (antiphon alternated with the psalm, responsory, etc. Cf. Instruction, **Musicam sacram**, March 5, 1967, nn. 6 and 9).
- (b) Regarding the psalms, in addition to the division into versicles as given in Latin, a division into stanzas may be particularly desirable if a text is used which is well known by the people or common to other churches.
- (c) The responses (versicles, responsories) and antiphons, even though they come from scripture, become part of the liturgy and enter into a new literary form. In translating them it is possible to give them a verbal form which, while preserving their full meaning, is more suitable for singing and harmonizes them with the liturgical season or a special feast. Examples of such adaptations which include minor adaptations of the original text are numerous in ancient antiphonaries.
- (d) When the content of an antiphon or psalm creates a special difficulty, the episcopal conference may authorize the choice of another text which meets the same needs of the liturgical celebration and the particular season or feast.
- (e) If these same texts are likewise intended for recitation without singing, the translation should be suitable for that purpose.

37. Liturgical hymns lose their proper function unless they are rendered in an appropriate verse rhythm, suitable for singing by the people. A literal translation of such texts is therefore generally out of the question. It follows that hymns very often need a new rendering made according to the musical and choral laws of the popular poetry in each language.

III COMMITTEES FOR TRANSLATING

38. To make the translations, committees should be formed of experts in the various disciplines, namely liturgy, scripture, theology, pastoral study, and especially languages and literature, and according to circumstances, music. If several committees are concerned with the different parts of liturgical texts, their work should be coordinated.

39. Before a text is promulgated, sufficient opportunity should be allowed for experiment by selected congregations in different places. An **ad interim** translation should be properly approved by the liturgical commission of the conference of bishops.

40. Close collaboration should be established between the committee of experts and the authorities who must approve the translations (such as a conference of bishops), so that:

- (1) the same people, for the most part, share in the work from beginning to end; and
- (2) when the authority asks for emendations, these should be made by the experts themselves, and a new text then submitted for the judgment of the authority. Otherwise, it should give the task to a new committee which is more suitable, but also composed of qualified people.

41. Those countries which have a common language should employ a "mixed commission" to prepare a single text. There are many advantages to such a procedure: in the preparation of a text the most competent experts are able to cooperate; a unique possibility for communication is created among these people; participation of the people is made easier. In this joint venture between countries speaking the same language, it is important to 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.

42. In those cases where a single text is prepared for a large number of countries, the text should satisfy the "different needs and mentalities of each region" (Letter of Cardinal Lercaro to the presidents of episcopal conferences, October 16, 1964). Therefore:

- (1) Each episcopal conference sharing the same language should examine the translation program, or the first draft of a text.
- (2) Meanwhile, to avoid anxiety and unnecessary delay for priests and people, the coordinating secretariat should provide a provisional text which, with the consent of the proper authority (cf. n. 39) can be published and printed as an **ad interim** text in each country. It is preferable that the same provisional text be used everywhere since the result will contribute to a better final text for all the countries.
- (3) Each of the countries will receive the definitive text at the same time. If a particular episcopal conference requires a change or substitution for specific local needs, it should propose the change to the "mixed commission" which must first agree. This is necessary in order to have a single text which remains substantially unchanged and under the supervision of the "mixed commission."
- (4) Each country can publish texts which are provisional as well as texts which are officially approved by the Holy See, but ought to contribute on a prorated basis according to the extent it publishes, to the expenses of the "mixed commission" which must pay the periti and bishops of the commission. National liturgical commissions should make prior arrangements with the secretariat regarding these publications.
- (5) In the publications of works from the "mixed commissions," the appropriate notice should appear on the first page: "A provisional text prepared by the 'mixed commission' . . ." or "Text approved by the 'mixed commission' . . . and confirmed by the Consilium for the Implementation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy."

If a change or substitution is desirable in an individual country, as indicated in 42.3, a further notice is necessary, namely: "with adaptations authorized by the episcopal conference of . . . and the 'mixed commission.'"

43. Texts translated from another language are clearly not sufficient for the celebration of a fully renewed liturgy. The

creation of new texts will be necessary. But translation of texts transmitted through the tradition of the Church is the best school and discipline for the creation of new texts so "that any new forms adopted should in some way grow organically from forms already in existence" (Constitution on the Liturgy, art. 23).

