“At last we have a comprehensive treatment of the sad history of the Vatican's dismantling of ICEL’s efforts at providing us with translations that are both elegant and communicative. My favorite line: ‘Before I die, I would be delighted to celebrate once again the Eucharist in my native language.’ This book provides trenchant criticism of the current translation of the Roman Missal and wonderful observations on the 1998 ‘Missal that wasn’t.’ As in so many areas of contemporary theology, we are once again in O'Collins's debt.”

—John F. Baldovin, SJ
Professor of Historical and Liturgical Theology
Boston College School of Theology & Ministry

“Authoritative, well detailed, and searingly honest, this account of the recent history of Vatican translation policy and its devastating effect on the current English version of the Roman Missal needs to be read by any liturgy scholar, teacher, or presider who uses these texts or, indeed, tries to explain them. O'Collins and Wilkins bring a wealth of experience and insight into the story of the process, the high quality of the 1998 material, and the most evident problems and contradictions in the texts that English-speaking Catholics hear and repeat every Sunday.

“The timing of this publication, as it happens, could not have been better. The role of the bishops in taking primary responsibility for the liturgical texts authorized for use in their own countries and linguistic communities is now consistent with that envisioned at Vatican II. New reasons for hope for a truly vernacular and participative liturgy.”

—Susan Roll
Saint Paul University
Ottawa, Canada
“Here is a required book for any class in contemporary Roman Catholic eucharistic liturgy today. O'Collins narrates the rise and fall of the 1998 ICEL translation of the Roman Missal and its replacement by the 2010 ‘translation.’ Together with ample references to the best in contemporary liturgical scholarship and official documents—including Comme le prevoit and Liturgiam authenticam—O’Collins calls for the end of the 2010 text with its impossible syntax and forced ‘sacral language’ in favor of an official recognition of the 1998 text. With serious ecumenical implications as well (especially with regard to what were common texts of the Kyrie, Gloria, Creed, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei), this book needs to be read by all in light of Pope Francis’s call for a reevaluation of Liturgiam authenticam. May O’Collins’s hope be realized and may the 2010 text become but a footnote in the history of the Roman Rite.”

—Maxwell E. Johnson
University of Notre Dame
LOST IN TRANSLATION
The English Language and the Catholic Mass

Gerald O’Collins

with

John Wilkins

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The history of ICEL’s rise and fall in Chapter 1 is by John Wilkins. The comparative analysis of the Missals of 1998 and 2010 in the following chapters is by Gerald O’Collins. The whole book has been edited by Wilkins.
Preface

“There is only the fight to recover what has been lost.”
T. S. Eliot, *East Coker*

Each week I celebrate the Eucharist for a group of old Italian men and women. It is a great joy to use a missal that sounds like good, contemporary Italian and communicates very well to my small congregation. During the rest of the week, however, I say Mass in what its translators have called a “sacred vernacular”—a language that falls halfway between Latin and English.

This sacred vernacular with which the English-speaking churches were saddled in Advent 2011 asks me to prefer “charity” over “love,” “compunction” over “repentance,” “laud” over “praise,” “supplication” over “prayer,” and “wondrous” over “wonderful.” In the Creed “consubstantial with the Father” has replaced the user-friendly “of one being with the Father.” At the feast of the Immaculate Conception, I am expected to talk of the “prevenient” grace that preserved Mary from all sin. Every now and then I have to speak about the eucharistic “oblation,” and wonder how many of the assembled faithful think that I have mispronounced “ablution.”

Before launching into some prayers, I need to take a deep breath. I face long sentences that belong more to the Latin of Cicero than to contemporary English.

Worse still, this strange new Missal wants me in the name of Jesus to declare that his blood was “poured out for you and for many,” as if he did not die for all. It calls on me persistently to use a language of
“merit,” which moves close to the ancient heresy derived from Pelagius. Pelagius held that through our own efforts we can gain salvation. I find it distressing to read texts that encourage a “do-it-yourself” redemption.

Before I die, I would be delighted to celebrate once again the Eucharist in my native language. Hence I welcomed with delight the decision Pope Francis took just before Christmas 2016. He has appointed a commission to revisit the guidelines for translation, called *Liturgiam Authenticam* (“Authentic Liturgy”), which stood behind and “justified” the Latin words transposed into the so-called English of the present Missal. May that commission quickly propose repealing *Liturgiam Authenticam*! And may it press on to endorse the “missal that never was,” an excellent translation that the Vatican summarily rejected in 1998.

The roots of the problem go back to the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65). In *Sacro sanctum Concilium* (the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, December 4, 1963), the council acknowledged that the primary responsibility in revising the liturgy for the Roman Rite belonged to the Holy See (that is to say, to the pope and his collaborators in the Vatican) and to the bishops of different regions (SC 22, 37–40). The same document allowed the use of vernacular translations and expected the bishops around the world to “approve” the “translations from the Latin for use in the liturgy” (SC 36.4). The council made no explicit mention of any further obligation to have these translations (into Chinese, English, French, German, Hindi, Maori, Spanish, and so forth) also confirmed or “recognized” by the Holy See. However, such an express obligation surfaced soon enough.

On January 25, 1964, Pope Paul VI issued *Sacram Liturgiam*, a *motu proprio* or personal edict that prescribed submitting translations to the Holy See for an official *recognitio* or approval.1 When the revised *Missale Romanum*, the authorized Latin version sometimes called “the Paul VI Missal,” appeared in 1970, conferences of bishops around the world were to prepare editions in the vernacular. But these editions

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would come into force only after being confirmed by the Holy See. By 1972, the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL) had finished its translation of the 1970 Roman Missal. The eleven bishops’ conferences who were full members of ICEL approved the translation, the Holy See gave the required confirmation, and by 1973 the Missal was ready to be printed and distributed.

In 1981, ICEL set itself to revise painstakingly the 1972 translation and in the early 1990s submitted to the bishops’ conferences segments of the revised text. All eleven English-speaking conferences approved the new translation and in 1998 submitted it to Rome for approval. Instead of discussing the text with the episcopal conferences or with ICEL, however, the prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Cardinal Medina Estévez, rejected the 1998 Missal.

Cardinal Medina demanded widespread changes in the mandate, structures, and personnel of ICEL, which led in 2003 to new statutes governing its operation. The recognitio of translations, enjoined by Paul VI in Sacram Liturgiam, ceased to be a merely formal confirmation and became an exercise of governance by the Holy See. Rome seized control of ICEL and now planned to supervise strictly this commission set up by the English-speaking conferences of bishops to prepare vernacular translations for their local churches.

ICEL was dismantled, the chairman from 1997 to 2002, Bishop Maurice Taylor of Galloway in Scotland, replaced, and a new membership installed, with key roles to be played by Bishop (later Archbishop) Arthur Roche, chairman of ICEL from 2002 to 2012, and Father (later Monsignor) Bruce Harbert. From 2002 to 2009 Harbert would be the executive director of the secretariat of the new ICEL. His appointment paralleled the establishment of the Vox Clara (“Clear Voice”) committee (of which Cardinal George Pell was named president), founded by the Congregation for Divine Worship to oversee and regulate the English translation of liturgical texts. This committee and ICEL, along with those responsible for translations into other languages, were to follow the prescriptions of Liturgiam Authenticam, a document issued on March 28, 2001, by the Congregation for Divine Worship that changed the rules for translating the original Latin texts.
Now, in Francis, we have a truly Vatican II pope. In the first major document of his pontificate, *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel, November 24, 2013), he stressed the need for a sound decentralization. Accordingly, the Vatican’s usurpation of the local bishops’ work through ICEL, its legitimate commission, has come under the scrutiny it deserves.

This book will compare and contrast the 1998 and 2010 Missals and put the case for recognizing the clear superiority of the 1998 translation.

The new commission set up by Pope Francis may not concern itself directly with the question of whether or not there should be another translation of the Roman Missal. It does not need to. Waiting in the wings is a translation, prepared by the original ICEL and approved by all the English-speaking bishops’ conferences. Take it down from a Vatican shelf, dust it off, and make a few additions. Then Mass in the vernacular can become, as it should be, a powerful tool of evangelization when people experience it.

My warm thanks to John Wilkins, editor of *The Tablet* for twenty-one years and a wonderful friend. He made available and updated a chapter for this book; he has also done an excellent job in checking and improving what I have written. Let me express my gratitude as well to John Batt, Paul Baumann (the editor of *Commonweal* who allowed me to reproduce John Wilkins’s chapter), Philomena Billington, Bishop Paul Bird, Sean Burke, Brendan Byrne, Gilles Emery, Anne Hunt, Ruth McCurry, Brett O’Neill, Moira Peters, Roderick Strange, Christopher Willcock, and the librarians of the Dalton McCaughey Library. In different ways they all contributed to the making of this book. It is dedicated to Bishop Maurice Taylor, who served as chairman for the old ICEL’s episcopal board and, in *It’s the Eucharist, Thank God* (Brandon, Suffolk: Decani Books, 2009), told the story of ICEL’s dismantling. Scripture quotations are usually taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

Gerald O’Collins, SJ
Jesuit Theological College
Parkville, Australia
Easter, 2017
Chapter One

The Missal That Never Was

by John Wilkins

The reforming Second Vatican Council concluded its work in Rome in December 1965. The first document it promulgated was the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium). It was a trailblazer for what followed, harbinger of a new era for the church. The draft text lifted the spirits of one member of the council's central preparatory commission, the late Archbishop Denis Hurley of Durban, when he took it out of his briefcase during a journey from Rome to South Africa and started to read it.

He had been discouraged by the other material that he had seen; this was different. “For the first time,” he testified, “I felt able to say: this council is going to mean something in the life of the church.”

Archbishop Hurley, a prominent progressive at Vatican II who died in 2004 at the age of eighty-eight, was to play an important part in the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL), set up by bishops of the English-speaking world to translate into the vernacular the Latin liturgical books as reformed by the council and postconciliar commissions. It is a disturbing story. As editor from 1982 to 2003 of the Catholic weekly The Tablet in London, I had a rule of thumb to apply to the stream of instructions coming out of the Roman Curia. If the curial congregations became concerned about an issue, it should always be assumed that they had good reason. But the methods they used and their answers could be wrong. This twin-track assessment fits the ICEL case all too well. The early translations were done under
great pressure and they contained many inadequacies. When ICEL itself set out to remedy these, its work foundered on Vatican distrust.

The use of vernacular languages in the liturgy of the Roman Rite did not begin with the Second Vatican Council. For decades previously, an array of Catholic scholars and experts had been doing research in France, Germany, the Low Countries, Italy, England, and the United States; centers of liturgical renewal had become influential; and by the early 1950s, Rome had commissioned conferences of bishops—already it was they who had the responsibility—to prepare translations of part of the rites for baptisms, marriages, and funerals. Precisely because so much preparation had been done, the bishops assembled for the council felt able to push ahead immediately with liturgical reform.

Few realized in those early days just how far the logic of the liturgical changes would take them. Repeatedly the council’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy stressed that what the church desired was “full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations” by “all the faithful.” This aim was “to be considered before all else”; here was “the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit.” Full participation was “their right and obligation by reason of their baptism”; it was this that showed them to be “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people” (SC 14).

On December 4, 1963, at the end of the council’s second session, the constitution was passed by a massive majority: there were only four dissenting votes. Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, who would later lead a schismatic movement against the council’s work, is said to have been in favor of it.

The overwhelming consensus was achieved in part because the opening to the vernacular was endorsed in guarded terms. “The use of the Latin language . . . is to be preserved in the Latin rites,” the document cautioned, before opening up the way ahead: “But since the use of the vernacular, whether in the Mass, the administration of the sacraments, or in other parts of the liturgy, may frequently be of great advantage to the people, a wider use may be made of it.” This passage was followed immediately by the commissioning of bishops’ conferences to put the council’s wishes into practice. It was the local
bishops who had the responsibility “to decide whether, and to what extent, the vernacular language is to be used.” Their decrees must then be confirmed by Rome, the document said (SC 36).

So from the first, local bishops were clearly understood to be in control of the liturgical translations. This approach was in line with one of Vatican II’s key achievements, confirmed by a vote of the whole council on October 30, 1963. On that day, by a huge majority, the bishops affirmed that the church must be seen to be governed on the model of Peter and the Twelve. Leadership therefore belongs to the whole college of bishops, with and under the pope. Each bishop is a vicar of Christ in his own diocese (Lumen Gentium, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 27). Sharing of authority, within Catholic unity, is proper to the church. As with the liturgy, though, this necessary counterbalance to Vatican I’s emphasis on papal and Roman power was a reform easier to approve in principle than to implement in practice.

Before the liturgy constitution was promulgated, the English-speaking bishops, who were the first to see the advantages of pooling their resources, had established the core of ICEL. In a formal meeting at the English College in Rome on October 17, 1963, ten English-speaking conferences agreed to share the translation work: those of Australia, Canada, England and Wales, India, Ireland, New Zealand, Pakistan, Scotland, South Africa, and the United States. By the time the council ended in 1965, the ICEL secretariat had been opened in Washington, DC. In 1967 the Philippines became the eleventh ICEL member; there were also fifteen associated conferences of countries that used English in the liturgy without its being the predominant language. A vast task awaited them: the translation of several thousand texts in some thirty distinct liturgical books. And that “full, conscious, and active participation” desired by the council would turn out to be a far more complicated undertaking than anyone had envisaged.

It quickly became evident that, once begun, vernacular translations had to go the whole way. The bishops were as eager as the priests and people. The Vatican Congregation for Rites, as it was then called (in 1969 it became the Congregation for Divine Worship), hesitated
and made attempts at retreat, but in 1967 Paul VI gave the bishops’ conferences his permission to press ahead.¹

Those early years were frenetic. In Rome, the Vatican consilium for implementing the Constitution on the Liturgy, set up in 1964, worked night and day to complete editiones typicae in Latin and make them available to local bishops’ conferences. The first Eucharistic Prayer was joined by three more in 1968. Sunday Mass sheets appeared each week. Liturgists burned the midnight oil as they debated how best to achieve a style appropriate to English usage. How to deal with the long periodic sentences that give the Latin its characteristic rhythm? ICEL decided to break them down into shorter components.

That preference triggered a battle royal. The aim was to achieve a noble simplicity of language that was true to the original while pleasing to the ear and apt for proclamation. But to what extent did simplification in the interests of modern sensibilities mean falsification? The more rhetorical style of the Latin presents a balance between God’s action and the human response. Fierce criticism of the 1973 Missal accused it of trivializing the profundities of the original and of exalting human religious striving at the expense of the initiative of God, which is always prior.²

The ICEL texts were widely circulated for comment and critique. There was an attempt to enlist Catholic poets and writers, but they were not willing to participate: this was not, they felt, an assignment for them.³

² This error has been traditionally called “Pelagianism,” after Pelagius (active around 400), who taught that human beings can achieve salvation through their own sustained efforts. In “What Kind of Missal Are We Getting?” New Blackfriars 77, no. 910 (1996): 548–52, Bruce Harbert wrongly detected Pelagianism in several collects found in the 1998 Missal (which he called ICEL 2). Ironically, given Harbert’s role in preparing the 2010 Missal, Pelagianism clearly turns up in that translation.
³ Unlike ICEL, those who prepared the 1966 Jerusalem Bible had succeeded in enlisting the help of such notable authors as J. R. R. Tolkien.
Chapter Three

The Roman Missal of December 2010

Writing in 2005 and 2009, respectively, John Wilkins (chapter 1) and Bishop Maurice Taylor provided vivid accounts of how the drama that affected the translation of the Roman Missal into English unfolded.¹ But how would it finally play itself out?

In February 2006 the new ICEL and Vox Clara issued the final draft of their translation, the so-called “gray book.” The eleven English-speaking bishops’ conferences approved the “gray book” and also proposed some changes toward a revised version accepted by the Vatican in June 2008. A final recognitio, given on March 26, 2010, was announced a month later at a meeting of Vox Clara with Pope Benedict XVI on April 28, 2010. But when, on August 20, 2010, the English translation of the Order of Mass was made public, it contained over one hundred changes to the text of 2008 that had received the official recognitio in March 2010. Even more dramatic news came on December 31, 2010, when the text of the Roman Missal was sent to seven publishers for preparation and release. Around ten thousand changes had been made in the “gray book” revised and approved by the bishops’ conferences. Astonishingly, even after securing the reluctant agreement of English-speaking bishops to their new translation, the Congregation for Divine Worship, through Vox Clara and the new ICEL, unilaterally introduced thousands of changes, some

¹Maurice Taylor, It’s the Eucharist, Thank God (Brandon, Suffolk, UK: Decani Books, 2009).
of which were of a relatively minor nature (such as punctuation) but some of a substantial nature. It was this text that was imposed on English-speaking Catholics from the First Sunday of Advent 2011.²

The 2010 Roman Missal had been prepared under the auspices of Cardinal George Pell as president of Vox Clara, Archbishop Arthur Roche as chairman of the new ICEL (2002–2012), and Monsignor Bruce Harbert as executive director of the secretariat of the new ICEL (2002–2009). They and their colleagues worked, of course, according to the guidelines of Liturgiam Authenticam, but added their own touches. Let us see, for instance, how those guidelines were unpacked in several principles that Harbert has endorsed for translating the Latin liturgy into English.

Some Principles from Harbert

In a brief review for New Blackfriars,³ Monsignor Harbert proposed as one principle for translation that “the effect of a text on its original audience should be reproduced” (emphasis original). This ignores the fact that, as with much of the Latin liturgy, we have no idea who constituted, for example, “the original audience” of the Roman Canon, let alone the effect on them of the text that they were hearing for the first time. We need to recall that it “was composed of a number of distinct prayers over the course of several centuries.”⁴

Who then would be the “original audience”? Those, whoever they were, who heard the text that John Baldovin quotes from Ambrose of Milan? Those who heard the Roman Canon as it became more or less stable in the sixth century? We should label Harbert’s principle “the original audience fallacy.”

It resembles “the intentional fallacy” (that is to say, the original author fallacy) of Eric Donald Hirsch (b. 1928), professor emeritus of

the University of Virginia. He argued for the theory, now discredited by many philosophers, literary critics, experts in jurisprudence, and biblical exegetes, that texts mean only what their authors intended to communicate. In Hirsch’s view, texts function as a bridge between the minds of the authors and those of subsequent readers. The latter have the role of grasping and restating now what the authors consciously wished to convey then. Harbert’s “original audience fallacy” understands traditional liturgical texts to function as a similar bridge—between the minds and emotions of the original audience and those who perform these texts today. Translators of such texts, he holds, should aim at allowing contemporary worshipers to grasp for themselves and reproduce the impact these texts had on the worshipers who first experienced them.

In the same review, Harbert remarks that a central principle for the 2010 translation was “a sacral style that will inspire its users.” Here he uses an old-fashioned adjective by speaking of a “sacral style” rather than a “sacred style,” as Liturgiam Authenticam did (see previous chapter). Such a “sacral style” and, for that matter, a “sacred style” seem alien to the model of all Christian prayers, the Our Father. Such a style simply does not characterize petitions like “thy will be done,” “give us this day our daily bread,” and “deliver us from evil.” Jesus never suggested that we would honor God more and find ourselves more “inspired” by adopting a “sacral style” in our prayers, as if we should say: “may thy will, we pray, be graciously done”; “graciously grant us today our daily bread”; or “grant, we pray, that we may be mercifully delivered from evil.”

Furthermore, it is the straightforward and not particularly “sacral” style of the psalms that fed Jesus’ own prayer and made them enduringly effective as prayers for Jews and Christians alike. Their language is simple and powerfully direct and does not keep intelligibility at bay: “Have mercy on me, Lord. I have no strength”; “I will praise you, Lord, with all my heart”; “Lord God, I take refuge in you.” A sacral style was not the style that inspired either Jesus or the psalmists. Did Harbert

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and his associates set up a human “tradition” and fail to follow the example and teaching of Jesus himself?

Some remarks of St. Cyprian of Carthage in his treatise On the Lord’s Prayer seem apropos: “To pray otherwise than he [Jesus] taught us is more than a mistake, it is a fault, for he laid down: ‘You reject the commandment of God in order to set up your own tradition.’ Let us pray as our Master himself taught us. Our prayer is friendly and intimate when we petition God with his own prayer” (chapters 2 and 3). Surely the teaching and example of Jesus should be the supreme rule not only for Christian life but also for Christian liturgy? Would Harbert and his colleagues answer this question with an unqualified yes? One of them, Cuthbert Johnson, has quoted Thomas Aquinas on the Lord’s Prayer as “the most perfect of prayers.”

Harbert remarks correctly on the vivid contrast “between the Scriptural style [of Jesus and others] and the Roman [read: Latin] one.” He goes on to say rightly that “Roman rhetoric does not translate easily into modern English, nor are modern English speakers readily receptive to ancient Roman culture.” But this was no excuse for what the translators of the 2010 Missal chose: “a path that lies midway between” the “lofty” and “elaborate style” of ancient Latin of the ancient Roman Canon and “a modern English style.” The result has been the “halfway” translation that often is no longer Latin but not yet acceptable modern English. I wonder how Jerome, John Henry Newman, and the other authorities quoted at the beginning of chapter 2 would judge this unabashed plea for a third style, neither ancient Latin nor modern English. Harbert and his coworkers followed the odd directives of Liturgiam Authenticam, which, as we noted in the last chapter, prescribed a special, “sacred style” that could differ from current speech and even sound strange and “obsolete” (LA 27, 43).

Finally, in his review Monsignor Harbert echoes Liturgiam Authenticam (LA 72) when he insists that “it is a mistake to entrust the liturgy

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to a few powerful hands.” But one might well ask: was it a mistake to seize control of the translation of the liturgy into English and put it into the hands of the few powerful people who made up the Vox Clara committee and the new ICEL that the Vatican carefully controlled? Was it a mistake to abandon the old ICEL’s practice of transparency and to act for the most part in secrecy? Was it a mistake to introduce unilaterally thousands of changes into translations already approved by the English-speaking bishops’ conferences?

Other Criticisms

Some supporters of the 2010 translation have appealed to the fact that around the world those who were to prepare translations into other languages often knew English but had at best a limited knowledge of Latin (in which the Missale Romanum appeared in 1970). They could turn to the English translation for guidance. This strange view pictured the English translation as a kind of “crib” for other translations and refused to acknowledge that an odd, Latinized translation fails to meet the liturgical needs of the native English-speakers and inhibits their sharing in worship. If translators for other language groups need a “crib” as they grapple with the original Latin, by all means let someone supply them with such an aid. But why foist on English-speakers what is hardly more than a “crib” of the original Latin text, the Missale Romanum of Paul VI with its minor revisions of 1975, 2002, and 2008?

Surveys in the United States, the British Isles, and New Zealand have shown how seriously dissatisfied the majority of laypeople and clergy are with the 2010 Missal. Too often its new, “sacral” renderings are hard to proclaim, unpleasant to listen to, and difficult to understand. Following Liturgiam Authenticam, the translators forgot how Vatican II’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (and Comme le prévoit) insisted

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8 In “Why Pope Francis Is Right to Revisit the New Mass Translation” (America, for January 27, 2017), Michael G. Ryan cited a survey conducted by Georgetown University’s Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate: only 27 percent of priests in the USA held that the 2010 translation lived up to expectations; more than half believed it urgently needed to be revised.
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