

Translating Liturgically

Robert F. Taft, S.J.

Abstract

(Українське резюме на ст. 183)

The article examines the difficulties of responsible and useful translation of liturgical texts at three levels: problems of translation per se, liturgical issues and problems of ideology. The author argues that effective and competent translation of the liturgy results from nuanced reflection and hard decisions in tune with this three-level problematic, rather than from the application of supposedly absolute principles.



Preliminaries

In any discussion of the process of language translation and how to proceed with it, one must ask oneself several questions: [1] translating what, [2] into what, [3] for whom? [4] For what specific purpose is the translation being made? [5] By whom and [6] how should it be done? And finally, [7] why bother?

The answer to the first question [1] is easy. In the Byzantine tradition we are translating a liturgy originally found in Byzantine Greek. Questions [2, 5–6]: what we are translating it into [2], and

consequently [6] how to go about it, and [5] who should do it, depend on our answers to [1, 3–4]. For there is no such thing as “just translating,” any more than there is any such thing as just “translating into English.” Since we are translating [1] a liturgy, and doing it, presumably, for worshipping congregations of ordinary people whose mother tongue or preferred best language is English, [4] and translating for liturgical use by those people in public worship, [7] and bothering to do it because these people no longer understand well enough the original language – if all those things are true,¹ then we need a translation quite different from a translation of the same material for private scholarly use by those who know some Greek, but might wish to have an authoritative interpretation of the original in English because they are more comfortable in that tongue. The latter use might require a relatively literal version in academic English, as close to the original Greek as possible without violating the basic parameters of the English language. I often do that sort of version myself when I wish to cite and explain a Greek text in one of my books or articles, often highly

¹ That last point, that people may no longer understand the original language, must be faced with at least a modicum of honesty. As baldly stated, the recent declaration of Patriarch Alexis II of Moscow that “any text in Slavonic read slowly can certainly be understood by everyone, such that a translation into Russian is not necessary” (SEIA Newsletter no. 28, Feb. 13, 1998, p. 2, from SOP no. 225, Feb. 1998, p. 10), is flatly false. An ordinary native Russian speaker might understand the short responses and the constantly repeated pieces like the Creed and Our Father. Not even the educated native Russian speaker would understand the psalms and epistles and poetic pieces without some background in Old Slavonic. It is this ostrich-like, head-in-the-sand approach to reality that makes the informed observer skeptical of the possibility of any effective renewal. For a realistic treatment of the problem of the vernacular in the Russian Church, see Nikolaj Balašov, “Lingua della liturgia, lingua della missione,” *La nuova Europa* 7 no. 2/278 (March-April 1998) 35–53, which discusses the lengthy and detailed debate on the vernacular at the local Panrussian Council of June 1917 – Sept. 1918 in Petrograd, during which it was unambiguously stated that the issue was under debate because the people did not understand the liturgy in Old Slavonic. For the same problem in the Greek Church, see R. Fontaine OP, “L’Église grecque et la question de la langue en Grèce,” *Istina* 21 (1976) 412–429. On the vernacular in the Eastern liturgies in general, see C. Korolevsky, *Living Languages in Catholic Worship. An Historical Enquiry* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1957).

technical studies in which I cite the original Greek text, but also wish to provide my own interpretation of it.

One's first interpretation of a passage is always the translation, and to pretend that a translation is not in a very real sense an *interpretation* of the original is to be completely ignorant of both the nature of language and the nature of translating. In the case of such an academic translation, questions about whether the text is suitable for public declamation or chanting, or easily intelligible to the average member of a worshipping congregation, are irrelevant. For an academic translation, the answer to question [6], by whom should the translation be done? is easy: get a scholar well versed in Greek who can also write intelligible, correct English.

But if we are doing a translation for use in public worship, then a whole new set of issues must be considered. Liturgical English is not the English of a scholarly translation or of a detective story. It is not the English of narrative dialogue, but also not the English of Hopkins' or Eliot's poetry. And, I might add, if we are doing the translation for people of today, and doing it, presumably, so they will understand it, since the only reason we are doing it is that they no longer understand Greek or Old Slavonic, then it should be in the English of today and not of the sixteenth century.

Furthermore, we are not translating for a professional coterie of clergy, who presumably know the original liturgical language and do not need the translation. Thus, the translation cannot be in a gnostic clerical jargon impenetrable to those who have not spent years in a monastery or seminary. This means that the translation must not be done and vetted only by clergy, who have an in-house clericalesque of their own that is not the language of the *hoi polloi*.

The point I am trying to make is that *translating for use in liturgy is a very serious enterprise requiring a lot of hard-headed reflection and difficult, objective decisions*, and both must be carried out without the ethnico-confessional hysteria, ideologizing, and sheer intellectual arrogance with which altogether too many enterprises in the Christian East are rife.



Permit me to offer some reflections on some of the problems adumbrated above. Though I have no pretense at having answers to these questions, perhaps the reflections of one who has spent almost his entire adult life studying and writing on eastern liturgy might in turn stimulate your own reflections – which, after all, I take to be the purpose of this gathering. For convenience, I shall organize my reflections according to the following three, at times overlapping, categories: [1] general problems of liturgical translation, then problems [2] of language and [3] of ideology.

General Problems of Liturgical Translation

The purpose of translation

It is generally agreed that the purpose of translation is, by definition, to take a text that is in one language and render it into another. And doubtless we agree that we are translating a text from one language into another to make that text more intelligible to those who know the language of the translation better than that of the original.

But that is the beginning, not the end of the problem. For we translate not words into words, but texts into texts. And texts are a very nuanced reality. First of all, there are two of them, the donor and the recipient, the translated and its translation. If the translated text was written in inelegant Greek, should we seek to preserve the flavor of the original by translating it into inelegant English? That depends not just on the donor but on the nature of the recipient. If we are translating the deliberately slang dialogue of a crime novel, the answer might well be yes. If we are translating the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola, who did not write very elegant Spanish, the answer would doubtless be no.

Liturgical translation

This permits me to formulate my first principle: *The nature and style of a liturgical translation should be determined by the use of the text for liturgical celebration in the recipient language,*

in our case English, and not by the donor language, in our case Byzantine Greek.

If the purpose of all language is communication, that must also be true of liturgical translations. By that, I do not wish to imply that liturgy communicates only through words. But it does that too, and I presume we all agree that this communication is directed at us, not at God. God understands all languages, and knows well enough what eucharist and baptism and whatever are all about without the help of our translations. Liturgical prayers may be addressed to God, but they are said in our hearing *so that we will get the point of it all*. God already knows what is in our hearts long before we express it.

The aim of a good translation is to be faithful to two languages, the donor and the recipient. But in case of conflict, the recipient language must take precedence, all other things being equal. Sometimes things that can be said easily in one language just cannot in others without paraphrasing, changes in grammar and syntax, etc. Languages differ in structure and syntax. A fully inflected language that has agreement of case and gender not only in the case of nouns and adjectives, but also participles, can allow itself things that make for very awkward English unless radically rearranged to suit the structure of the recipient language.

The classic instance is the piling up of participial clauses in Greek and Slavonic. To render them into English as an endless string of relative clauses results in a text that is extremely clumsy. Rightly ridiculing this as “yoo-hoo” constructions – “O God, you who..., you who..., you who...” – modern translators have tried various solutions to this problem.²

A classic instance is the Trisagion Prayer:

² On this, see J.M. Kemper, *Behind the Text: A Study of the Principles and Procedures of Translation, Adaptation, and Composition of Original Texts by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy* (dissertation, Univ. of Notre Dame, October 1992, Ann Arbor MI: Univerity Microfilms International, 1993) 125ff, 310ff and *passim*.