

## *Franciscan University Presents*

### *“The New Translation of the Roman Missal”*

*With guest, Dr. Anthony Esolen*

**“On the Art of Translation” by Professor Anthony Esolen,  
an excerpt from *Magnificat, Roman Missal Companion***

It is an honor for me, and a great delight, to help to introduce my fellow English-speaking Catholics to the new translation of the Holy Mass.

#### **Why a New Translation**

“Why should there be a translation at all?” some of the faithful may wonder. Well, the new Order of Mass – not the so-called “Latin Mass,” more properly named the Tridentine Rite Mass, which was said in all countries before the Second Vatican Council recommended the use of the vernacular and revised the structure and the language of the Mass – is written in Latin, as are all the prayers used at Mass, for every day of the year, and for every purpose for which a Mass is said. These texts must be translated, then, from the original Latin into English and all the other vernacular languages of the world. Thus, when the priest says, “The Lord be with you,” the response in the vernacular languages has simply translated the Latin “*Et cum spiritu tuo*,” “And with your spirit,” so that in Sweden the response is just that, “*Och med din ande*,” as it is in German, “*Und mit deinem Geist*,” as it is in Italian, “*E con il tuo spirito*.” The new translation in English, then, is meant to bring our prayers closer not only to the original Latin, but to what our brothers and sisters throughout the world have long been saying in *their* languages.

#### **Meaning for Meaning**

Granted, then, that the Mass must be translated, I should like to begin with a brief discussion of the challenges that a translator must face, particularly if he is translating something other than ordinary speech – poetry, for instance, or prayer.

It is one of the maxims of translation that we are supposed to render meaning for meaning, and not simply word for word. We are not to hang ourselves by the rope of literalism. The Vatican’s guidelines for liturgical translation (*Liturgiam Authenticam*) state as much. And the maxim is true, if what is said in the original language is already to be understood in a figurative way. So, for example, someone learning German will be taught that if you want to say “Goodbye,” you say, “*Au Wiedersehen*,” or, in common speech, simply “*Wiedersehen*.” The meanings are “equivalent” in their situations of use.

If you're waving to friends at a train station, you will say "Goodbye" in Boston and "*Auf Wiedersehen*" in Berlin. That's so, even though "Goodbye" is an old contraction of the phrase "God be with you," and "*Auf Wiedersehen*" is a contraction of the very different phrase "Until we see one another again." Its closest English counterpart would be "See you later," but the jauntiness and familiarity of that phrase would often be quite inappropriate. If a German man shakes the hand of the Pope in the Vatican and says, "*Auf Wiedersehen*," we had better translate it as simply "Goodbye."

So of course it is true that a translation cannot be slavishly bound to the literal, but that is only because the original language itself is not always used in a literal sense, or because what works in the grammar of one language does not work in the grammar of another, so that words have to be supplied, or combined, or rearranged. When in the preface to the liturgy of the Eucharist, the priest calls out, "*Sursum corda*," he is using a phrase in Latin that has no verb. *Sursum* is an adverb without an exact counterpart in English. It means, roughly, "up from below," so that the phrase, if we translated without an ear for our own language, might be rendered, "Hearts up from below." But that does not make much sense. We need a verb. So our translators have justifiably supplied a verb and even a possessive pronoun to make the phrase clear: "Lift up your hearts."

### **Keeping Close to the Literal: Reason One**

And yet – granting all that – it is better to err on the side of the literal. There are, as I see them, three reasons for this. The first is that the task of the translator demands humility. If I am translating the poet Dante, I must assume that Dante knew what he was doing, and that I am not supposed to intrude my personal poetic sensibility or my philosophy or my theology into the work. Indeed, the reverse is true. It is Dante's poetic sensibility and philosophy and theology that I must struggle to reveal. I must take as my own the frank confession of John the Baptist: "He must increase, and I must decrease." If the Order of the Mass has the people responding to the priest, "*Et cum spiritu tuo*," I cannot say to myself, "I should prefer a different response." I cannot say, "I wish to ensure that there is no felt distinction between the people and the priest." I am not hired to quarrel with the original. I am hired to submit to it. So now the people respond, "And with your spirit," and the mystery of the response, the prayer that God might animate the spirit of the man who leads us in prayer, justly remains.

### **Reason Two**

The second reason for keeping close to the literal might seem, to a casual observer, to contradict what I have said above, and that is that a peculiar usage in one language *might not have a true counterpart* in another, and that it therefore might reveal something in reality that is obscured in the other. In other words, we might want a literal translation *precisely because we do not say things that way in our language*, but rather because the original helps us see what we might otherwise miss. Take for example Mary's reply to Gabriel, when the angel tells her that she will bear a son. "How can this

be,” she asks, “since I have had no relations with a man?” Now that is how we currently hear it translated in our lectionary, and if the purpose is simply to stress that Mary is a virgin, that is well enough. But the Greek in Luke’s Gospel uses the verb “know” – “I know not man” – and not because the Greeks used it that way, but because the Hebrews did. That verb is far richer than the rather technical phrase “to have relations with.” We are, in an instant, brought back to the first man and woman, when Adam “knew” his wife, and she bore him a son. And we are reminded, in a gentle way, that the union of man and woman was never meant to be merely the union of flesh, or the establishment of some “relation” or other, but the union of whole beings, a union of intimate knowledge.

### **Reason Three**

The third reason is a corollary of the two above. If my task is to submit to the original, and if the original often shows me what my own language sometimes obscures, then a close examination of the literal words may *unlock the figurative meaning beneath*. That is, I am not preferring the figurative to the literal, but am *revealing the figurative through the literal*. Take for example our response to the priest’s call, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.” It is the literal rendering, and not the more distant rendering we have grown accustomed to, that opens out to us the profound analogy between ourselves and the centurion in the Gospel, who begged Jesus to heal his servant. “Lord,” we say, repeating the centurion’s words. “I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof.” The Lord’s offering to go to the centurion’s house is a foreshadowing of his entering the house of our body, in the form of bread. His is the action, his is the offer; he is the one who wishes to take up his dwelling within us.

### **A Language of Prayer**

The translation we are adopting is, I affirm, more *faithful* to the original, both in its accuracy and in its humble and generous submission. And this leads me to a crucial point about the language of faith. Consider the difference between a grand piano and a toy piano, or between a cornet and a harmonica. You may play a C on each instrument, and in a certain sense they will all be playing one note; you will recognize the pitch as the same. But it would be absurd to suppose that there is no difference – and indeed all the difference in the world – between the grand piano and the toy piano, or between the cornet and the harmonica. The grand piano is an instrument of surpassing power; the toy piano is but a child’s half-comical imitation. The cornet is an instrument for proclaiming the approach of a king; the harmonica, for a lonely farmer boy out in the field, musing about the lovely girl in the village nearby.

As in music, so in language. There are many instruments that play in English: consider the rough banter of boys on a street corner; the colorless formality of an office memorandum; the tender phrases of a love letter, tinged with nostalgia; the intricacy of poetry in meter and rhyme. So the question is not simply, “How do we translate this Latin

into English?” but “What instrument in English is best for this instrument in Latin?” How do we translate the language of prayer? And there is a language of prayer.

I have heard it said that when Jesus prayed, he used the common language of the people. The implication is that there should be no real difference between the style of our prayers and the style, say, of our letters to the editor. But the premise is wrong, and so is the conclusion. The fact is, there was no such thing as one “common language of the people.” That is because, as I’ve suggested, language is a many splendored thing. The farmer in old Quebec speaks in a courtly way to his wife – but not so to his horse or his dog. A soldier writing home to his beloved allows himself flights of fancy that would be laughed at in the barracks. Every language too has a sacral register. That was true of the Aramaic that Jesus spoke. More than that, when Jesus gathered with his disciples to celebrate the sacred feasts, or when he read in the synagogues, it was not Aramaic that he read, and not Aramaic psalms that he sang, but Hebrew, the ancient language of his people.

### **The Structure of Sentences**

That concern for the sacred character of our worship at Mass is made manifest in another way, beyond the choice of words and the determination to render into English the beauty of the Latin. It is made manifest in the length and the structure of the sentences. This too is something that calls for explanation.

When we read, we can do all kinds of things that help us make sense of a difficult passage. We can insert a bookmark and put the book down for a while. We can turn the page back to something we had read before. We can glance ahead to see if an explanation is coming. We can read the passage over again. But we can do none of these things while we are *listening* to a speech. Oratory, in other words, cannot work like straight prose. It requires the linking devices of oral poetry. It requires repetition of key words, parallel structures in grammar and sense, balance of idea with idea and image with image, and – something that people unused to oral poetry do not suspect – a minimum of full stops that interrupt the flow of declamation and meaning. That is why Homer, who composed his great poems the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* using his mind and his voice and his ear, and not his hand and his eye, since these poems would not be written down for centuries, and since, as tradition has it, he was blind – it is why the great Homer employs long, flowing, delicately balanced sentences, with many repeated forms and phrases, so that the work could be *heard*, and, more important than that, *remembered*. That is why when Martin Luther King addressed the hundreds of thousands on the Mall in Washington, he spoke in a series of long sentences with all the balance and repetition of a Jeremiah or Isaiah, and why so many of us still remember what he said was the vision of his dream.

In oratory, as in oral poetry, every full stop is a breach, and runs the risk of losing the ear and the memory. Four consecutive simple declarative sentences are, taken singly, easier to hear and to remember than one long and complex sentence would be, but taken together they are like disconnected boxcars bumping into each other on a track. So there

is an eminently practical reason, and an aesthetic reason, for translating a long sentence of oratory as a long sentence of oratory. But there is still more. The elements of such sentences *belong together*. When we separate them into their own sentences, we lose the theological connections between them. They no longer form parts of an intricate whole. Indeed, we are often reduced to the awkward position of informing God of what he already knows, stopping in our tracks, and then praying for something that occurs to us as an afterthought. That is not the way of the new translation.

Let me give a prime example. In the new translation, most of the prefaces to the Liturgy of the Eucharist consist of a single sentence, between the declaration of the priest that it is right for us to praise God, and his summoning us to join the angels and archangels in their hymn of praise. Typically, an opening clause after the pronoun “who” reminds us of what God has done for us – rather than reporting the information back to God; and that is followed by a prayer that is to be considered in light of what God has done, or a reflection upon the meaning of God’s action. Here, for example, is the central portion of the Preface for the Assumption of Mary:

For today the Virgin Mother of God  
was assumed into heaven  
as the beginning and image  
of your Church’s coming to perfection  
and a sure sign of hope and comfort to your pilgrim people;  
rightly you would not allow her  
to see the corruption of the tomb  
since from her own body she marvelously brought forth  
your incarnate Son, the Author of all life.

Notice, in this lovely prayer, that we begin and end with our minds devoted to the Motherhood of Mary, as is right and just for this solemn feast. Notice too that what is in the middle is deftly balanced, one truth reflecting upon another, so that the Assumption of Mary is an image of the raising of the Church and of all her pilgrims. Both are a reflection of the Resurrection of Jesus in his glorified body, Jesus, to whom the Church applies the words of the Psalm: “You would not let your holy one see corruption.”

### **Steeped in Scripture**

And that leads me to the last but perhaps most important point. It is astonishing how steeped in Scripture the prayers of the Mass are, how, for example, a passage from Saint Paul will be placed alongside a passage from the Psalms, effortlessly interwoven, to make a profound theological point, or to see our Christian prayer as springing from and elevating the prayers of the children of Israel. It is no exaggeration to say that even the relatively short prayers before the Liturgy of the Word, the Collects, echo one or two passages in the Word of God. Every single Collect is delicately and wisely crafted to fit the season and the day. The new translation unmuffles that Word of God, so that we can hear it once again in all of our prayers, and so that we can glimpse the great work of

sacred art that the Mass is. It is an art whose language comes from God himself, and yet it is an art for everyone. Our heads have been anointed with oil; our cups overflow.

So when we pray in this translation, let us not be embarrassed by beauty, by intricacy, by elevation, by mystery, by the potency of repetition, by fullness of heart and of expression. Let us instead consider every word of the Latin to be like the wine at Cana, and let us be grateful for translators who humbled themselves to accept that wine, without desiring to translate it back into water.

**By Anthony Esolen**  
**Reprinted from Magnificat, Roman Missal Companion,**  
**Excerpted from pp. 15-24**  
**With permission of Magnificat®**  
**To order call 1-866-273-5215**  
**Web site: [www.magnificat.com](http://www.magnificat.com)**  
**All rights reserved.**

**Titles Mentioned on *Franciscan University Presents*  
“The New Translation of the Roman Missal”  
with guest, Dr. Anthony Esolen**

***Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium), Vatican II.* Pauline Books and Media.**

***Roman Missal Companion* by Dr. Anthony Esolen. Magnificat. Also available at [www.magnificatmissal.com](http://www.magnificatmissal.com).**

***Constitution in the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium), Vatican II.* St. Paul Books and Media.**

***The Suffering of Love: Christ’s Descent Into the Hell of Human Hopelessness* by Dr. Regis Martin. Ignatius Press.**

***Signs of Life: 40 Catholic Customs and Their Biblical Roots* by Dr. Scott Hahn. Doubleday Publishing.**

***Spiritual Freedom: God’s Life-Changing Gift* by Father Dave Pivonka, TOR. St. Anthony Messenger Press.**

***Hiking the Camino: 500 Miles With Jesus* by Father Dave Pivonka, TOR. St. Anthony Messenger Press.**

***Let the Fire Fall* by Father Michael Scanlan, TOR. Franciscan University Press.**

**All of the above books are available through the Franciscan University Bookstore, 1235 University Blvd., Steubenville, OH 43952, 1-888-333-0381, [www.franciscan.edu/bookstore](http://www.franciscan.edu/bookstore).**

***Academically Excellent, Passionately Catholic*  
FRANCISCAN UNIVERSITY OF STEUBENVILLE  
Steubenville, Ohio, USA  
1-800-783-6220/[www.Franciscan.edu](http://www.Franciscan.edu)**