



## *Praying the Mass Anew*

*The New Translation of The Roman Missal  
and Our Actual Participation at Mass*

### 2. Who Translates the Prayers?

**W**e have already been introduced to the new translation of the prayers of the Mass in general. We are mindful of how some use of the common languages (called “vernacular”) was desired in the reform of the liturgy that was initiated by Vatican II, and are aware of the ongoing task of translating, as language continues to evolve and change. The new translation has been carried out in keeping with renewed goals and guidelines for translating Latin prayer texts. Among these goals are the need to be more literal in translating and to more clearly reflect the biblical sources and the traditional formulas of many of the prayers that we pray. Today, let us look at who carries out this work of translating.

Prior to Vatican II, when the liturgical prayers of the Church were in Latin, no official structures were necessary for translating official prayer texts. While the approval of official prayer texts has always belonged to the highest levels of the Church, the new post-Vatican II reality of translating Latin prayer texts into other languages has resulted in new bodies of Church leadership to carry out this work. For the numerous English speaking countries, the translating of Latin into English is an endeavor that is only fittingly

accomplished as a collaborative effort of all these major English speaking countries. Hence, in 1963, bishops from these countries established “The International Commission on English in the Liturgy” (ICEL). As found on their website, ICEL is “a mixed commission of Catholic Bishops’ Conferences in countries where English is used in the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy according to the Roman Rite. The purpose of the Commission is 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.”

Simply stated, ICEL has the duty and task of carrying out the work of translating the Church’s Latin prayers into English. ICEL’s translated texts are then reviewed and approved by all of the national bishops’ conferences of these English speaking countries. Upon receiving the approval of these bodies of bishops, the Vatican itself reviews the proposed translations, giving final approval of the translated texts through its “*recognitio*,” of the texts. It is only after the granting of this *recognitio* by the Vatican that a translated text is able to be officially used in the liturgy. Since ICEL members are spread throughout the world, they have one central office (which is in Washington, D.C.) through

which they carry out their work and coordinate their ongoing efforts in translating texts.

Today, as we prepare for a new translation of prayers for Mass, perhaps the first change to note is how the new translation includes a new title for the book itself. Maybe you have seen the “red book that Father uses for the prayers at Mass,” and noticed that it has the word “Sacramentary” on the binding. This title will no longer be used, as the more literal name of the book is “Roman Missal.” Hence, whenever you see or hear the title *The Roman Missal*, this is the name of the book that contains the prayers for Mass. Using this example, it is important to note the ICEL has always been guided in their work by particular goals for translation set by the Church – which have also been adjusted at times.

Forty years ago, an early set of guidelines was given for translators to follow, which gave them great liberty to interpret the Latin words through the use of more common and recognizable expressions. Their reasoning was that the general meaning of the text was more important than a literal translation. In 2001, a revised set of guidelines that values literal translation was given. ICEL’s work since 2001 has been carried out accordingly, with the reasoning that such literal translations will yield prayer texts that are not simply “everyday” in their language, but will be rooted in tradition, with an elevated or even “sacred” style as is fitting for prayer. In weeks ahead, we will see examples of how the recent standards for translations are accomplished in the new English versions.

### ***Questions of the Week:***

➤ ***How is this change in the translation a legitimate change – for it seems like the Church usually resists change?***

As we seek to implement the new translation of *The Roman Missal*, perhaps we might reflect on the reality of “change” itself. Life is always changing – our moods, our knowledge, our relationships, and so on. The Church, the Body of Christ, as a living reality, made up of living beings, is no different. While the core teachings of faith do not change, the way the faith is articulated at times does change.

Over the 2000 years of the Church, the liturgy has developed and undergone many moments of legitimate change. While some changes have been very noticeable, others have been much smaller. In fact, just prior to Vatican II (a time that many today judge the liturgy as having been very strict and rigid), the liturgy of the Church underwent several changes. In fact, in 1962 (the same year Vatican II started), a new version of *The Roman Missal* was issued by Pope John XXIII. These truly legitimate and proper changes, small as they may seem, give us a good example that “the only thing constant is change.”

➤ ***Will this translation be permanent?***

While we can confidently say that this translation will be used for years to come, we must avoid calling it “permanent.” Truly, this one English version of the prayers will be used in all Masses offered in English – replacing the previous version. However, that does not mean that the work of translating is ever complete or permanent. Just as forty years ago we received the first English translation and we receive another today, so in the future (perhaps in another 40 years, or more...), new translations, or edited translations, will likely be proposed and implemented.