

# Liturgical Translations of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America: Personal Reflections<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

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Prof. Chryssavgis examines the problems and issues in liturgical translations in the USA in three sections. Section one considers the current liturgical context, reminding us that language is only one element of that context. He sees in the contemporary USA a problem of individualism, whereby any translation except one's own tends to be criticized; he notes that the States has at this point a "consumer market" for translations; and he adds that music is an important factor in translating. Section two examines three stylistic matters in translating. First is the question of modern or traditional English, and he gives his reasons for considering the former not only desirable but necessary. Second is inclusive language, which he calls "a challenge, not an error." Third, he calls for some

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<sup>1</sup> I am particularly pleased to present this paper at the International Symposium on English Translations of Byzantine Liturgical Texts organized by the Sheptytsky Institute of Eastern Christian Studies of Saint Paul University at Saint Basil's College in Stamford, Connecticut. Early in 1993, I had proposed to the Committee on the Translation of Liturgical Texts in Australia (and an appropriate letter was composed and forwarded to Constantinople through the Primate there) that such an initiative be organized under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Aware of the problems involved in such a project, I had then suggested that the basis of this consultation should be more scholarly than ecclesiastical or ecumenical, in order to include as wide as possible a representation of those involved in liturgical translations into English, and indeed other European languages, throughout the world.

editing of texts, for example to avoid any hint of anti-semitism. Section three surveys the American experience of liturgical translations, reviewing the efforts of Holy Cross, Narthex Press, and individual priests of the Greek Archdiocese. The conclusion reminds us that liturgical translation ought to be an act of thanksgiving.



***Introduction: "Then ... and Now"***

Thirty-five years ago, under the heading "Notes and Comments," *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly* published a brief article entitled: "A Case for English." The opening words of this article, which described with a great deal of pain the situation within the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese at the time, were:

The Greek Orthodox Church in the United States today faces the potential loss of a most vital element of its membership – the young people. This loss is threatened because of the continued denial of the use of the English language in the services of the Church. Although some priests give their sermons or portions of their sermons in English, there is still a vital need for the regular use of English in the Divine Liturgy and other services in order to keep the younger people within the faith.

Having related the consequences of this practice, the article

turn[s] to some of the causes and controversy surrounding the issues. First and foremost, the Greek Orthodox Church is the *only* Eastern Orthodox jurisdiction in this country which does not allow services of the Church to be done in English. The Russian Orthodox Church allows the regular use of English...

There are varying uses of English services by all of the other Orthodox Churches in America, but none has gone as far as the Syrian Orthodox Church. Under or-

ders from His Beatitude Alexander III, Patriarch of the Great City of Antioch, Syrian priests in the country are required to use English in the Liturgy.

Finally, when it comes to outlining the arguments in favour of the use of English in liturgical services, the article argues

one basic fact: God understands all languages, and whether a person prays or sings His praises in English, Greek, Chinese, or Hindu, he will be heard... Christ certainly didn't command that we should all pray in Greek. He commanded His Apostles instead ... "[that] they shall speak with new tongues" [cf. Mark 16:17].<sup>2</sup>

I am not quite sure whether the numerous translations in use throughout the English-speaking world are exactly the "new tongues" envisaged by Christ, and I shall return later to the matter of addressing the younger generation. However, at this point, permit me to observe how the situation has fortunately – at least from my own perspective, as an Orthodox born and raised in Australia – changed in the Greek Orthodox Church of America, where the official policy of the Archdiocese is that English *must* be used *wherever and whenever* required, in order "to preach the Gospel so all can understand,"<sup>3</sup> and where a number of parishes today use English almost exclusively.

### *I. Exploring the World of Liturgy*

Part of the "liturgical problem" in the United States lies in the way in which the secular outlook has influenced the understanding of liturgy. The liturgical language has been reduced to one or another aspect of the powerful culture that shapes American society. In this opening section, I shall consider three elements that have played an inevitable role in the translations that have appeared in the "new world." The first of

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<sup>2</sup>C. Argue, *St Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly* 2 (1963): 43–44.

<sup>3</sup>*Archdiocesan Memorandum to the Faithful*, November 24, 1997.