

They say a bad workman blames his tools, but that's not really fair. If you want to do a job well, to make the very best thing you can make, you need good tools: a sharp knife, a well-balanced hammer ... the best translation of the Bible.

All right, you're asking, "What's the Bible got to do with doing a job?" Well, if you're going "by the book" for your liturgy, then the best translation of the Bible is the tool you need to do it. Unfortunately, that's not what we've got in the Church today. I call this one the Case of the Latin Switcheroo.

The history of this one goes back a long way — before the Second Vatican Council, before the Council of Trent. Heck, this one goes back before Christ.

In the fourth century BC, Alexander of Macedon, popularly known as Alexander the Great, conquered the Persian Empire. The result was a Greek-speaking empire spreading from Europe to India. One of the kingdoms he conquered was Egypt.

After the death of Alexander, one of his generals — and, perhaps, his illegitimate half-brother — Ptolemy ended up as king, or Pharaoh, of Egypt. He was the founder of the famous Ptolemaic dynasty which culminated in the infamous Cleopatra, the last queen of Egypt.

But it's an earlier period of the Ptolemaic dynasty we're concerned with. Before the intrigue of Cleopatra and Caesar and Mark Anthony we saw on the silver screen in the eponymous movie, before adultery and war and snakes in baskets of figs, Egypt was famous as a seat of great learning. Alexander was more than a barbaric conqueror; he built cities wherever he went. Many, if not most, of these cities were named after him. The Near and Middle East are strewn with cities called "Alexandria" or something like it.

But it's the one in Egypt that concerns us. Alexandria-by-Egypt was its formal name, but it was such a powerful and great city most people know it simply as "Alexandria," eclipsing all other cities of the same name. It was a seat of great learning, famed for not only having one of the seven wonders of the world — the lighthouse of Alexandria — but also the greatest library the world had ever seen, the famous Library of Alexandria.

Imagine the situation. Alexander's crusade hasn't destroyed the Persian Empire. Rather, it has Hellenized it, made it Greek. But the Persians have also influenced the Greeks. There was a mingling of knowledge and cultures. From Greece to India, everyone spoke a single language — Greek — for commerce and government. European thought had met Eastern philosophy and religion, including a little Near-Eastern religion called Judaism, concentrated around a city called Jerusalem.

Ptolemy's son, Ptolemy the Second, was gathering books for his glorious library. He wanted to collect all the books he could, translated into the language everyone spoke, Greek. He was gathering texts from the Persian Empire and the peoples under their rule, and one of the collections of books he gathered was the Hebrew Scriptures, what we know today as the Old Testament.

He commissioned a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. The result was the Septuagint, from the Latin meaning "70." According to legend, 70 scholars working independently produced identical translations in 70 days. Now, that might merely be a pious tradition, but what we do know as a fact is that the Septuagint became *the* version of the Jewish Scriptures for the next 2,000 years.

Why was this? Well, first and foremost, it was a complete translation into a single language. If you speak to a Protestant about the Bible, sooner or later he's going to talk about "the Apocrypha" — seven books the Protestant Bible is missing. Catholic Bibles — and the Septuagint — have those books in place. We call them the "Deuterocanon," meaning "second canon." That doesn't mean they are lesser than the other books; what it means is that they weren't written in Hebrew.

Why is that? Well, that's down to Alexander. Remember: He'd conquered the known world in the fourth century. By the time these books were written, everyone was speaking Greek for anything important. If you wanted to get your work read, you wrote in the language everyone spoke, which was Greek. People would speak a local language at home, but for commerce, trade, government or the discussion of important concepts like philosophy or religion, you would speak the language everyone spoke. And that language was Greek.

It's hard for us to imagine today. There isn't a single language which is used throughout the world for discussing everything important. In the UN and other international organizations, there are hundreds of languages and hundreds of translators. The

only two places you still see this kind of thing are in commercial air-traffic control — there, everyone speaks English — and in the Church, where the official language is still Latin.

But that's how it was — and that's another reason why the Septuagint became *the* version everyone used. Not only did it include *all* the books of the Jewish Scriptures without missing any out, but it was also written in a language everyone spoke. For those two reasons alone, it was perfect for not only scholars studying Judaism, but also for the Jews themselves. Spread out across the Near East, Jews spoke many different languages in their day-to-day life. Hebrew was a religious language used in the Temple and for services. But Greek was a language they could use to talk with anyone.

But perhaps the *most* important reason why the Septuagint was so successful and popular was that it wasn't just a simple translation. It was more than that — it was a scholarly gathering of the whole history of the people of God, choosing the best from the different versions of the Scriptures that were out there, selecting the ones that best reflect the truth of God and His relationship with His people.

Pope Benedict XVI said this best in a lecture he gave in 2006;

Today we know that the Greek translation of the Old Testament produced at Alexandria — the Septuagint — is more than a simple (and in that sense really less than satisfactory) translation of the Hebrew text: It is an independent textual witness and a distinct and important step in the history of revelation, one which brought about this encounter in a way that it was decisive for the birth and spread of Christianity. [Address at Regensburg 12 September 2006]

Remember: The Scriptures, be they the Jewish Scriptures or the Christian Bible, come from the teaching of the Church, not the other way around. The Bible was made *by* the Church; it was written by members of the Church (men like Peter and Paul and Luke and Mark) and also assembled, translated and preserved *by* the Church. This is why it makes so little sense for Protestants to talk about *Sola Scriptura* or anything like that. It's putting the cart before the horse, ignoring not only logic and the historical record, but also the historical witness of the Bible itself.

Another — and perhaps the most slam-dunk — reason to use the Septuagint is that Christ used it. We're often asked, “What Would Jesus Do?” In this case, the answer is: “Use the Septuagint.”

Christ quotes the Old Testament Scriptures *a lot*. It makes sense; He is the Messiah, and He is the fulfillment of the Old Testament. But the vast majority of the times He quotes the Jewish Scriptures — and the vast majority of the times the New Testament writers reference the Old Testament, it is the Septuagint version which is being quoted.

Taking all of this into consideration, it is hardly surprising the Church, when She was assembling the Bible in the fourth century AD, used the Septuagint for the Old Testament. The New Testament had been written in Greek, and the end result was a complete collection of the Christian Scriptures in a single language.

But it wasn't the language *everyone* spoke anymore. See, a lot had changed in nearly eight centuries. The Greek Empire of Alexander the Great had collapsed and splintered, and an upstart power was throwing its weight around the Mediterranean. You might have heard of it; they called themselves the Roman Empire, and they spoke Latin.

The Church was then, as She is now, headquartered in Rome, in the heart of imperial power. And She wanted to be able to speak Her Gospel to the whole world. So She did everything in Latin — because that was the universal language. And that included a translation of the Scriptures into Latin.

So, at the end of the fourth century, Pope Damasus commissioned St. Jerome to translate the Scriptures into Latin. The result was the *Versio Vulgata*, meaning “the version commonly used.” Today, we call it the Vulgate.

That version of the Bible was indeed commonly used. It was the unofficial-official version of the Bible for 1,200 years, the version everyone used, and then, at the Council of Trent in the mid-16th century, it became the official-official version of the Bible. And it stayed that way for 500 years until the 1960s.

*Uh-oh.*

In 1965, Bd. Pope Paul VI appointed a commission to revise the Vulgate. His new translation is — and maybe we have to make this *crystal* clear because people will take it the wrong way — unquestionably Catholic. No doubt about it. It contained all the books, and didn't contain anything that contradicted or challenged the Faith.

So, what's the problem with it? *Is* there a problem with it?

Well, it uses the *Hebrew* version of the Old Testament, not the Greek Septuagint. It's translated into Latin from the Hebrew, not into Latin from the Greek. Really, translating from Hebrew rather than Greek isn't the issue. The problem — if it can be called that — is that it didn't use the Septuagint.

Remember, the Septuagint wasn't just any old translation. It was a comprehensive compilation of scriptural and theological study which most perfectly reflected the teaching of the Old Testament pointing towards Christ.

Another difference between the Old Vulgate and the New Vulgate — officially called in Latin the *Nova Vulgata* — is the use of *Classical* Latin rather than *Ecclesiastical* Latin.

Ok, now I'm talking about different *kinds* of Latin? Isn't Latin just Latin? Hasn't it been a dead language for a thousand years or more? How can there be different dialects?

Classic Latin is the Latin the Romans spoke. It's associated with the Augustan age — approximately 31 BC to 17 AD. This period was the pinnacle of Roman literature when prose and poetry enriched the empire's cultural and academic life. The influence of the great figures of this period — men like Cicero and Virgil — can still be felt today.

But it wasn't just a language for poets; it was used by educated Roman politicians and lawyers to rule their vast empire. It was intended for speech, and was used to great effect by masters of rhetoric and debate. It has a heavy Greek influence and was seen as a more sophisticated language used by the intellectual elites.

Ecclesiastical Latin differs from Classical Latin in a number of ways. There are some pronunciation differences, but these aren't the things that interest us right now. Ecclesiastical Latin was used from the very earliest days of Christianity, but it was in the early medieval period — between 500 and 700 AD — this form of Latin reached its full maturity.

It is a development of Classical Latin, with a simplified grammar, designed to be most suitable for writings and theological works. It lacks the pagan influence of the Greek-inspired Classical Latin, and is the very best language for doing “Church Stuff.”

Don't just take my word for it — and don't just take the word of some document or Council from before we'd invented the internal combustion engine. Let's take the word of the document which was, ironically enough, the reason Paul VI commissioned the New Vulgate: *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Second Vatican Council document on the sacred liturgy;

“The work of revising the psalter ... is to take into account the style of Christian Latin.”

That sounds pretty clear, right? At least, even if it isn't explicitly calling for the whole Bible to be in Ecclesiastical Latin, the Council wanted the Psalms in a style which “took into account” Ecclesiastical Latin. And given that Ecclesiastical Latin is a development of Classical Latin, that means it should probably be in Ecclesiastical Latin.

You know I wouldn't have a file on it if it was all hunky-dory.

The Vulgate used Ecclesiastical Latin exclusively, as might be expected. But the New Vulgate uses Classical Latin for the Psalms, and, as I mentioned before, used the Hebrew version of the Old Testament.

Look, I really want to make something clear here. It's not that there is anything “wrong” with the New Vulgate — far from it. It's a *good* translation, a Catholic translation. There is nothing, absolutely *nothing*, in there that challenges Catholic doctrine.

Heck, as a sidebar, there are very few versions of the Bible out there that actually out-and-out challenge or contradict Catholic doctrine, even so-called Protestant versions. If you ignore the notes and commentary some Protestant has scribbled

in the margins or as a footnote, you can use virtually any version of the Bible to defend Catholic teaching from whack-a-doodle Protestant theology. Excepting translations like those of the Mormons and other groups who've *really* changed words to reflect their own beliefs, pretty much any text is a good enough tool.

Right. “Good enough” ain't best.

Most Catholic translations of the Bible you will see today — translations into your own language like English, or French (*Bonjour, mes amis!*), or German (*Guten tag!*) or whatever — are based on the New Vulgate. Those are the versions you will likely hear at Mass. And, rest assured, they are good enough.

But good enough ain't best. And we're all about the BEST when it comes to God, right? Or we should be — particularly when it comes to the Liturgy.

This is an odd case, because it's not an abuse to use the New Vulgate — far from it. The liturgy can be said without any problems if you use it. But there is something powerful about using a language that is not only sacred ... that is, set aside for a particular purpose ... but was also specifically designed to be used *for* that thing, and not for anything else.

And, of course, what could be more sacred than using the *very same* words, the very same ancient translation Christ Himself used? Pope Benedict XVI said the Septuagint wasn't just a simple translation, but the answer is even easier than that: If it was good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for me.

This case isn't about abuse. It's about using the right tool, about using the best and most effective tool. The book of Hebrews talks about the Word of God being a sharp sword. The changes made to the Scriptures used in the liturgy don't mean it is an inappropriate or effective tool. Rather, they mean there is a better, sharper, more effective and more appropriate tool that could be used.

Perhaps we can't change what is used in the liturgy, but we can certainly be aware of the differences and perhaps use a different version in our private devotions. And that, I think, is enough to call this case closed.