Vatican



Oscar Kha is silhouetted as he prays during a Nov. 23 Mass at St. John the Evangelist Church in Greece, N.Y., in a 2014 file photo. (CNS/Mike Crupi, Catholic Courier)



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Pope Francis' Sept. 9 announcement that he was decentralizing the Vatican's authority over translations of liturgical texts, turning that duty back over to local bishops, created quite a buzz in Catholic circles because, for some, it capped a story that spans more than 50 years. It is the story of the "liturgy wars."

Consternation over the liturgy has roiled through the Catholic community since sweeping reforms were introduced by the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) — although truth be told, many of the changes that came in the 1960s rose out of liturgical reform movements in the 1940s and '50s.

It was probably not until the very late 1980s and early 1990s, however, the bubbling controversy in liturgical matters came to a boiling point.

If one wants to point to a time and event when controversy turned to conflict and the tagline "liturgy wars" could be applied to what was happening, a secret meeting in the Vatican in 1997 might be that point and time.

This is how NCR reported it in September 1998 under the headline "On the lectionary, 11 men made the deal." The American bishops had spent six years revising the Lectionary, the Scripture readings used in Mass, one aim of which was to make the language of the readings more gender-inclusive, but a Vatican-appointed committee intervened to short-circuit those efforts.

Skirmishes followed, but the next major salvo came in May 2001 when the Vatican issued *Liturgiam Authenticam*, a set of new rules on liturgical translation. The headline of NCR's reporting on the document sets the mood: "New document

replaces 35 years of liturgy work." We reported then: "Critics say the document, issued May 7, strikes at the heart of Vatican II ecclesiology by centralizing power in the curia and by insisting that local cultures adopt an essentially Roman style of worship."

In 2001, Viatorian Fr. Mark Francis, a liturgical scholar who has worked on translations for the English-speaking world, told NCR, "*Liturgiam Authenticam* is a form of Western Colonialism masquerading as ecclesial unity."

A year later, in March 2002, the Vatican's oversight of English translations — heretofore the responsibility of the International Commission on English in the Liturgy, a body sponsored by 11 bishops' conferences from English-speaking nations — was formalized with the creation of the Vox Clara (Latin for "clear voice") commission to ensure a more literal fidelity to the Latin as the best guarantee of doctrinal accuracy.

The next decade saw a back-and-forth between bishops' conferences, liturgists and pastors, a few ordinary Catholics and the Vatican over the translations of the Roman Missal, the collection of Mass prayers.

In the United States during this time, Donald Trautman, then the bishop of Erie, Pennsylvania, and chair of the bishop's Committee on Liturgy, led an effort to keep the Mass prayers faithful to the Latin, but also grammatically correct in English, eloquent and — most important for the presiders at Mass — able to be proclaimed out loud for an assembly. These NCR headlines show the progress of these efforts:

- "Trautman says change on 'pro multis' may confuse teaching that Christ died for all"
- "Has the Vatican usurped Vatican II liturgical norms?"
- "Last-ditch effort to dump Mass translations"

Despite thousands of voices raised in protest (see, for example, "Thousands join campaign to delay changes to missal" and "Seattle pastor begins effort to review new missal translations"), the U.S. bishops approved the new translations in 2009, and the worshiping public began to use them in Advent 2011. But that was not the end of the story.

As the U.S. bishops, liturgists and Catholics in the pews struggled with the new translations, their counterparts in other parts of the world also confronted the

translations, sometimes in different ways:

- "Irish priests want new missal postponed"
- "German bishops table new Mass translation"

In Advent 2012, a year after the new missal was introduced, NCR ran this story: "Bar is set low in acceptance of year-old English missal."

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Two years after that, Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, or CARA, released a study that found 75 percent of leaders at American churches say that the new translation is "awkward and distracting"; 50 percent say it "urgently needs to be revised"; and the clergy widely rejected the new translations.

That was pretty much the state of the "liturgy wars," when Francis issued *Magnum Principium*.

One way to understand the story of Mass translations is by learning more about Fr. Anthony Ruff, a Benedictine monk and a professor of liturgy, music and Gregorian chant at St. John's Abbey and University in Collegeville, Minnesota. In many ways, Ruff's professional journey is entwined with the journey from *Liturgiam Authenticam* to *Magnum Principium*:

- "Anthony Ruff: The accidental activist"
- "Benedictine monk describes new translation of Roman Missal"
- "Liturgist drops support of missal translation."

[James Dearie is an NCR Bertelsen intern and Dennis Coday is NCR editor.]

This story appears in the **Magnum Principium** feature series. View the full series.
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