

# Liturgical Translation: A Question of Truth

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Pope John Paul II began his majestic encyclical on philosophy and ethics with two words, *Veritatis splendor*, challenging the world and encouraging many Catholics. Drawing on some of his other well-known words, the message was: *Do not be afraid of 'truth' for it always bears much splendor*. Unfortunately, when we enter the complex domain of translating the sacred liturgy into the vernacular we find that there have been different understandings and applications of 'truth,' and not all of them have been splendid.

## TELLING THE TRUTH

The first way of understanding truth in liturgical translation is obvious and has been raked over by various critics ever since the International Commission for English in the Liturgy [ICEL] produced its translations over thirty years ago. This is simply the question of whether *this* vernacular text tells the truth, the question of truthfulness or truthful accuracy in translation. Do these English words convey the Catholic doctrinal meaning that is embodied in the words of the Latin original authorized by the Church?

Many of the negative responses to that question are based on examples of what might be called *mendacious banality*, that is, a translation that tells lies in a rather dull way. To be fair, it must be stated at the outset that this was brought about by good intentions, distorted by applying the flawed principle of translation known as dynamic equivalence. This principle was endorsed by the 1969 instruction of the *Consilium* for Implementing the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Comme le prévoit*.<sup>2</sup> The old ICEL was faithful to much of that instruction, and even went beyond it.

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1 This address was delivered at the international conference "*Sacrificium laudis: The Medina Years (1996-2002)*," hosted by the Research Institute for Catholic Liturgy at the Colombiere Center in Clarkston, Michigan, 28-30 October 2005.

2 *Consilium* for Implementing the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Instruction On the Translation of Liturgical Texts for Celebrations with a Congregation *Comme le prévoit* (25 January 1969), in *Documents on the Liturgy 1963-1979: Conciliar, Papal, and Curial Texts*, trans. International Commission

Thirty years ago an Australian archbishop linked to ICEL told me that a religious, un-named, had translated the Sunday collects in use today. He praised this work. When I groaned, he scowled. They surely rank among the worst instances of liturgical translation. They are as brief as their Latin originals, but that is not what a vernacular version of a collect should be, for the compact Latin of a collect is a literary genre with its own conventions and structure, demanding rich expansion in the vernacular; otherwise a collect sounds abrupt, trite, even absurd, which is what has happened. Each collect has been reduced to something like this: ‘God! You are good. So do this for us,’ followed by a slightly inaccurate version of the trinitarian ending. Yet, by eliminating any traces of the Latin “oratorical cursus, rhetorical-prose cadence,” the unknown translator had only followed *Comme le prévoit*.<sup>3</sup>

When we examine the specific content of the current ICEL collects, however, we find a more serious result of this ruthless paraphrase or précis: the virtual elimination of “grace.” It could be argued that this goes beyond *Comme le prévoit*. This serious falsification may be observed in the current translations of seven collects assigned to Sundays *per annum*, or in so-called “Ordinary Time,” that contain the word *gratia*.<sup>4</sup> Of these seven collects, not one has translated *gratia* as “grace.” *Gratia* is usually rendered as “love” or “gifts of love” (Sunday xxvi). Surely that is stretching the principle of dynamic equivalence beyond the limits.

For Sunday xxviii, the beautiful collect about God’s prevenient grace, the grace that goes before us, has been hacked to pieces. The word “grace” has been excised and the meaning of the collect has been lost. Likewise, the word “grace” has effectively vanished in the four Sunday Prayers over the Gifts and the one Sunday Post Communion Prayer where *gratia* appears.<sup>5</sup>

Taking the essential Christian word “grace” out of seasonal liturgical prayers is a symptom of the deeper doctrinal malaise underly-

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on English in the Liturgy (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1982) §§ 838-80, no. 123, pp. 284-91, subsequent references refer to section numbers of the document.

3 See *Comme le prévoit* 28.

4 See Collectae, Dominicae v, vi, xi, xiii, xvi, xxvi, xxviii per annum, *Missale Romanum*, third typical edition (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2002) pp. 455, 456, 461, 463, 466, 476, 478. The ICEL calendar title for *Tempus per annum* is yet another instance of mendacious banality. What is “ordinary” about sacred time?

5 Super oblata, Dominicae ix, xvii, xxix, xxxiii per annum (MR 2002, pp. 459, 467, 479, 483); Post communionem, Dominica iii per annum (MR 2002, p. 453).

ing the current ICEL texts. As others have noted, this is a kind of Pelagianism. What *we* do is what matters. So *we make the liturgy*; it is no longer primarily a gift to us from God through the Church. By contrast, Pope Benedict XVI, when Cardinal Ratzinger, pointed out that the “liturgy derives its greatness from what it is, not from what we make of it.”<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, the current version of Eucharistic Prayer I blithely begins, “We come to you, Father, with praise and thanksgiving....” These are good words, but they have nothing to do with the majestic *Tē igitur clementissime Pater* of the venerable Roman Canon, where the emphasis is on God and how the divine *actio liturgica* flows out of the Sanctus and preface – hence the *igitur*. The first lines of this current ICEL text would make a good hymn, which might be sung to a German chorale melody, but the shift from God to us in an anaphora is not only a violation of consistent tradition, but also a dangerous shift of emphasis that is characteristic of the current translations.

### MISREPRESENTING OUR LADY

Striking examples of mendacious banality are evident if Latin references to Our Lady in the *Missale Romanum* are checked against the current ICEL texts. Here we find an amazing failure to comprehend a basic principle of christology and mariology: Marian adjectives are doctrinal, not poetic. The bland expression “the Virgin Mary” is used again and again by ICEL, but this does not truthfully translate references to Mary in the *Missale Romanum*. Nor does “blessed” accurately render *beatissima*, because this superlative, “most blessed,” is reserved for the Mother of God, proclaiming her as the pre-eminent saint, the Queen of All Saints. But here ICEL was in line with a specific critical reference in *Comme le prévoit* concerning *beatissima Virgo* or *beata et gloriosa*, which was followed by a curious comment: “Understatement in English is sometimes the more effective means of emphasis.”<sup>7</sup> The authors of the instruction were blissfully unaware of the mariological nuances not only of *beatissima* but, in terms of the Assumption, of *beata et gloriosa*. So these Marian adjectives had to be “understated.” *Comme le prévoit* confused understatement with the sobriety of the Roman Rite.

Dynamic equivalence became more destructive when Marian phrases that convey doctrinal truths taught by the Church were sim-

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6 Joseph Ratzinger, “The Theology of the Liturgy,” in *Looking Again at the Question of the Liturgy with Cardinal Ratzinger: Proceedings of the July 2001 Fontgombault Liturgical Conference*, ed. Alcuin Reid (Farnborough UK: St. Michael’s Abbey Press, 2003) 30.

7 *Comme le prévoit* 12.

ply removed. In the first preface of Our Lady, two unequivocal Latin phrases expressing Mary's perpetual virginity have vanished. The second becomes a paraphrase, "She became the virgin mother of your Son," but does not carry the Latin *integritate virginitatis permanente*, literally "the integrity of her virginity remaining." "She became the virgin mother of your Son" barely hints at Mary's perpetual virginity as set out in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (see especially §§ 496-501). Here we touch on ideological motives reflective of the era when the ICEL translations were made.

One senses the hand of a translator or committee working away over thirty years ago and not wanting to offend someone. But who was this someone? Was this an imaginary non-Catholic Christian, to be respected out of misguided ecumenism? But the only groups beyond the Catholic Church who might ever use a Marian preface would be some high-church Anglicans and Lutherans, and they likely would be among the first to point out the defects and to regret devious paraphrases.

The more recent translation of the beautiful new preface of Mary Mother of the Church is another example of a kind of protective censorship. A reference to Mary's immaculate heart has been excised. Why? Do the Catholic people need to be protected from something? Is it exotic language, or does that phrase hint too much of Fatima? In the collect for the third day before Christmas the adjective "immaculate" also vanished. In the collect for the memorial of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, the mystical representation of the Son of Mary as a holy mountain has also vanished, even if it is central to Carmelite spirituality. Why?

These examples of the destructive effects of ICEL following the principle of dynamic equivalence reveal a vernacular version of the text of the Roman liturgy that tells lies such that, at these points and many others, it is no longer the Roman liturgy. That demonstrable reality has helped recruit some English-speaking people to traditionalist circles and provided much fuel for traditionalist polemics.

### THE TRUTH OF THE MYSTERY

Another dimension of truth in translation is asking whether a text maintains the mystery or a sense of the sacred. In the East, mystery in worship is maintained largely by the iconostasis. In the West, the Latin language functioned as a kind of iconostasis of language. Coupled with the celebration of Mass *ad orientem*, the Roman Rite retained the sense of a holy mystery that the East maintained through the universal liturgical paradox of concealing so as to reveal. The truth of the mystery came to be carried in the Latin texts.

It would have been possible to translate the Mass into our vernacular while retaining much of that gracious sense of linguistic mystery, as may already be seen in the unfolding work of the Vox Clara Committee and of the newly reconfigured ICEL, which seeks to reclaim the truth of the mystery. But that was not the prevailing mentality in the 1960s. The reasons for this attitude may be discerned by beginning with the obvious didacticism of the translations.

The didacticism of the current ICEL texts embodies a stage in history when communication was the key to everything – the era of Marshall McLuhan and the “global village,” when mankind reached for the stars and we could hear men talking from the moon. Clarity, comprehensibility, access to data and information, and the triumph of the Enlightenment were also marked by the jostling of ideologies, each claiming to carry the light and future whether of “modern man,” “secular man,” or “socialist man,” to use the language of the pre-feminist vocabulary of those times.

In such a social, historical, and political context, everything in the new *Missale Romanum* had to be reworked in modern translations, so as to be, above all, comprehensible. It was all a question of communication, understandable in the conciliar era when getting the message across to the people was paramount, and that emphasis dominated *Comme le prévoit*.<sup>8</sup> But there is little place for mystery if communication is based on being consciously modern and enlightened, hence in control of meaning. Mystery eludes human control. In itself, the liturgy finds its summit and source in the Eucharist, that is, the sacred Mystery of Faith ever stretching out beyond our control, ever inviting us into deeper union with God.

At the same time, because the ICEL translations reflected the principle of dynamic equivalence according to *Comme le prévoit*, the paraphrases had to bear a modernity that communicated a meaning instantly, in the language of common usage.<sup>9</sup> I would describe this as *immediately accessible meaning*. If I translate *gratia* as “love,” listeners immediately comprehend something: the word “love.” But in contemporary society, “love” is a polyvalent term. Therefore the faithful hearing “love” will not comprehend or retain much of the real meanings of *gratia*, which is another polyvalent word, but one suggesting another range of divine realities.

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8 See *Comme le prévoit* 5-8, but 8 modifies McLuhan’s maxim “the medium is the message.”

9 *Comme le prévoit* 14-15, briefly citing from a message that Pope Paul VI delivered on 10 November 1965 to participants in a congress on translating liturgical texts.

*Liturgiam authenticam*<sup>10</sup> and the recent guidelines from Vox Clara have freed us from an obsession with communication, instant comprehension, or immediately accessible meaning, all of which destroy real meaning. A rearguard action against these welcome developments only reveals the lingering mindset that was established thirty or forty years ago, a mentality rooted in the Enlightenment and the confident modernity of the conciliar era. This may explain why the existing ICEL texts are being defended as more ‘pastoral.’ By ‘pastoral,’ the critics of the new ICEL mean that the existing texts are easily comprehended, that they convey rapid meanings. The proposed texts are deemed to be archaic and obscure because they draw on unfamiliar symbolic language and suggest a sense of mystery in worship.

### FROM DIDACTICISM TO TRUE PEDAGOGY

Here we confront a widespread misunderstanding of liturgy that has set in throughout the Church, also obvious in the French translations.<sup>11</sup> It is assumed that Catholic worship is primarily a pedagogical device. This view effectively argues that public prayers addressed to God are in fact messages addressed to us, designed for our instruction, improvement, and edification. That misunderstanding has had a devastating effect on the very structure of the Roman Mass. At not a few celebrations of Mass, the eucharistic liturgy becomes merely an extension of the liturgy of the Word, not its culmination as the divine mystery and gift evoking a human response.

Most Catholics would not be aware that a Calvinist theology of worship embodies this didactic approach. When I was a young Anglican theological student, I recall hearing an Evangelical Anglican theologian explain that all prayer in public worship is really a prolonged form of sermon. According to this theological perspective, God seems to be too majestic for us fallen creatures to dare to address Him directly, so when the godly ones pray, they are really edifying one another. Every dimension of worship becomes the proclaimed Word. This also explains the style and tone of much Evangelical extempore prayer, which, to the outside observer, sounds like people telling God what is on CNN tonight.

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10 Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Fifth Instruction on the Vernacular Translation of the Roman Liturgy *Liturgiam authenticam* (28 March 2001), Latin-English edition (Washington DC: USCCB, 2001).

11 It is instructive to compare the official French translation of the Ordinary of the Mass with that prepared over fifty years ago by Dom Bernard Botte and Christine Mohrman, *L'Ordinaire de la Messe, texte critique, traduction et études*, Études Liturgiques 2 (Paris: Cerf, 1953).

I am not arguing that liturgical language should be incomprehensible. But once we try to make a vernacular liturgical text an exercise in instructing people, we are caught in a destructive illusion. We imagine that we are conveying everything – nothing is concealed, no mysteries here – when in fact very little is being conveyed at all. When this happens, the Mass becomes boring, especially for the young. They are in front of a liturgical television set, and its patter and style sound little different from what they can hear at any time through the various forms of electronic media.

In the field of religious education, we place great emphasis on comprehensible meaning. I have spent the past eight years editing a series of thirteen Australian religious education texts, *To Know, Worship and Love*. We have tried to navigate the difficult field of helping children and young people to comprehend the content of faith without violating real meanings.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, we want them to grasp and love their own tradition, not only in words but through the signs and symbols of liturgy, art, and culture. That is the search for a true pedagogy as distinct from didacticism, an attempt to take up what Fr Luigi Giussani, founder of *Comunione e Liberazione*, called the “risk of education,” an adventure in education that offers them the freedom and richness of our Christian culture and tradition, in the midst of a postmodern culture of meaninglessness, darkness, and despair.<sup>13</sup>

Now I would not presume to argue that all current ICEL translations are secularized to that extent, for obviously they cannot be postmodern. Moreover, it is easy to detect many hands at work in the currently used texts, for example in quite acceptable renderings of many prefaces and in various reasonable texts used for celebrating the sacraments. But it is important to set the rushed translation projects of more than thirty years ago not only in their historical, social, and political context, but also in the catechetical and theological *sitz im leben* of that now distant era.

Beginning with the catechetical dimension, the ICEL style of translation to a certain extent reflected the influence of the then-dominant catechetical method, popularly known as the ‘life experience’ approach. That method was based on existentialism and relied on a heterodox theology of divine revelation as subjective inferences or intuitions. This pastoral reworking of early modernism was derived from a misinterpretation of the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*.<sup>14</sup>

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12 See the Melbourne-Sydney religious education text project website <[www.kwl.co.au](http://www.kwl.co.au)>.

13 See Luigi Giussani, *Il rischio educativo* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2005).

14 See, for example, the influential Gabriel Moran, *Theology of*

An obvious case of didacticism, derived from a secularized catechetical mentality, is the rendering of *beatus* as “happy.” Currently, at every Mass people hear the trite words “Happy are those who are called to his supper.” That will vanish with the new translations. But in the *Jerusalem Bible*, source of the lectionary in Australia, we have ended up with “happy are those who mourn” (Mt 5:4). On face value this is nonsense, but it also is doctrinally mischievous, as it eliminates the eschatological and mystical significance of “beatitudes,” derived in revelation from the very mind of Our Lord himself who taught these *makarisms* or blessings within the Hebrew culture. I believe it may be possible on Old Testament grounds to interpret “mourn” as our sorrow for sins, but that is not what the people hear.

An opportunity to go beyond comprehension in favor of mystery may be discerned in how we might translate the word *oblatio*. This may be rendered as “offering,” but why not the traditional English “oblation,” as in Cranmer’s Prayer Book? Offering might hint at secular concepts, such as giving money, that are not found in “oblation.” Nevertheless, the slightly incomprehensible word “oblation” sets up the mystery of the sacrifice. The very fact that it is not directly accessible suggests a meaning that is mysterious, something inviting us to go further, something provoking wonder, leading us deeper into the Mystery of Faith. Nevertheless, it is good to note that the *Oratio super oblata*, currently the “Prayer over the Gifts,” will be renamed the “Prayer over the Offerings.” That subtle change refutes so-called liberals and so-called traditionalists, who have told us, with very different agendas, that the ‘preparation of the gifts’ is not a real of-fertory rite.

### LOOKING AWAY FROM THE MYSTERY

Another related problem has been language that distracts us from the Eucharistic Mystery. A good preface such as Weekdays III is ruined by one little English word, “too”: “we too rejoice with the angels.” This vulgar intrusion mars the moment of mystery because the word itself connotes distraction. Even if only for a split second, it reminds people to look in another direction. ‘Hey! We’re here too!’

A subtle example of distraction by diverging from accurate meaning is the paraphrase of *Mysterium fidei* as “Let us proclaim the Mystery of Faith.” That could have been tolerable had it been rendered “Let us proclaim *this* Mystery of Faith.” But at present it points away from what has been accomplished on the altar and what is now be-

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*Revelation* (New York: Herder, 1966), where the author adds *Dei Verbum* as an appendix to a book which, it can be argued, actually contradicts the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation.

ing proclaimed: the Eucharistic Mystery. Here I am not sure that the proposed translation is much better: "The Mystery of Faith." Perhaps the meaning would be clearer as "*This is the Mystery of Faith,*" which would also be slightly easier for the celebrant to sing.

### TRUTH AND THE 'SENSE' OF CATHOLIC WORSHIP

ICEL's moments of vulgarity, distraction, and triteness lead into a more subtle dimension of this issue of truth and translation. The language of the liturgy is part of the whole shape and sense of what is happening. The sacred whole of the *actio liturgica* focuses not simply on liturgy, but on its essence: Christian worship of the triune God. The relevant Roman congregation is not named the "Congregation for Sacred Liturgy" but the "Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments."

This truth of the whole ought to be expressed in particular words and phrases, in a style and ritual pace that convey a sense of the whole action. This is not simply the truth of the liturgy, which may be understood in various ways. It is the truth of Catholic worship.

I would argue that the lack of a Catholic 'sense' in worship in English-speaking countries today has been caused largely by the current ICEL texts. This is the result not merely of flattened-out language or jejune style, smooth though it usually is. It is the general impression of dullness, reinforced over thirty-six years of use, so that now our worship often seems to have a non-Catholic tone about it. In no way do I wish to identify that tone with Anglicanism or classical Protestantism. For in some of these circles there is an awareness of this issue, and they can be quite scathing about the direction ICEL took, a direction some of their experts have taken even further, with bizarre effects, especially once the ideology of gender takes over.

The original ICEL project, however, preserved elements of something else that was very destructive and quite alien to a sense of Catholic worship. The translations we use have effectively perpetuated elements of a dead and discredited school of theology. I refer to the secularized theology of the 1960s. Some of my generation and those among us who are a little older can recall the "secular city" of Harvey Cox, the "God is dead" theology of Bishop John Robinson and the London "left bank," when views such as "religionless Christianity" circulated, derived in part from an interpretation of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

This radical theology bubbled up just before secularized liturgy and radical pastoral councils appeared in the Netherlands immediately after the council. By and large, the Thomistic philosophical base protected Catholic theology from the full impact of this liberal-Pro-

estant-secularized theology. But through the current ICEL language, something of this destructive virus has been preserved, as it were, in an ecclesiastical Jurassic Park. The secular mood and tone of the English we use in worship carry that era into our times. Perhaps it sustains those who are still locked into its ideals, categories, and agenda. Some of these people are the loudest in decrying the work of Vox Clara and the new ICEL, perhaps because they sense that the existing language of ICEL is an echo of the mood of their era.

When liturgical language no longer speaks with dignity, reverence, and graciousness, we risk losing an essentially *Catholic* way of how we relate to God, how we understand God and ourselves as persons. The fathers at the Synod on the Eucharist in 2005 were concerned about this desacralized mood which undermines the praxis of liturgy today. In the Anglophone world, for nearly forty years, the banal ICEL language has gradually insinuated a kind of neutrality into the minds of millions of Catholics, dulling their Catholic sense of public worship and prayer, failing to nourish holiness or to promote sound spirituality. Partly through inadequate language, a desacralized atmosphere has been created in many of our churches, and it is less than Catholic. The loss of sacral language may be seen as a betrayal of the Second Vatican Council's radiant vision of the liturgy. It can only serve the interests of what Pope Benedict XVI has identified as the false hermeneutic of the council.<sup>15</sup>

That false hermeneutic is not restricted to theological faculties, rectories, or religious houses. Recently I discussed this dimension of truthfulness and the imminent translations with a wise friend who pointed out that some middle-aged and elderly laity will probably resent the new Vox Clara and ICEL texts, not because they are new, but because they will seem to be "a reversion to the past." That will remind them that they are not living up to the doctrinal and moral norms of the Church, norms they want to consider locked in a past they never wish to see again. So we may also expect to hear the cry "archaisms!" or something similar from some lay people. Others accustomed to fast food may not wish to savor what is more substantial, subtle, and refined. Even if we find it hard to articulate exactly what happened, something went wrong in the language of Catholic worship, and that has caused harm among Christ's faithful.

### ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Lying is a sin. Then, we may well ask, has our worship in the English language involved telling lies for nearly forty years? I regret to say that

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<sup>15</sup> See Benedict XVI, Address to the Roman Curia offering them his Christmas greetings (22 December 2005), at <[www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)>.

*to a certain extent* it has. This is evident, first, in many demonstrable instances at the obvious level of mistranslation through omission, distortion, or the blurring of language that bears doctrinal truth. Secondly, it may be discerned in more subtle ways – as the undermining of the truth of the mystery and above all as the creation of a dull mood that drains away the truth of Christian worship. This is why it is important to redefine the debate between the two contrasting ICEL translations in ethical terms.

Those running a rearguard action to salvage as much of the old ICEL as possible should face some ethical challenges. It is all very well now to take up the rhetoric about being ‘pastorally sensitive’ to the people. There was not a word of that over thirty years ago when a hastily mistranslated liturgy robbed the people of much of their Catholic cultural and spiritual heritage. Here the ethic of strategic mistranslation enters a domain closely related to lying: stealing. Much is rightly made of robbing people of their ethnic, indigenous, or spiritual cultures, but something like this has been going on quietly among English-speaking Catholics for years, through the banal, but calculated, ICEL translations.

The ethical questions surrounding mendacious banality raise yet another issue. Some will want to ask: who was responsible for this enterprise? But there is no place for apportioning blame for what happened so many years ago. That is not a Christian way to set right past wrongs, which were largely the result of sincere persons using a flawed principle of dynamic equivalence, even as they were inspired by the religious ideologies of the era. At the same time, as with the more serious ethical tragedies of the past century, it is important to say firmly and clearly, “Never again!”

Now is the time to look forward and “wait in joyful hope,” if I may use one of the old ICEL’s more felicitous phrases. Something better is emerging in this area of English liturgical language, a significant development that may also make it possible to face the wider challenges of an inevitable reform of the reform. Through the new translations, we hope to see something of the glory of the liturgy shine once more. May we recover the divine splendor of the truth, on the lips, in the minds, and in the hearts of a people worshipping the triune God “in spirit and in truth.”

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