

What Will We Be Doing and Why?

Mass Prayers and Principles of Translation

After our two week side trip into the *Sensus Fidelium* we return to where we will be going this coming November 27th, the next text of the Roman Missal and the new English translation of the Mass prayers. As noted, the Church has produced and used numerous texts and translations of the Mass prayers over the past two thousand years, and this is just the latest in that long tradition. Each new text has been an attempt to provide prayers that best serve the needs of the Church in the many different times and places we have found ourselves at prayer. The new translation attempts to do the same for our day and age.

The single most basic or significant thing to understand about the new translation is the “principle of translation” used in its production. When anything is translated, there are different ways the translation can be done, depending on how the final work will be used. For example, there are many different translations of the Bible because there are many different ways the Bible is read and used, such as for scholarly study, personal prayer, and public proclamation. A scholarly reader would be more concerned with an exact translations of each and every word of a scripture text, no matter how clumsy it might sound if read aloud. On the other hand, a translation to be used for public proclamation would have to be easy to read and understood when read aloud. The two principles of translation that have been used with the Mass prayers are *dynamic equivalence* and *formal equivalence*. A *dynamic equivalence* translation attempts to convey the thought or meaning expressed in the original Latin text, even at the expense of literalness, original word order, exact grammar and so on. A *formal equivalence* translation attempts to render the Latin text word-for-word and literally, even if necessary at the expense of naturalness of expression in English. The two approaches represent different emphases. One is concerned with readability (*dynamic equivalence*), the other literal fidelity to the original text (*formal equivalence*). The principle of translation used for the translation of the Mass prayers we’ve had for the past forty years was *dynamic equivalence*. The principle of translation used for the new translation was *formal equivalence*.

In coming articles we’ll look at why the different principle of translation was used, how the revision process took place, and what some of the changes will be.

Please let us know what else about our faith tradition you'd like to find out more about.

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