

In this talk I will briefly do three things. Say what's wrong with our current translations. Talk about the qualities a liturgical translator will need. And give an example of a new translation of one of our shortest hymns, and the reasoning behind my choices as a translator.

## I. The Sacrifice of Cain.

My first argument is very simple. Our liturgical sacrifice in English is like the sacrifice of Cain, unacceptable to the Lord. Why. Because our prayer consists of words that are neither beautiful nor effective. They are this way because our translators do not know how to read and write well enough to translate poetry.

When people with a little culture go to our services, we often talk about the music and the icons, especially if they are notably beautiful or in bad taste. But the music and the icons are only there to accompany the words. The words enter into our very hearts and our minds, where the Holy Spirit makes His dwelling and then we utter them again with our breath. They are the substance of our prayer. We could have the liturgy without icons, without music, without a church building even. But a liturgy without words is inconceivable. Because words are the substance of prayer.

Yet these very words are invariably inadequate, lacking in art and professionalism, lacking in poetry. Lacking in beauty. Lacking in suitability. Lacking in depth. Lacking in understanding the apophatic nature of language, the deep groanings of the spirit, which is quite different from scholarship and theology, as different as blood is from water.

This is the one idea I want to get across. Language betrays us because we use it every day and revel in our supposed mastery. But poetic language, and the language of serious literature, is something radically different from our everyday speech, rhetoric and even published writing. Thomas Mann put it very well:

A professional is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people.

This understanding of writing, this being blessed by the Muses, as the ancients said, is not something that comes without conscious effort. You have to unusually even to begin to even understand how bad you are. Most people, even very intelligent ones, have no clue.

Pat Reardon wrote in 1996 of just one more awful translation:

A decade or so ago there appeared a new translation of the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom largely produced by the Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Seminary in Massachusetts. It was **a dreadful piece of work from every perspective**

As one looks over the names of those credited with the effort, it is not difficult to see why this should be so; **it[the committee] contains scarcely a single person who had any business serving on a translation committee. Indeed, I have heard a couple of those folks speak in public, and their everyday English is not better than barely adequate. Even among those few translators who do speak English comfortably as a native tongue, there is no evidence of developed skills in the more refined rhetorical complexities of the language.** So it is not surprising that the Holy Cross translation, now in use for more than a decade in the Greek archdiocese, is positively abysmal, nor is it marvelous that some priests would prefer to stick with the original Greek. Personally, I would.

He speaks of this  
**mere linguistic ineptitude**

II. What are the attributes of a professional translator.

Recently, Professor McGucking quoted Kallistos Ware. The latter, when asked what were the requirements for painting holy icons said: "Well, I suppose it would help to know how to paint."

Given that we all swim in the sea of language that we scarcely notice, what skills make one able to master some of its depths?

1. An ability to read dense literary texts, in order to understand the original. We cannot write well without reading equally well.  
As an undergraduate at Yale, I took a graduate level seminar on the Iliad. Everyone else on the seminar agreed that Achilles could not be the hero, because they did not approve of his behavior. Hector was more like them, a mature family man not given to extreme behavior, and so he must have been the hero.

Starting with the very first line, there are numerous semaphors that show that Achilles is the great hero of the Iliad. These scholars of ancient Greek did not know how to escape the prison of their own experience and to read properly the foundation text of all Greek literature.

Reading properly requires accepting the discomfort of an unfamiliar world, and learning from them.

2. Native speaker of the language of the new version.  
This is translation 101. In recent decades a whole discipline of translation studies has developed. The key principle they teach is that the person doing the translation must be a native speaker of the language being translated into. This is even more essential for poetry.
3. A deep knowledge of literature, an intimate acquaintance with writers who are better than you are and who have voyaged further in the universe of poetry.  
We need models.
4. Audience awareness
  - a. This requirement automatically disqualifies so many people. Liturgical poetry should be written for the literate lay person. A literate audience allows for a depth of metaphor, symbol and linguistic expression that is appropriate for the matter. Writing for professors and clergy is too specialized and, lacking in linguistic depth. It's the wrong skill set.
  - b. The purpose of liturgical poetry is the communication of the experience of God's revelation and of the incarnation of Christ. If you cannot envisage someone outside yourself that will hear your words, your words will not be effective. You need to make them think, and to make them feel and to make them experience in some way the beauty of God's divine glory. Like St. Paul, we need a consistent sense of whom we are writing for.
5. Linguistic sensuality

- a. Words are not just logical symbols, and we are not just computational machines. Words work on us in very complex ways, in ways that we do not fully understand. Certain Christian texts had a very powerful attraction for me long before I became a Christian, working on depths of self I did not even know exist. I can mention the beginning of the Gospel of John and the Latin mass I practically memorized on record covers. And much else. We can only touch these deep parts of the self if we let worlds have their aboriginal power, if we use beauty to unleash their apophatic significance.
6. Ability to read poetry aloud.
- a. All the texts of the King James version were read aloud in the translation committees without accompanying written text. It should be common sense, if we are preparing texts to be read aloud, that they be practiced aloud and perfected for that purpose. If you don't habitually read poetry aloud or memorize poetry just for the sound of it, you will not be able to write that kind of stuff.
7. Ability to write original poetry.
- a. A translator is creating a new poem. The best poets make the best translators. The greatest poets make the greatest translations.

When Yeats translates Ronsard's great sonnet to Helen,

~~Quand vous serez bien vieille, au soir, à la chandelle,  
Assise auprès du feu, dévidant et filant,  
Direz, chantant mes vers, en vous émerveillant :  
Ronsard me célébrait du temps que j'étais belle.~~

With

~~When you are old and grey and full of sleep,  
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,  
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look  
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep:~~

Their equal greatness leaps over the centuries and tells us what we need to know about the mind of the Renaissance and Modern romanticism. And the heart gasps, if it knows enough.

8. Technical training

- a. I have done a fair amount of translating over the years. The more I do it, the more difficult it becomes, in effect, but the more proficient I am as well.

9. Love and respect for the ancients and their language.

- a. The person who wrote the original poem, and the people who hear it then, are engaged in a dance of love between God and their souls. It's been years since I read Romanos' Akathist to the Virgin in Greek, but the sense of joy in the incarnation it embodies will live forever in my heart. I wrote my translation to capture it.
- b. It is often useful to understand pagan classical poetry because that is what educated people in Christian times had as their background.

10. Love and respect for the English language.

- a. The two great literary languages are the language of Homer and the Language of Shakespeare. It always amuses me when Orthodox act as if they are Christianizing our culture, when the British Isles had great Christian poetry and great Christian writing and great Christian art long before the baptism of Rus. I couldn't imagine trying to promote a religion in Russia before reading Pushkin. The English language has many poets of the first rank, certainly more than any other than the Greeks, and an entire world of literature that, if you haven't read widely and deeply in, you are just not an educated man. Learn English literature first before taking up your pen to compose in it.

11. Love and respect for our own modern times

- a. Bishop Seraphim Sigrist keeps repeating the words of Fr. Aleander Men: Christianity is in its infancy. These may be the most important words for the future of our church.

The word of God is constantly renewing itself and constantly growing in our collective hearts. The writers of the gospel were very bold, and Paul of Tarsus was bolder still, in making the fullness of Christ available to their world. But that fullness is never filled. We are not slaves to the past, as creators, but recipients of the same fullness, each to our own measure.

- b. The two translations of mine that have touched people the most are Fr. Petrov's akathist written in Russian, a language I cannot read, in the gulag and, not my good translation of Francis of Assisi's Canticle of Brother Sun, but my modern original adaptation. This I'm beginning to see is no accident. Our task is not just to wrestle these ancient texts and drag them over the finish line. There are fields of thought and language and sensibility that are available to us that were not available to the Byzantine, and to the Church fathers and even to the apostles. We are called on not just to carry in the ancient sheaves, but to make new plantings.

### III The Cherubikon

Since time is short, let's take one text of only 32 words that is sung at almost every liturgy. The Cherubic Hymn.

~~The handout has the Greek text, the usual translation, and my own that I wrote for this talk.~~

I'm doing without a handout because the hymn is known to us all, and to keep things as oral as possible.

A careful reading of the standard translation will note the following issues:

**Represent** – I am not alone in thinking that this is a mistranslation of εἰκονίζοντες in this context. And it is a terrible word choice in any case. What is happening here? We are singing the trisagion. Are we representing the angels? Or are we joining the angels in adoration? The whole point of the hymn is to elevate the worshipper to the level of the cherubim. Represent does not do that. Especially in a representative democracy, represent has an implication that does not belong in this hymn, of acting in the interest of, like a Congressman or a salesman. This is a case where, I think, we put the dictionary aside and realize that the

root of the icon is being punned on in a powerful way. We are icons of the Cherubim. We are like them. This meaning is forced by the adverb “mystical.” One does not mystically “represent” something. A knife, fork and a spoon can be use to represent the Trinity, and there is nothing mystical about that. What is happening here is that were are mystically becoming “like” the Cherubim, singing their hymn. We are not representing or portraying them, which would be static, but dynamically and mystically being like them.

***Thrice holy hymn*** - Another mistranslation. In the English word order, thrice naturally modifies holy. What does it mean to be thrice holy? The natural understanding, and in much poetry, would be as an intensifier, intensely holy. But that is not what is meant here. What is meant here is that the "Holy, holy, holy" of the Cherubic chorus reflects the triune nature of the Trinity. In the Greek, this is crystal clear, a pun in fact, that is emphasized by the word order and the repetition of the root "tri."

***Earthly cares*** – A slight mistranslation, but not a bad one. The Greek refers to biological, organic life instead of earthly. But earthly has the advantage of calling to mind the dust from which we are made and to which we must return. Accuracy is not everything in translation. The corrected translation “cares of this life” is very lame, and misleading. The Greek is making a distinction between zoe and bios. Using the same word in English distorts the subtlety of the Greek that distinguishes essential life from biological existence.

***Lay aside*** – the translator must decide whether to keep the image of taking off a garment, or just subtly imply it, or discard it.

***King of All*** - The translator must make a decision. When written, all the world was ruled by kings. That’s not the case today. It can be argued that the hymn is stronger in English if we replace King with Lord. But I understand that our Christological understanding of Christ as Lord is sometimes different from Christ as King. Tough choice.

***Angels*** – Professor McGuckin was kind enough to explain to me that the original compares the angels to the eunuchs of the court who used their spears to push away the crowd for the emperor’s procession. It is an

image I will long cherish. No one has ever translated the original in that sense, and no one ever should. However, it is the rhetorical climax of the hymn. The usual translation is a vague anticlimax that makes no sense and defeats the purpose of the hymn. In the standard translation, God becomes an oriental king, or an Inca, who enslaves the angels. Is this any better than the eunuchs? And how exactly can one be “invisibly upborne?” Is that the same as “no strings attached?”

So how do we fix all this? The answer is both linguistic and poetic. A hymn is a form of poetry and has to work as a poem in English.

I will spare you an account of all my discarded drafts. This is not easy writing.

The three overall final decisions I consciously made were:

1. Write something completely new without constraints. Sometimes you have to because communication of the deposit is more important than preserving the form it came down in.
2. Totally ignore the syntax of the Greek. It is the spine of the original, but it only ties the English version in knots. This was a very important decision.
3. Use a more modern poetic voice, that is simpler and more direct and contemporary. My previous version was in iambic pentameter, and was horribly over-poetic and over-written.

Contemplating the text, I incorporated two new thoughts, intuitive connections that rose from meditating about the text:

1. We who are singing are the ecclesia. We are gathered in his name. That is what calls forth his presence. It is this gathering that is assimilated to the angels. They are also gathered and praising his name.
2. Christ, the king of all is, also *ho on*, he who is. Both of these linguistic formulations are related to idea of ‘the only existing one.’ While Christ pantocrator rules over all, he rules especially over things, including us, that are truly themselves, that is the kind of existence that God’s revelation is aimed at and that it fosters. This could be a way of making the idea of “King of All” more forceful and relevant to us moderns. And it carries with it the distinction, lost in English, between Zoe and Bios.

Once I made these decisions, the impossible to translate into English poetry became possible. I was actually surprised at how close to the original the new hymn turned out to be. I was prepared to be more radical than was actually required.

## The Cherubic Hymn

In this, our assembly here on earth,  
Mystically we are like the cherubim  
Who sing three times to the Trinity  
The holy hymn.

Now is the time for us to lay down  
All earthly cares,  
For we will receive the king  
Of all that truly is,  
And life's creator.

He comes with angels,  
Innumerable,  
Unseen,  
Their holy spears  
Shine with light unyielding.

Alleluia,  
Alleluia,  
Alleluia.

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When I showed it to my wife, she said, guardedly: "Well it works as an English poem."

That was my hope.

Appolinaire