Opinion
Guest Voices



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Reading the news and social media might lead you to think the only liturgical issue Catholics are concerned about is the Latin Mass. But there is another language problem in the Catholic liturgy that affects many more Catholics: The current liturgy in English is terrible.

Scores of social media accounts trumpet the wonders of the traditional Latin Mass, the order of service used prior to the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s. Before Vatican II, the entire Mass was said in Latin, with the priest facing the altar, his back to the congregation.

After the council, the reformed Mass in the vernacular replaced the traditional Latin Mass, or TLM, but for pastoral reasons the local bishop was permitted to allow limited use of the TLM. The hope was that it would gradually fade away as Catholics got used to the new liturgy.

For the most part this happened. Only 3% of American Catholics attend a traditional Latin Mass once or more a month, according to a recent Pew Research Center survey. Eighty-seven percent of American Catholics have never attended a traditional Latin Mass in the past five years.

There is even less interest in the traditional Latin Mass outside the United States.

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But rather than fading away entirely, the Latin Mass has continued to attract a small cadre of followers, including among young adults. Some ultraconservative Catholics deny the legitimacy of the new Mass, while others simply find more devotion in the old way. Some of these TLM fans promote it as a more pious and devotional approach to the Mass.

Conservative Catholics cheered in 2007 when Pope Benedict XVI allowed any priest to say the traditional Latin Mass when and where he wanted, and many complained bitterly in 2021 when Pope Francis restored the authority of the local bishop to control whether a priest was allowed to celebrate it.

Francis felt that traditional Latin Mass supporters had become divisive in the church and wanted to quiet the dissenting spirit of the TLM. He forbade its use in parish churches, allowing it only in chapels. He also forbade the ordination of priests unwilling to celebrate the new Mass in the vernacular.

Conservatives hope that Pope Leo XIV will restore Benedict's policy allowing any priest to say the traditional Latin Mass.

But Benedict's edicts on the TLM pale in comparison to his effect on the Mass most American Catholics hear each week. As the church's doctrinal arbiter, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger insisted on a word-for-word translation of the Latin, rather than one that conveyed the meaning of the text but was understandable when spoken aloud to contemporary Americans.



A file photo shows clergymen concelebrating the extraordinary form liturgy, commonly known as the Tridentine or traditional Latin Mass, at St. Joseph Shrine in Detroit. St. Joseph Shrine is one of four regional sites in the Archdiocese of Detroit that will continue to offer Masses according the extraordinary form starting July 1, 2025. (OSV News/Detroit Catholic/Valaurian Waller)

In 1963, English-speaking bishops' conferences set up the International Commission on English in the Liturgy to conform to Vatican II's order to render the Mass (and the other sacraments) in the vernacular. In 1973 the same body, known as ICEL, produced a translation of the new rite that everyone quickly acknowledged needed to be improved. A new translation was published in 1998 after years of work by scholars and translators.

Rather than a word-for-word translation, however, they produced one that could be proclaimed and understood by contemporary English-speaking Catholics. The 1998 ICEL sacramentary also included new prayers. For example, the opening prayer on each Sunday was written to go with that Sunday's Scripture readings.

The ICEL translation was well received by the English-speaking bishops around the world. However, Ratzinger, a native German speaker, vetoed the translation and insisted that a new word-for-word translation be used.

The Vatican was not interested in listening to reason. When the U.S. bishops asked to send a delegation to Rome to argue their case, the Vatican reluctantly agreed but told them not to bring Cincinnati Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk, who was chair of ICEL. Pilarczyk had a doctorate in classical languages and could run circles around the Vatican "experts."

While some non-English-speaking bishops, notably the Italians, successfully fought off Vatican-imposed translations, the American bishops caved. In 2002, the executive director of ICEL was replaced by someone who would produce a translation acceptable to Ratzinger. That translation, which we still use today, was implemented in Advent of 2011.

It is time to get a better English translation of the liturgy. We do not have to begin translating all over again. We can simply give the 1998 ICEL translation another try.

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The good news is, we now have a pope whose first language is English and who might appreciate the problems of the current translation. The head of the Dicastery for Divine Worship, Cardinal Arthur Roche, of the United Kingdom, is also a native English speaker, but since he was chair of ICEL when the current translation was developed, he may not be open to replacing it.

On the other hand, he was involved in writing *Magnum Principium* ("The Great Principle"), a letter issued in 2017 by Francis giving bishops' conferences more authority in determining liturgical translations and limiting the role of the Dicastery for Divine Worship and the Sacraments (then the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments). Francis issued this letter because he didn't want the Dicastery for Divine Worship micromanaging translations as in the past. The document, Francis said, "concedes to episcopal conferences the faculty of judging the worth and coherence of one or another term in translations from the original."

The presumption is that the bishops know what they are doing. Under *Magnum Principium*, the Vatican would have to allow the 1998 ICEL translation if a bishops'

conference requested it.

But this will not happen unless priests and laity push for it. The American bishops are naturally conservative when it comes to liturgy. They fear upsetting people with change. Negative reaction from the laity could be avoided if we kept the current translation of the responses said by the congregation. It is the prayers said by the priest that most need to be updated.

Other English-speaking bishops' conferences should not wait for action from the U.S. bishops. These conferences should lead the way by asking the pope for approval to use the 1998 ICEL sacramentary in their countries.

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In the United States, we need to create a grassroots movement calling for approval of the 1998 ICEL sacramentary. We need to make as much noise as the supporters of the traditional Latin Mass.

Every time a bishop visits your parish, ask him when the bishops are going to ask for approval of the 1998 ICEL translation. Every time the priests' council meets with the bishop, tell him you want to use the ICEL translation of the sacramentary.

When the priest prays out loud during the Eucharist, he is praying for the entire congregation, and he should pray in a way that is understandable by the people in the pews. The people of God deserve better than what they are hearing in church today. It is time for a better translation of the liturgy, and the ICEL sacramentary is ready if the hierarchy will implement it.