LITURGIAM AUTHENTICAM
Translation in the Service of Inculturation*

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My remarks on Liturgiam authenticam will focus on the question of inculturation because liturgical translation is essentially in the service of inculturation.

Liturgiam authenticam (LA), issued 28 Mar 2001, is one of those rare Vatican documents that entirely ignore their predecessors. It is de rigueur for Vatican documents to pay homage to preceding ones. Such a practice creates a sense of organic unity among the Acts of the Holy See. However, nowhere does this Fifth Instruction mention, much less give credit, to its predecessor Comme le prévoit, the Instruction that the Consilium issued in 1969 as guide to the translation of liturgical texts.

Several years ago, when the new Instruction was being planned, a minor official of the Congregation "indiscreetly," that is unofficially, informed me that the Holy See had actually never considered the 1969 Instruction an official document. That probably explains

why it did not merit being a player in the new Instruction. But how do we explain away the embarrassment of having translations made into major languages for over thirty years on the basis of an unofficial document? Why did it take the Holy See such a lengthy span of time to address an issue of such magnitude as liturgical translation? LA 6 does not mince its words when it speaks of “omissions or errors, which affect certain existing vernacular translations” on the basis of the 1969 Instruction. I often wonder why the Holy See approved such translations in the first place, allowing them ironically to become an integral part of the local Church's lex orandi, lex credende.

The Holy See has finally come out with a translation document whose ownership it officially claims. Only time will tell what the future holds in store for this new and as yet untried document. Will it command the kind of respect, not to say eager welcome, its predecessor had? Or will it suffer the fate of other reactionary documents like Veterum sapientia (on the study of Latin in seminaries) that became obsolete soon after it hit the front pages of Catholic dailies and read by those who were meant to implement it?

Translation is a Form of Inculturation

In a sense, LA can be regarded as a sequel to the Fourth Instruction, which deals with the question of liturgical inculturation. Translation is in reality a type, perhaps the most significant type, of inculturation. What, in fact, is liturgical inculturation but the dynamic translation of the cultural components of the Roman Rite into the equivalent cultural components of the local Church? Strictly speaking, liturgical inculturation is not absolute creativity. It is basically a work of translation through dynamic equivalence. Although LA is rather shaky on several issues, it hits a bull’s eye when it affirms:

The work of inculturation, of which the translation into the vernacular languages is a part, is not therefore to be considered an avenue for the creation of new varieties of families of rites. (LA 5)

The basic question we need to ask is what type of translation is it talking about?
Not every method of translation falls under the category of inculturation. Today linguists speak of two methods, namely formal correspondence and dynamic equivalence. It appears to me that LA leans heavily on formal correspondence, as it subtly warns against the dangers of dynamic equivalence. Formal correspondence is what we commonly call word-for-word translation. In its obsession for lexical accuracy and verbal fidelity to the original text, the method of formal correspondence ignores the culture of the recipient or the people for whom the translation is made. Because formal correspondence does not bother with the cultural situation of the recipient, it cannot be considered a form of inculturation.

Dynamic equivalence, on the other hand, aims to transmit the message of the original text to the recipients by using the equivalent linguistic components with which they are familiar. Whenever feasible, this type of translation makes use of value words, idiomatic expressions, proverbs, and local images in an effort to embody the original message in the culture of the recipient. For this reason, dynamic equivalence can be considered a creative endeavor, although it is not a creative innovation that results in a new liturgical rite apart from the Roman Rite. LA sees danger in dynamic equivalence. It fears that this method can eventually distance the translated text from the original to the point that the original Latin text is no longer recognizable in the translation. It seems to me that what LA wants to happen is this: if the translated text is to be rendered back to the original language, which is Latin, every word can be retrieved and accounted for.

But we know that the chief interest of translators who use the method of dynamic equivalence is not to answer for each individual word, sentence structure, and rhetorical expression but to communicate the message of the original text. Part of this is the concern to help the recipients grasp the message in their own cultural context, in the same way as the recipients of the original text understood the message in their cultural milieu. Dynamic equivalence is concerned with the message and the people to whom the message is addressed rather than the individual Latin words and phrases.
How does LA understand liturgical translation? The answer can be gathered from some of the statements it makes:

The translation of the liturgical texts of the Roman liturgy is not so much a work of creative innovation as it is of rendering the original texts faithfully and accurately into the vernacular language (LA 20).

I find it easy to agree with this statement, but not with its explanation. Although LA permits the arrangement of the wording, the syntax, and the style of the translation for the sake of flow and rhythm, it insists that

The original text, insofar as possible, must be translated integrally and in the most exact manner, without omissions or additions in terms of their content, and without paraphrases or glosses. Any adaptation to the characteristics or the nature of various vernacular languages is to be sober and discreet (LA 22).

LA bombards us here with such words and phrases as “faithfully,” “accurately,” “integrally,” “in the most exact manner,” “without omissions or additions,” and “without paraphrases or glosses.” In short, what LA requires is formal correspondence. History, however, tells us otherwise. This was not the way the Roman Rite handled the materials it received from the people’s culture and other liturgical traditions. For example, the Roman liturgical orations, especially during the classical period, paraphrased the Scripture in order to respect the requirements of such Latin rhetorical devices as the *cursus*. It often takes a profoundly biblical mind to perceive the words of Scripture in those prayers.

LA warns us that “the adaptations of the texts” should not be an excuse for “supplementing or changing the theological content” of the Latin typical edition. In other words, there is no room for enriching or contextualizing the doctrine conveyed in the original texts. Consequently, there is no chance that the liturgical prayers of local churches will grow in theology, spirituality, and pastoral concern. The orations the popes wrote for their people in the fifth and sixth centuries are what we must pray today without supplement or change.
All this reveals a stifling predilection for formal correspondence and hence LA's debatable definition of inculturation. Perhaps, this explains the prohibition to translate from translations made into other languages: "New translations must be made directly from the original texts, namely the Latin, as regards the texts of ecclesiastical composition" (LA 24). As an aside, I foresee several local Churches without translated texts for lack of medieval Latinists.

Even more disenchancing is the suggestion to retain "a certain manner of speech which has come to be considered somewhat obsolete in daily usage" (LA 27). This suggestion is prefaced by a caution to avoid "excessively unusual or awkward" expressions that hinder comprehension. The adverb "excessively" says it all! LA allows us to use unusual or awkward expressions, as long as we do not exaggerate. On the other hand, we are told that the work of translation "should be free of an overly servile adherence to prevailing modes of expression." LA further argues that words or expressions, "which differ somewhat from usual and everyday speech," become truly memorable and capable of expressing heavenly realities.

Norms such as these can originate only in a soul that still struggles between the sacred and the profane. Why permit the use of the unusual or awkward and of somewhat obsolete words? The answer of LA is steeped in Roman pragmatism: To "free the liturgy from the necessity of frequent revisions when modes of expression may have passed out of popular usage." The thinking here is: the less we touch or tinker with the liturgy, the more secure its deposit of faith will be.

The principle regarding the use of what is obsolete is further developed by the term "sacral vernacular." What does it mean? LA 47-50 defines it as worship language that "differs somewhat from ordinary speech"; it is "characterized by a vocabulary, syntax and grammar that are proper to divine worship." My question is why say "sacral," when there is a more suitable word, namely "liturgical"? The use of "sacral" belies the agenda to save the liturgy from the false perception that it has become secular. Or perhaps it is a reaction to the existing English translation of the Roman liturgy that minimized or dropped the use of "sacred" before such words as min-
isters, vessels, furnishings, and vesture; or substituted cup for chalice, plate for paten, and so on. LA instructs the translator to keep the "distinction of sacred persons and things pertaining to everyday life and usage." The dichotomy between the sacred and the profane is nowhere as firmly established as here.

But what if the assembly understands little or nothing of what is proclaimed in liturgical prayer because of the latter's obsolete expression? LA 29 has a ready answer for it: "It is the task of the homily and of catechesis to set forth the meaning of the liturgical texts." What happens to Vatican II's program of active participation, which means that the assembly, including children, should understand the liturgical texts while they are proclaimed? As a rule of thumb, a good test for the suitability of a liturgical text is that it needs little or no explanation. The homily and catechesis should deepen the assembly's comprehension, but not set forth the meaning of a translated text that is obscure. At any rate, what assurance do we have that the homilist and catechist correctly interpret the liturgical text?

**Conclusion**

A Filipino proverb says: *Ang hindi lumingon sa pinanggalingan, hindi makararating sa paroroongan* [Those who forget their roots will not reach their destination]. LA set out on its momentous journey, completely ignoring its 1969 predecessor. It evidently lacks the pastoral insight of a document that bathed in the enthusiasm and vitality of Vatican II. It does not build on the past. On the contrary, it ignores the wisdom and positive qualities of its predecessor. It only points out where the errors lie. It is not a document that will be remembered for its vision of what the worshipping community should be in the third millennium. Rather, it will be remembered as a reactionary statement that belonged more to the nineteenth century, which some historians have described as "a century without grace."

One can only hope that as *Liturgiam authenticam* gathers dust in libraries, it will be replaced by a more balanced Instruction.