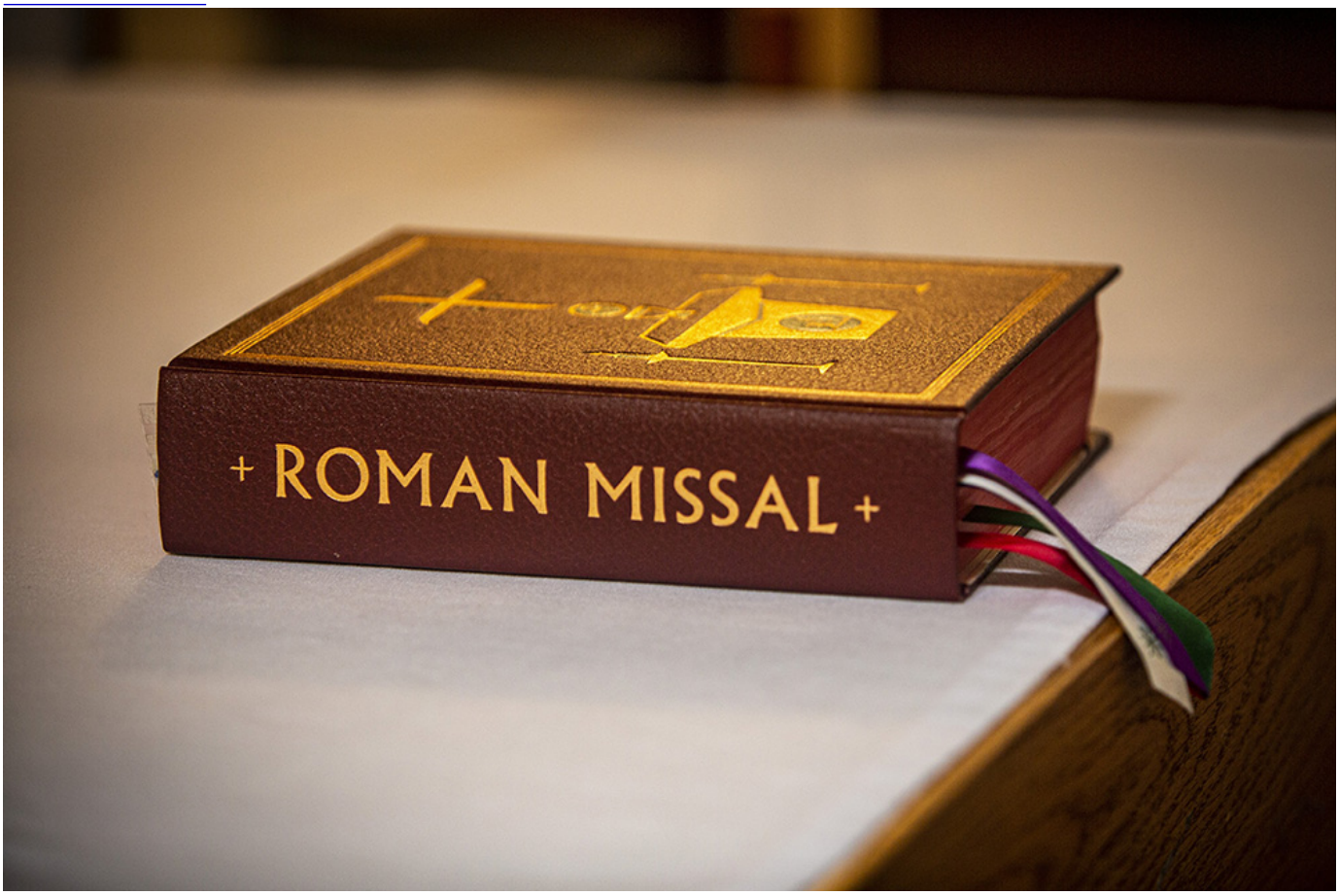
Opinion
Guest Voices




The Roman Missal is visible on the altar in the Cathedral of St. Peter in Wilmington, Delaware, May 27, 2021. (CNS/Chaz Muth)



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One of the surprises to come out of the synod on synodality was a call for better-written liturgies. The final report of the October 2023 session of the synod referred to "the widely reported need to make liturgical language more accessible to the faithful and more embodied in the diversity of cultures."

The English-speaking church has an easy response to this request: the 1998 translation of the Roman missal done by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy, known as ICEL. Its work was rejected by the man who would become Pope Benedict XVI, but the time has come to put it forward again.

Implementing liturgical translations has often been controversial, both recently and in the long ago past.

The first schism in Rome occurred early in the third century, after Pope Callistus I translated the liturgy from Greek into vulgar Latin — the informal, popular version of the language at the time — so that the common people could better understand the celebration of the Eucharist. Hippolytus, the first antipope and author of Eucharistic Prayer II, led a revolt to keep the Greek liturgy. The dispute became so bitter and violent that pagan soldiers arrested both men and sent them to the tin mines of Sardinia.

After the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), the Catholic Church began translating liturgical texts from Latin into contemporary languages for the same reasons

Callistus put the liturgy into Latin: so that people could participate more fully and actively in the liturgy. The translations were supposed to be made by episcopal conferences and were subject to final approval by Rome.

ICEL's 1998 translation was supposed to replace the translation that had been done quickly after the council. The group, which comprises 11 bishops' conferences from the U.S. and the United Kingdom, to India and the Philippines, to New Zealand and Australia, employed experienced translators, liturgical scholars and even poets. They also added new prayers — for example, presidential prayers after the Gloria that picked up themes from the Sunday Scripture readings.

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The 1998 translation followed the 1969 Vatican instruction "*Comme Le Prévoit*," which stated, "The language chosen should be that in 'common' usage, that is, suited to the greater number of the faithful who speak it in everyday use, even children and persons of small education."

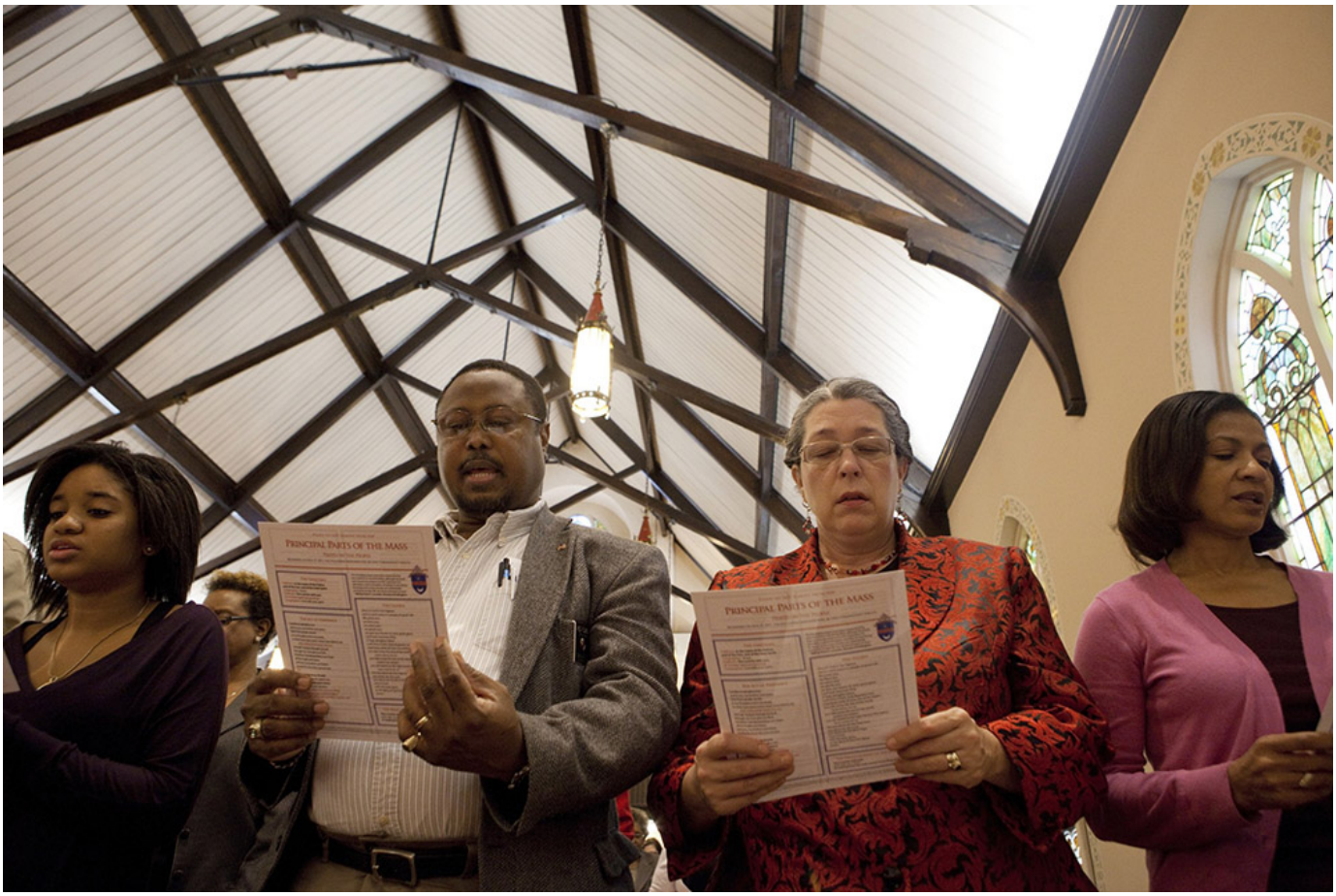
The 1998 translation was well-received by English-speaking episcopal conferences, who approved it and sent it to Rome for final approval.

However, by the time the translation got to the Vatican, the rules were changing. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, then head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, preferred a word-for-word translation of the Latin rather than one that was easily understood when it was proclaimed.

At first, the English-speaking conferences fought for their translations, but the Vatican was not interested in listening. In one instance, the American bishops asked to send a delegation to Rome to talk about the translation, but the Vatican agreed only on the condition that Cincinnati Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk not be part of the delegation. Pilarczyk had a doctorate in classics and could run circles around Vatican officials.

In 2001, the Vatican issued new instructions about translations of the Roman missal in *Liturgiam Authenticam*, which directed "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."

Eventually, under new leadership, ICEL followed Ratzinger's directions and produced the flawed 2010 translation that we are now using in church. Thus, one cardinal in Rome, whose native language was German, was able to overrule years of work by the English-speaking bishops and tell them how they should pray their own language in worship.




Parishioners use Mass guides during a Sunday morning service at St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Alexandria, Virginia, Nov. 27, 2011. That year, the 2010 English translation of the Roman Missal was used for the first time in churches across the nation on the first Sunday of Advent. (CNS/Nancy Phelan Wiechec)

Times have again changed. In 2017, Pope Francis revised canon law to emphasize that the main responsibility for liturgical translations lies with episcopal conferences. According to Francis, the Dicastery for Divine Worship should no longer impose a given translation on episcopal conferences. Nor should it be involved in a detailed word-by-word examination of translations.

Under these new procedures, the 1998 ICEL translation would have been easily approved by the Vatican.

Because Francis told the synod delegates not to talk to the press, it is hard to know from where the recommendation on liturgical translations came. Did the push come from the bishops or the lay delegates at the synod?

Was it from Africa? Asia? Latin America? These parts of the church have certainly wanted more respect for "the diversity of cultures."

But given that the biggest recent fight over translation involved English speakers, the call may have come from one of the ICEL countries. It certainly did not come from the American bishops, who have no interest in revising liturgical texts. But perhaps other English-speaking bishops want to revisit the translation.

Granted this history, what would be a good way forward for the English-speaking church?

First, since it takes years to do a new translation, ICEL should begin by resurrecting the 1998 translation and reviewing it for minor improvements. This translation, the fruit of years of work, is much better than the one currently used. There is no need to start from scratch.

Sadly, ICEL, which holds the copyright, does not allow the 1998 translation to be posted on the web (although some creative searching on Google turns it up), so it is difficult for people to see how good it is.

Second, changing the people's responses would probably be a bad idea. Going from "And also with you" to "And with your spirit" and back to "And also with you" would cause whiplash among the laity.

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On the other hand, if Christian denominations reach agreement on common English texts for the Gloria, the Nicene Creed and the Lord's Prayer, then for ecumenical

reasons, adopting these texts would be worth the effort.

Third, in the meantime, priests should be given permission to use the 1998 translation for the parts of the Mass that are said only by the priest: the presidential prayers, prefaces, eucharistic prayers, etc. Let priests have the option of using the 1998 version or the current version, and see which one promotes fuller participation in the liturgy.

It would be instructive to see which version becomes more common after five or 10 years of allowing them both. Which translation do priests find easier to proclaim, and which version do people more easily hear and understand?

One of the problems with how the church does liturgical translations is that they are not tested in the real world before they are imposed throughout the church. The hierarchy does not believe in market testing translations to see what works. Allowing priests to use the 1998 ICEL translation would be a good way to test its value.

Sadly, practical problems will foster inertia in liturgical translations. Publishers have warehouses full of the current missal that they want to sell. Pastors don't want to spend money on new missals. Bishops do not want to risk backlash from conservative Catholics who oppose any change in the liturgy.

All of this makes it likely that we will have to endure the current translation unless liturgists, priests and people in the pews support the synod's call for change.

If the United States is going to experience a true eucharistic revival, then it needs liturgical texts that promote the full and active participation by all people in the liturgy. The current text does not do that. The 1998 ICEL translation is a step in the right direction.

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series.