

# A NEW CATHOLIC VERSION IN DUTCH

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*The following article is by a member of the Roman Catholic translation committee which has recently completed a new translation of the New Testament in Dutch. We are most grateful to Professor Grossouw for giving us permission to use part of an article which first appeared in the Dutch periodical "Het Heilig Land", February 1959, and also for his co-operation in amplifying this with answers to the questionnaire on procedure which we have prepared in connection with a series on modern revisions. Ed.*

A happy result of the present Biblical revival among catholics is the appearance of so many new translations of the Bible all over the catholic world. One of these is a translation of the New Testament which has just been completed in Dutch. This has been done under the auspices of the R.C. Episcopate in the Netherlands on the initiative of the Society of Saint Willibrord, which also intends to form a kind of Roman Catholic Bible Society within its framework. The Society has recently had fruitful contact with the Netherlands Bible Society in this connection. The purpose was to make a completely new translation, not a revision, which is intended for private reading rather than for public worship. In as much as the average faithful catholic does not know his Bible as well as the protestant, the modern catholic Bible translator has an easier task than his protestant counterpart because there is not so strong a verbal tradition, except in the liturgy. The translation committee bore full responsibility for the translation, although the translation is of course subject to the approval of the Episcopate.

## **The translation committee**

The translation was done by team-work. Ronald Knox was fortunate enough to have been able to do it alone, but generally speaking a committee or 'team' seems to be inevitable nowadays. Luther once wrote: "Saint Hieronymus did as much as one man can do. No one else could have achieved so much. If he had had one or two companions in the work, the Holy Spirit would have been with him as it is written: 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst.' A translator must not be alone, because the exactly right words do not always occur to one man alone."

The members of the translation committee were all members of the Roman Catholic Bible Work Group "Saint Hieronymus", to which practically all Roman Catholic exegetes in the Netherlands belong. A dozen members of this Work Group, mostly but not all New Testament scholars, undertook the translation. There was no full-time secretary, and all the members of the committee had full-time

commitments to other work; it is not surprising, therefore, that the translation took ten years to complete. Personally I feel that the work might quickest and perhaps best be done by a few scholars who are free to give a major part of their time to the project for two or three years, at any rate for the New Testament. Of course the Old Testament is a different matter.

### **Method of work**

The committee of a dozen split up into teams of three to five persons, and each team tackled a separate book of the New Testament. The first draft for any book was made by one individual; copies of this were sent to the other members of the particular sub-committee and it was then discussed verse by verse and word for word in long sittings. In cases of difference of opinion the translator of the original draft had the right of maintaining his opinion. In this way a 'preliminary definitive text' was produced. Unfortunately no minutes of these committee meetings were kept.

This version was then submitted to the reading-committee. First of all a philologist checked it for the correctness of the Dutch, and then two literary experts read it for style. After passing the reading-committee the translation was subjected to a final revision by two members of the translation committee, of whom one undertook the Gospels and Acts and the other the rest of the New Testament. In case of conflict between the translation committee and the reading-committee, the former always had the last word.

It might be added that there was no systematic consultation of people outside the translation and reading-committees.

### **Text**

Important variant readings were taken into consideration. I believe many modern translations are too confident in taking the modern *textus receptus* as established. An exception to this are the *Bible de Jérusalem* which gives many variant readings in the footnotes, and the American *Revised Standard Version* which indicates too many.

### **Questions of principle**

However, the greatest difficulty is not in deciding what the original says; in most cases at least, modern scholarship provides sufficient aids to determine this. The greatest difficulty is to find the *one* modern translation, and above all the *one* sentence which answers to the original. It has to be the *one* sentence, because the translator is not a commentator who can give two alternatives in his exegesis. No, the translator must constantly make a choice. He cannot turn his work into a commentary by constantly putting alternative translations in the footnotes. Much of our time was thus spent searching for the right word, for the best Dutch phrase. This meant that the final result was often the fruit of a compromise, since we worked

as a team. In consequence the resulting translation has, one hopes, a reasonable literary quality, especially as it was checked by literary experts, but it is not powerful, original or spirited.

Another experience was this: one begins with certain principles upon which all are agreed. But the implications of these only become apparent during the work. For example, all are agreed upon the principle of intelligibility. The average modern Dutchman must be able to understand the translation. Therefore there must be no archaisms. But what is an archaism? Or again should we be colloquial? No, for we are translating the Bible. But what if Paul is careless, or Mark seems to use a rather banal expression? Erasmus once said that we do not need to imitate the solecisms of the apostles. The literary men say the language should be dignified; but what is 'dignified language' in this feverishly changing age with its experimental art?

Experience would teach us a certain opportunism. One should not make too many fixed rules, for you often cannot apply them. Each case must be decided separately.

### Literary quality

My most serious objection to the majority of modern translations is that too much is sacrificed to a false concept of faithfulness, to literalness, *servitus literae*. True, most are freer than the old versions, and catholic translations are less slavish than protestant, but I think I may quote Knox here: "If you are translating for the benefit of a person who wants to be able to read the word of God for ten minutes on end without laying it aside from sheer boredom or bewilderment, a literary translation is what you want—and we have been lacking it for centuries."<sup>1</sup> I think this is true of catholic translation in Holland. I do not mean to say that our committee has provided such a literary translation, but this should certainly be our goal, especially when it is a matter of providing a readable version for the common man who is reading the Bible steadily more, privately or with others. Now I know that Knox is charged with paraphrasing, not translating. But in a critical revue of his work in *Revue Biblique* 63 (1956) p. 590 it is stated: "Enfin, et c'est là incontestablement la plus belle réussite de tout l'ouvrage, il est le premier à nous offrir une traduction anglaise des épîtres de s. Paul qui soit lisible!!" (Finally, and in this his work has indisputably succeeded most, he is the first to give us an English translation of Paul's letters that is readable).<sup>2</sup>

Let me give some examples in which the majority of even the modern versions retain an unjustified literalness, which often makes

<sup>1</sup> R. Knox, *On Englishing the Bible* (London, 1949), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Knox's translation appeared before *Letters to Young Churches* by J. B. Phillips. - Ed.

the text needlessly strange and obscure for the inexperienced reader. *Romans 12:1* "I appeal to you therefore, brethren, . . . to present your bodies as a living sacrifice" R.S.V. (or something like this). The fault here is the literal rendering "your bodies". This should be translated "yourselves" (Bible de Jérusalem: *vos personnes*). Knox gives this rendering in a footnote, but there is nothing to prevent it being inserted in the text.

*Romans 9:33a* "Behold, I lay in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence" (R.V.). Although most modern translations change this to something like: "a stone to make people stumble, and a rock to trip over" (Goodspeed), not all omit *and* as they should, since following the Hebrew parallelism 'the stone of stumbling' is identical with the 'rock of offence'; I believe one should simply translate "a stone which people will trip over, a stumbling-block".

*Romans 9:33b* "and he who believes in him will not be put to shame" (R.S.V. etc.). Here I believe Moffat uses the right word and that in modern English one must simply say "will not be disappointed".

### Consistency

In accordance with the principle of endeavouring to attain a good literary standard we have been fairly free in rendering Greek terms by various Dutch words and expressions. This may be illustrated by our translation of one of the most difficult Pauline terms, *sarx*. The easiest method here is consistently to translate this by *caro*, 'flesh' (as in the Vulgate) or its equivalent in the language concerned, but this can no longer be done. In many cases this literal rendering causes misunderstanding, not merely among those who do not know better; the term 'flesh' and 'fleshly' have now such an unavoidably puritan connotation that no one can completely get rid of it as long as the term is retained. It is impossible to give a general rule for the translation of this word; each case must be decided separately, with all the difficulties and inconsistencies to which this gives rise. I believe the problem is insoluble.

Perhaps one can best retain 'flesh' in passages such as *Romans* ch. 8, where *sarx* repeatedly occurs in deliberate contrast to *pneuma* 'spirit'. The context itself here suggests a broader meaning than that in the old anthropological dualism; however, a good footnote will be needed! It can also be retained in regular expressions in which there is little chance of misunderstanding, such as *Romans* 1:3, "descended from David according to the flesh" (R.S.V.).

I would translate *Romans* 2:28-29 as follows: "For being a Jew is not something outward, nor is circumcision something outward and physical. Being a Jew is something inward, and real circumcision is of the heart, spiritual and not legal." Here one must employ considerable freedom in order to obtain something which is understandable and acceptable to the modern man.

Sometimes one must be even more radical and deal with *sarx* in such a way that it is unrecognizable in the resultant rendering. For example in 2 Cor. 1:17 "the things that I purpose, do I purpose according to the flesh" (R.V.) is impossible. This has to be translated "make plans like a worldly man" (R.S.V. etc.), or "on mere impulse" (The Twentieth Century N.T.), or something of the sort.

Of course we have attempted to render quotations from the Old Testament in a similar way in the various places where they occur in the New Testament, e.g., Mt. 21:42a = 1 Pet. 2:7. (And if I may disillusion some future Bible translators: do not let anyone think that it is possible to work out a consistent system for spelling proper names in the Bible, at least in Dutch. You can spend your time in better ways!)

### Barbarisms

Another question connected with the literary quality of the translation is whether all 'barbarisms' should be rigorously excluded; in Dutch there are quite a number of words which purists label "Anglicisms", "Germanisms" etc. I feel Dutch translations have been in general too conservative concerning words of this kind when, despite their origin, they have now become such an integral part of the language that virtually everyone uses them. They cannot be excluded on principle. Whether one will use them or not depends on matters of style, and that in connection with both languages concerned. It is a question of feeling whether a particular word, even though of foreign origin, has become so accepted that it is no longer felt to be foreign. And it also depends on the literary style of the original; such words cannot be used in the Magnificat or the Apocalypse, but they may fit very well in the often argumentative style of Paul's letters, as a sort of modern equivalent for the diatribe style.

### Literary form

Indication of the literary form of the original raises delicate issues. Up till now I have been a champion of freedom; but there are limits to this freedom and a good translation will endeavour not only to render the original in an understandable and readable manner, but also *if possible* to preserve *something* of the spirit, the style, the form of the original. So we should be literal and faithful to the form after all? Yes, but under certain very stringent conditions: this literalness is of a strictly literary kind, and is not simply philological. It is of no value, and can only be detrimental, if the Greek sentence structure itself can be detected in a translation by a reader who knows no Greek. This is pedanticism, or if you prefer, exaggerated pedagogy, and is perhaps appropriate in a commentary, but certainly not in a version intended to be read by the public.

Thus one must not slavishly reproduce the form, but seek an equivalent that really lives, and roughly reproduces the literary intention of the original.

Moreover, and this is my second condition, I would only seek this kind of literalness in passages which possess a *clearly pronounced* literary character in the original, such as the canticles in Luke 1 and 2, whole sections of the Apocalypse, and also certain lively parts of Paul's diatribes such as Romans 7. Although a few people still hold to the opinion that N.T. Greek is nothing but the common 'Koinê', in general the reaction which followed Deissman's discoveries<sup>3</sup> is not so popular now, and it is no longer denied that N.T. Greek has its own individual character. However convinced we may be that N.T. Greek belongs to the Koinê, it is perfectly clear that various special factors also played a rôle in it. Therefore one cannot simply appeal to the Koinê character of N.T. Greek and say that it should consequently be translated in everyday modern language.

The first two chapters of Luke's Gospel are a very clear illustration of this. There are various opinions about their literary background, but two things are certain: the language and style of this section is strongly Semitic, and that Luke's own style is quite different. This means, then, that the evangelist has *purposely* written, taken down, or at least allowed these passages to remain, in this style. The evangelist himself wanted this section to be in this *for him unusual style*. So that as far as I can see, one has no right to say that all these Hebraisms, or Aramaisms, or Semitisms such as "it came to pass in those days that . . ." are foreign to our language and must disappear. If you contend that "It came to pass in those days that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus" etc., means nothing more than "Then there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus", you forget that this manner of writing was strange for Luke himself, and must therefore have been purposely chosen or retained by him here. Thus I think that we should be 'conservative' here, and all the more so because it is just *these* stories which are so well-known to people in their traditional form, and through the liturgy and the celebration of Christmas have a familiar 'ring' for those who otherwise do not know their Bibles so well. For Lk. 1:1-4 on the other hand one should choose a somewhat literary style, and so not begin with a very familiar greeting, as does one of the Dutch translations.

Finally I will give just one more example of a difficult choice we have had to make, namely the translation of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins in Mt. 25. In Dutch there is no such convenient word as 'maidens' and so we had to choose between 'virgins' and 'girls'! When, at a press conference during the translation, it was said that we intended using the word 'girls' here, there

<sup>3</sup> It was Deissman who first noticed the similarities between New Testament Greek and Koinê Greek. — Ed.

was a storm of protest, even from a theologian who had stated in his commentary on this passage that these were bridesmaids, so that *virginity* was entirely irrelevant here! None the less I think 'girls' is the correct translation, for if one uses the word for 'virgin' here in Dutch, there is a most definite emphasis on their physical state which is certainly undesirable in this context. Lk. 1:27 is of course quite another matter. Similarly, we substituted the Dutch equivalents of 'sensible' and 'thoughtless' for 'wise' and 'foolish', respectively, since the latter two terms are far too 'dignified' in Dutch for such a context.

### Cross-references and foot-notes

As in all Roman Catholic translations our edition contains foot-notes. Indeed, considering the revived interest in the Bible among faithful Catholics we have endeavoured to provide abundant cross-references, including parallel passages, and explanatory notes. In general we have aimed at a similar system of annotation etc. as in the well-known French Catholic translation, the *Bible de Jérusalem*.<sup>4</sup>

### The future

The need for versions in contemporary language will, I believe, make fairly frequent revision of modern translations necessary. I do not think there will be many more "Authorized Versions" which will remain for centuries with a practically unchanged text, such as the old Dutch "States General" version. Although one should certainly beware of words and phrases which enjoy a passing popularity but quickly go out of fashion, I see no objection to the possibility that a new or at any rate revised translation must be issued every ten or twenty years.

The great advantage is that in this way the Bible remains living and understandable for the faithful. It must not become an antique, a sort of venerable relic of the past that one reverently puts away in the cupboard, or a cultural monument that is deposited in a religious museum. My plea for a reasonable modernity in Bible translation is above all based on the desire that the Word of God should remain *actual and relevant*, that it should speak to the man of today, and afresh to the man of every age, in the concrete situation in which he lives. Such, I think, is the purpose of God. The contemporary form is necessary for the Bible to retain its *actuality*, and this is necessary so that it can fulfil its function as judge and critic, as disturber of our consciences, as light and warmth on our path through life.

"For the Word of God is alive and powerful, sharper than the sharpest sword; it pierces through to the very soul and spirit of man, to the marrow of his bones, and lays his thoughts and intentions bare." (Heb. 4:12).

<sup>4</sup> Three short articles on this version are to be found in *The Bible Translator*, October 1958, pp. 153-161.