

Clarity, Truth and Beauty in Liturgical Translations

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Abstract

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Bishop Kallistos's review of the current state of English translations and the factors involved in improving that state, begins with a warning and a difficulty. He warns that all translations are provisional and require lived liturgical experience; he notes the problem of the multiplicity of versions now in use, "almost as many versions as parishes." He then focuses on three ingredients of good liturgical translations: first, clarity – without over-simplification or reductionism; second, truth – without being over-literal; and third, beauty. He finishes his discussion weighing the reasons for translating into "traditional" as opposed to "modern" English, and some of the problems involved in either choice, without disguising his preference for the former.



At the outset, I present a warning and then a difficulty. My warning is this: the best is the enemy of the good. In the words of G.K. Chesterton: "If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly." All translations, as Father Ephrem said yesterday, are approximations; there is no such thing as an absolutely exact and altogether perfect translation. In every translation there is an element of compromise. For example, there may be compromise between, on the one hand, accuracy and faithfulness to the original, and on the other hand, fluency and faithfulness to the recipient language. The qualities required of a translator of Byzantine liturgical texts are formida-

ble. If possible, he should have a knowledge of Hebrew and perhaps other significant languages. He or she should certainly have a close familiarity with the Septuagint in Greek, and should be widely read in the Greek Fathers. It is highly desirable that he should know Slavonic. He should also have a certain sense of poetry and an understanding of music. Few if any among us will combine all of those qualities. Consequently, let us not be over-critical of the efforts of others, or of ourselves, and if we laugh at the quirks or oversights of certain translations, let it be a humble, generous and affectionate laughter. So let us accept that all our translations are imperfect and provisional.

We are on a long journey and we still have far to go. To forge an effective English version is going to take time. A satisfactory translation of liturgical texts cannot be produced by scholars in their studies nor by a committee sitting in a diocesan office. Every translation has to be tested through use in practice by the worshipping people of God, priest and congregation together. The true test of the translation comes not in the study or the office, but before the holy table in church. Only slowly can we acquire the living experience that comes from actual liturgical usage. Without this living experience, every translation is inevitably deficient.

The One and the Many

That is my little warning; now I present the difficulty. In ancient Greek philosophy, the key problem was that of relating and reconciling the one and the many. We are faced by that same problem. We have at present a vast and bewildering multiplicity of different versions of liturgical texts. How can we pass from this situation to an agreed and standard practice? The situation grows steadily worse and worse, and of course it is not limited just to liturgical translations, or just to Byzantine liturgical translations. Fifty years ago, so far as the Bible went in the English-speaking world, the great majority of people were brought up on the authorised version, the King James Bible. The one advantage was that biblical quotations were readily recognizable. My students today simply do not recog-

nize my biblical quotations because they happen to be using a version quite different from mine. We seem to get new translations almost every year. We have the New Revised Standard Version, and no doubt in a few years we shall be having a Revised New Revised Standard Version; we have the Revised New English Bible, and we shall be having a New Revised New English Bible. The difficulty of having texts in contemporary usage is that contemporary usage is highly flexible. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were an excellent era for English as a language; from that period we have very fine translations. We live in an age in which English has lost a good deal of its crispness and power. An example I often think of is the response of his men to King Nebuchadnezzar in the book of Daniel. In the authorised version they say: "True, O King," which is firm and clear and effective. In the New English Bible they say: "Assuredly your Majesty." To me, that sums up much of what has been going wrong in our English language.

When I first became interested in Orthodoxy, the Orthodox in Britain, if they celebrated in English at all, used the Authorised Version, or Isabel Hapgood's translation, or Patrick Thompson's translation of the Liturgy produced for the fellowship of Saint Alban and Sergius, which is not a very satisfactory version. Today in Britain there are almost as many versions as there are parishes, and in parishes with two priests or more, such as at Oxford, the version varies with the celebrant. How are we to reverse this process?

The First Needed Ingredient: Clarity

As to style, three things are needful without being controversial. The first is clarity, accompanied by sobriety and simplicity. People often seem to think that the Christian East is highly emotional. That, I believe, is a superficial impression. What marks Eastern Christian spirituality is sobriety, *nepsis*, lucidity and vigilance; this should be clear in our liturgical practice. Yesterday it was remarked that the commemoration of the bishops in certain Eastern Christian traditions has grown more and more elaborate. This was the case many years ago in

the church of Russia, from Peter the Great onwards. The Greek tradition has kept a greater simplicity, which does not require that Bishops be given titles such as "great lord"; they are simply mentioned by name, without any title at all.

In Patmos, we are a Stauropegic monastery directly under the Patriarch. Both in the litanies and at the Great Entrance, we pray for the Patriarch as "our Archbishop Bartholomew," without even saying "Patriarch." It is quite sufficient that he is our Archbishop. He has no need of other titles. Indeed, at the Great Entrance in Patmos, we mention no hierarchs at all, which is the more ancient practice. There is a tendency in some circles to make the commemorations at the Great Entrance more and more elaborate, with more and more phrases often of a rhetorical rather than spiritual nature. Not long ago, the Church of Greece had to put out an encyclical forbidding clergy to mention at the Great Entrance the local football team. I am all in favor of bringing the fullness of daily life into our worship, but there are other ways of doing so. At Patmos we simply say: "*Panīōn hymōn*," "May the Lord God remember all of you and all Orthodox Christians in His kingdom," followed by: "*tēs hierosynēs hymōn*," "May the Lord God remember your priesthood in His kingdom," because there are always other priests in the church.

We should apply this principle to our style of liturgical translation. English makes its best impact through the use of short phrases. We have already discussed the need to break up participial clauses and elaborate inflected constructions. This is especially difficult when translating the *irmos* in the Canon because, by its very nature, the *irmos* links together the two themes of the Old Testament canticle in question and the theme of the Canon, whether the Resurrection or the Cross. Let us avoid, as we have also discussed, far-fetched, inflated and pretentious language. If there are short, simple, and powerful words, let us use them. At the Epiclesis, as was mentioned by Father Ephrem, let us simply say: "Changing them by Thy (or Your) Holy Spirit." *Metabalōn* is the normal word for change; there is no need to use a word such as "trans-make." Let us talk about "brightness" rather than "luminescence," as used in one translation, where we also find the