

## “When You Pray”

by Gil Ostdiek, OFM

With these few words, Jesus began his response to the disciples’ request, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Lk 11:1-2). Their question remains with us today. The prayer Jesus taught them is one of simple yet breath-taking beauty: “Father, hallowed be your name ...” (Lk 11:2-4). This brief prayer quickly became known as *the* prayer for Christians. The prayers of Jesus recorded in scripture<sup>1</sup> have that same direct, unadorned style—a style characteristic of common speech in Jesus’s time. The Word of God, who became fully human in Jesus of Nazareth, taught and prayed in the ordinary human language of his own time and place.<sup>2</sup> That example stands in clear contrast to the more abstract and complex way Roman Catholics now pray in his name when we celebrate the Eucharist.

How did we get here from there? Several milestones mark how liturgical language has changed: Aramaic in the first decades, then common Greek (*koine*), and in the late fourth century Latin, the common vernacular of the empire. At that point two things happened. First, prayer styles changed as large assemblies in basilicas required a heightened form of public speech. Imperial usages and elements of Latin rhetoric shaped the common Latin into a ritual language. Earlier the prayers had been extemporized according to known patterns. Now they became fixed texts, mostly original compositions. Second, prayers oriented to liturgical practice became more overtly theological in expression under the influence of the great councils of that era.<sup>3</sup> However, as the romance languages of Western Europe emerged in the early Middle Ages, Latin ceased to be the common vernacular, and thus its vocabulary and grammar became fixed. Although Latin no longer evolved as a living language, it remained the prayer language of most Catholics until the middle of the last century.

Vatican II changed that when it opened the door for the return to a liturgy using contemporary vernacular languages. What the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy envisioned was a modest introduction of today’s mother

1 See his short prayers: of praise to the Father for revealing to the childlike what was hidden from the wise (Mt 11:25-26, Lk 10:21-22), at the tomb of Lazarus (Jn 11:41-42), for his Father’s name to be glorified rather than for his own deliverance “from this hour” (Jn 12:27-28), in the garden of Gethsemane (Mt 26:39, Mk 14:36, Lk 22:42), three prayers on the cross (Mt 27:46, Mk 15:34, Lk 23:34, 46), and also his long prayer at the Last Supper (Jn 17:1-26).

2 Furthermore, Jesus prayed in the pattern of his ancestors: thankful remembrance of what God does and is, followed by confident petition.

3 This theological development is apparent in the shift from the Apostles’ Creed to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, both of which appear in our present Missal.

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tongues.<sup>4</sup> Within a few short years, bishops around the world flooded Rome with requests to allow the entire liturgy to be celebrated in local languages. That request was granted in 1967, and in 1969 guidelines for the work of translation<sup>5</sup> were issued in all the major modern languages. By 1970 the completed official Latin text (*editio typica*) of the Roman Missal appeared. The English translation being prepared by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL) was completed in 1973 and approved by Rome in 1974.

The 1969 instruction envisioned a three-stage process to develop the vernacular liturgy: first, translating the official Latin text; second, evaluating and revising the translations after pastoral experience, and third, eventual composition of original texts for a fully inculturated liturgy.<sup>6</sup> CLP emphasized that translations, as oral liturgical communication, should “take into account not only the message to be conveyed, but also the speaker, the audience, and the style” of the vernacular (CLP 7). Translated texts must be faithful to the message, the intended audience, and the vernacular’s manner of expression (CLP 8, 14, 25). Translators should keep in mind that “the unit of meaning is not the individual word but the whole passage” (CLP 12).

This principle of translating “meaning-for-meaning” stands in contrast to a “word-for-word” principle. These two approaches are called dynamic equivalence and literal (formal) equivalence. Dynamic equivalence privileges what the message can mean in the world of the receptor language; literal equivalence privileges what the meaning would have been in the world of the source language. These approaches actually lie on a continuum. An in-between approach, called corresponding equivalence, makes use of both approaches. Both ends of the spectrum can be pushed to extremes.<sup>7</sup>

In the first stage of its work, ICEL followed the first approach. Translation from Latin was done very quickly to meet pastoral demand for translated texts. After a decade of experience, ICEL undertook the second stage of revising the Missal.<sup>8</sup> It began with an extensive worldwide consultation of all episcopal conferences where English is used in liturgy. It elicited many helpful critiques and recommendations to improve shortcomings in the prayers, such as short staccato sentences, occasional banal and informal language, and some omissions. In keeping with its original mandate and CLP guidelines, ICEL adopted a more heightened form of prayer-speech using fuller translations and drawing out biblical allusions. The system of speech stresses native to classical English masterpieces, such as the King James Bible, Cranmer’s Book of Common Prayer, and the works of Shakespeare, was applied to the revised translations to make them more natural to both proclaimers and hearers, in tune with the oral/aural qualities of English at its best. In addition, during these same years ICEL began composing original prayer texts, as CLP envisioned in stage three.<sup>9</sup>

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4 Such as readings, instructions, and the collects (Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963), no. 36, 3, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19631204\\_sacrosanctum-concilium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html).)

5 This instruction is commonly identified as CLP, after its opening words in the French version (*Comme le prévoit*). Online at [http://natcath.org/NCR\\_Online/documents/comme.htm](http://natcath.org/NCR_Online/documents/comme.htm).

6 CLP, no. 43.

7 Dynamic equivalence can lead to loose paraphrase, which so transposes the original content that its meaning is no longer evident. Formal equivalence in turn can lead to an unintelligible jumble of words called metaphrase. A famous story paradoxically illustrates both extremes. Computer translation programs have translated Mt 26:41, e.g., as “the liquor is strong, but the meat has gone bad.” Such mistranslations make two faulty assumptions: 1) that in both languages every word has only one meaning, rather than a principal meaning and a wide range of connotations nuanced to fit different contexts/usages (as enumerated in dictionary “definitions”), and 2) that a translator can find an exactly identical single-meaning word in both languages. Another story tells about a Sanskrit translation of the Eucharistic Prayer that the episcopal conference of India sent to Rome. Although no one there knew Sanskrit, the text was rejected because the institution account (identified by capital letters) did not have the same number of words as the Latin.

8 It is proper to note here that I worked for ICEL for fifteen years during this second stage. That included chairing the subcommittee on translation and revision of the Latin prayer texts (some 2,500 in number) and serving on the three-member final editorial committee. That experience has clearly shaped my thoughts.

9 Especially noteworthy were the well-crafted alternative opening prayers related to the scripture readings of each year of the lectionary cycle.

The stage-two revision, completed in 1998, was sent to Rome with the full support of the episcopal conferences of ICEL. It did not receive approval and remains on the shelf. In 2001 Rome issued a new set of guidelines for translation, known by its Latin title *Liturgiam Authenticam*.<sup>10</sup> This instruction fully endorsed the principle of literal (formal) equivalence. The aim is not only to produce a full and exact word-for-word translation in “sacred language,” but also to replicate, insofar as possible, the word order and grammatical structure of the Latin. In effect, Latin syntax and grammar were to be retained, with the words in English. At the same time, a new official version of the Missal (*editio typica altera*) was in preparation. It was issued in 2002. The ICEL translation of that *editio* was approved by Rome and appeared in 2010. That is the version of the Mass now in use.

Why this shift? During the second phase of the CLP process, Rome had become more and more dissatisfied with ICEL’s approach, its seeming independence from Rome, and the deemed loss of “sacred language” and sense of mystery. Official oversight of liturgy underwent two important shifts during this time. First, the collegiality and authority of bishops and episcopal conferences over the vernacular liturgy set in place in Vatican II were reduced bit by bit as the reformed liturgy was implemented. Second, Roman congregations gradually reclaimed much of their previous authority in matters liturgical. In the 1990s the Congregation for Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments increasingly entered into the revision process, until it actively intervened in actual editing and re-editing of texts.<sup>11</sup> These shifts in oversight are embodied in the 2001 instruction.

A comparison of two prayers illustrates how the 1969 and 2001 guidelines have shaped different-sounding translations.

Sunday VIII in Ordinary Time Opening Prayer		
1973 translation	1998 translation	2010 translation
Lord, guide the course of world events and give your Church the joy and peace of serving you in freedom. We ask this . . .	Direct the course of this world, Lord God, and order it in your peace, that your Church may serve you in serenity and quiet joy. We ask this . . .	Grant us, O Lord, we pray, that the course of our world may be directed by your peaceful rule and that your Church may rejoice untroubled in her devotion. Through our Lord . . .

Pope Vigilius composed this prayer in the winter of 537-538. Rome was under siege and clearly would be sacked. In such a situation it would be natural to pray for some semblance of order, safety, and peace. The 1973 translation, though accurate, is direct and spare. It is almost *too* brief to lead people into prayer. The 1998 translation is fuller. Instead of ICEL’s normal reliance on the speech stresses of spoken prayer, it uses poetic meter: iambic (short-long) and its two variations spondee (long-long) and anapest (short-short-long). In this way it is not only the content but also the very sound of the prayer that communicate hopes for order, security, and peace amid chaos and ruin. The

10 Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Liturgiam Authenticam* (2001), [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccdds\\_doc\\_20010507\\_liturgiam-authenticam\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20010507_liturgiam-authenticam_en.html).

11 One can find another thread in these shifts. The crucial role of translation for liturgical inculturation is underlined in the 1994 instruction “Inculturation and the Roman Liturgy” (*Varietates Legitimae*), especially in numbers 5, 27-30, 39, and in 53, which states: “the first significant measure of inculturation is translation of liturgical books into the language of the people.” The position taken there seems much closer to CLP. The path to liturgical inculturation opened somewhat tentatively at Vatican II (CSL, nos. 37-40) also faces a struggle, despite some advances. *Varietates Legitimae* is online at the Adoremus website, <https://adoremus.org/1994/01/26/instruction-inculturation-and-the-roman-liturgy/>.

prayer is easily proclaimed and readily understood. The 2010 translation is more faithful to the Latin, especially in its word order and fuller use of subordinate clauses. Those clauses and the syntax, however, make it harder to proclaim or to understand without referring to the written text.

Sunday XVII in Ordinary Time Opening Prayer		
1973 translation	1998 translation	2010 translation
God our Father and protector, without you nothing is holy, nothing has value. Guide us to everlasting life by helping us to use wisely the blessings you have given to the world. We ask this . . .	O God, protector of those who hope in you, without you nothing is strong, nothing is holy, enfold us in your gracious care and mercy, that with you as our ruler and guide, we may use wisely the gifts of this passing world and fix our hearts even now on those which last forever. We ask this . . .	O God, protector of those who hope in you, without whom nothing has firm founda- tion, nothing is holy, bestow in abundance your mercy upon us and grant that, with you as our ruler and guide, we may use the good things that pass in such a way as to hold fast even now to those that ever endure. Through our Lord . . .

The 1973 text faithfully conveys the prayer’s central content, though in a direct and condensed manner. Split into two sentences, it is easy to proclaim and understand. The 1998 translation exemplifies corresponding equivalence, the middle approach on the translation spectrum. The word order and rhythm of the first part of the prayer follow the Latin closely, bordering on being word-for-word. The second part employs dynamic equivalence to a greater extent . The phrase *multiplica super nos misericordiam tuam* (“multiply your mercy upon us”) can sound too blandly mathematical if *multiplica* is transliterated into “multiply.” The editors chose rather to play on the etymological roots of *multiplica*: *multum* (many) and *plicare* (to fold, from which we derive “pleat” and “ply”): literally, to “fold many times.” “Enfold” subtly echoes our many human experiences of being enfolded by another to intimate something of God’s lavish “gracious care and mercy.” The prayer flows easily for proclaimer and hearers. The 2010 translation follows the Latin more closely. Latinate word order and choice of vocabulary make it harder to proclaim or understand.

The journey of liturgical translation will continue to unfold. In September 2017, Pope Francis set up another marker along that path. He issued an Apostolic Letter entitled *Magnum Principium* (The Great Principle).<sup>12</sup> In it he restored the responsibility and full authority Vatican II had given the episcopal conferences to prepare and approve liturgical translations, which were to be ratified by Rome,<sup>13</sup> and he instructed the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments to modify its own regulations to focus on helping the episcopal conferences fulfill their responsibility. The Congregation’s task of confirming/ratifying those translations assumes the doctrinal

12 Francis, “Apostolic Letter Motu Proprio “Magnum Principium” Quibus nonnulla in can. 838 Codicis Iuris Canonici” (2017), <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2017/09/09/170909a.html>. The title refers to the “great principle” of Vatican II, that liturgical prayer should be accommodated to the comprehension of people necessary for “full, conscious and active participation” (e.g., CSL, nos. 14, 21, 48, 59, 124).

13 More substantial adaptations still need Rome’s approval.

fidelity of the translations as presented, requiring no need for the Congregation to involve itself further in editing or revising what the conferences already have approved.<sup>14</sup>

*Magnum Principium* has rekindled a glimmer of hope that the process of providing vernacular translations will continue to serve God's people better and better as they seek to pray as Jesus did. The 1998 translation shows that it is possible to both retain sound theology and yet capture something of the simple but elegant beauty of Jesus's own prayer in our own time and place. That is what makes prayer truly memorable and engaging. It remains to be seen how soon and how far along that journey *Magnum Principium* will lead us in learning to mirror Jesus's own prayer "when we pray." Stay tuned.

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<sup>14</sup> Pope Francis officially modified Canon 838 to incorporate these determinations and clarifications.