

# The Pope on the ‘Lord’s Prayer’ and Translations in African Languages

Francis Anekwe Oborji

Recently, the Holy Father, Pope Francis made an important observation concerning the last phrase in the Lord’s Prayer, namely, ‘... *lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*’ According to the Pope, this last phrase in the Lord’s Prayer is poorly, translated in most of the Western Latin languages such as English, French, Italian, German, etc. For this reason, the Pope asked that the last phrase in the Lord’s Prayer (*‘lead us not into temptation ...’*), should be retranslated to reflect the original text and meaning of the ‘Lord’s Prayer.’

This is because in its present form the last phrase in the Lord’s Prayer gives impression that it is God himself, who leads us into temptation (sin). But that is wrong, because, God does not lead human beings into temptation, but rather delivers us from it.

From the time, Pope Francis’ made these important observations on the Lord’s Prayer, a good number of our people have been asking the question, ‘what of the translations of our ‘Lord’s Prayer’, we have in our African local languages? Do they have the same problem of poor translation of the last phrase in the prayer, which according to the Pope exist in translations in Western Latin languages?’

This question and other problems associated with translations of ‘sacred texts’ into our local African languages, will occupy us in the present article.

Although, I have shared my opinion on this matter in a small scale with some friends and acquaintances the day the Pope made his observations, however, there is need to expatiate on it. This will help us to answer the question: Are African language translations and interpretations of the Lord’s Prayer closer to the original texts of the New Testament Bible than the translations in Western Latin languages?

Taking Igbo as a case-study in this matter, it is likely the Igbo version of the Lord’s Prayer may not have the same problem of wrong translation and misrepresentation, Pope Francis has pointed out that exist in some of the Western Latin languages’ versions of the Lord’s Prayer. Authors who worked on the ‘Lord’s Prayer’ in the Western Latin languages might have taken their translations from the *Latin Vulgate* (original Latin version of the Bible), instead of the earlier texts in Aramaic and Greek languages of the New Testament. We should not forget that the *Latin Vulgate* of the Bible was translated from the earlier texts of the New Testament in Aramaic and Greek languages.

Thus, the last phrase of the Lord’s Prayer under contention goes like this in its Latin version: “... **et ne nos inducas in tentationem; sed libera nos a malo.**” In Italian, it is translated thus: “... **e non ci indurre in tentazione, ma liberaci dal male.**” In English, it goes thus: “... **and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.**”

The wrong translation from Latin of this last phrase of Lord's Prayer in Western languages is more evident in German version of the Prayer, which goes thus: "... **Und führe uns nicht in Versuchung, sondern erlöse uns von dem Bösen.**" In this case, the expression, '... **and lead us not into temptation**', is emphasized with strong terms in German version with the words '**...führe uns nicht in Versuchung**', which literally, could mean, '**do not hurry us (early) into temptation.**'

It is like asking that God delays, somehow, hurrying human beings into sin. The German version does not only make God a predicate of human sin but also the cause of it.

The French version of the Lord's Prayer was recently retranslated, thanks to the Pope's observations, and it came into effective from First Sunday of Advent (December 3, 2017). The retranslated French version goes thus: "... **ne nous laisse pas succomber à la tentation**" (which literally, means: 'don't allow us to succumb (fall) into temptation').

In general, apart from the newly retranslated French version, all other translations of our Lord's Prayer in Western Latin languages give the wrong impression that it is God himself, who leads us into temptations (sins). This is the wrong translation and interpretation which the Holy Father, Pope Francis asked should be revisited and corrected, because God does not lead human beings into temptation but rather protects and saves us from it.

All these could mean that existing translations of our Lord's Prayer in African languages are more correct, and perhaps closer to the original Aramaic and Greek Texts of the New Testament Bible than translations in the Western Latin languages under consideration.

For example, the Igbo translation goes thus, "... **ekwene ka anyi kwenye (dabanye) na nlonye (onwunwa), ma zoputa anyi na ajo ihe.**" In other words, while the Latin language translations accuse God as the one that leads (induces) us into temptation, the Igbo translation doesn't, but rather accuses man himself as being responsible for his temptations, and requests God's grace and protection from them.

Therefore, it is obvious many African languages like Igbo may not have the problem of wrong translation and interpretation of the Lord's Prayer, the Holy Father, Pope Francis has pointed out that exist with the Western Latin languages. However, as we continue to wait and expect further theological and biblical exegetical studies on this topic, one thing remains certain. Our pioneer missionaries and first generation African priests, teachers, catechists, other indigenous scholars and experts on African Christianity and culture, who worked on these local translations of the Lord's Prayer in our land, bequeathed us with solid and proud African Christian tradition. They left us with authentic translations in our local African languages of not only the Lord's Prayer, but also of most of other traditional Christian prayer books, catechism, popular Christian hymns, and forms of worship.

However, if today we are beneficiaries of the good work and sacrifices of our forbears' in the Christian faith in our land, the question now is, 'can the present generation of Christians – church leaders, priests, pastors, theologians and other scholars alike, in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, live up to the challenges confronting the local church today in our land?'

For instance, have our local church leaders, priests, pastors, theologians and other Christian scholars of various linguistic groups in Nigeria, ever confronted themselves, in the light of our new reality, with the question of translating the basic texts of our faith (in addition to the Bible translations), into our local languages? If yes, what are the concrete steps taken so far and structures in place towards their realization! Do we see such a project and venture as priority; or do we just mention it at our meetings, for the sake of sounding politically, correct?

Take the Catholic Church in Nigeria for example. Have the Catholic theologians and scholars in Nigeria been confronted by the local church authority, charged under trust and support, with the responsibility of translating into our different local languages, the basic texts of the Vatican Council II, Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1983 Code of Canon Law, Breviary, Sacramentary, and the new Roman Missal.

By now, we are supposed to be using local translations of these basic texts of our faith in our places of worship, teaching in schools, seminaries, universities, other institutions, and in private and public discourse in Nigeria. Nigeria ranks as number one country in Africa with the highest number of trained and educated Christian leaders, priests, pastors and theologians with specializations in various fields of ecclesiastical studies. The question is: how is the local church making use of these talents in our midst today? This is the crux of the matter!

### **The Translation of ‘*Et cum spiritu tuo*’ in African Languages**

Few years back, before his resignation, Pope Emeritus, Benedict XVI, introduced some retranslation of certain expressions in the “commons (Order) of the Holy Mass. Of particular importance here is the change in the words commonly used by the assembly in responding to the priest’s invitation at liturgical celebrations, which now has been corrected and retranslated in some Western Latin languages, like English.

For example, before, in the English translation of the Order of Mass, when the priest says to the people (assembly), ‘**The Lord be with you**’; the people would respond, ‘**And also with you.**’ However, with the new retranslation introduced by Benedict XVI, when the priest says, ‘The Lord be with you’; the people will now respond: ‘**And with your spirit.**’

The new directive from Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, that we should use the expression “**And with your spirit**”, instead of ‘**And also with you**’), is closer to the original Latin text of the Roman Missal, which has, ‘**Et cum spiritu tuo**’ (And with your spirit).

Some Western languages like German, Spanish, Italian, etc. do not have problem with this new changes introduced by Benedict XVI, because they have correct translations from the beginning from the original text in Latin. However, English translation which used to have, ‘**And also with you**’, has been adjusted and corrected to read now, “**And with your spirit**”, in conformity with the original Latin text of the Roman Missal.

However, in the African case, most of the translations in our local languages of ‘**Et cum spiritu tuo**’, have the same problem as the English and are yet to be retranslated and corrected.

For instance, the existing Igbo translation followed the English pattern of the old, ‘**And also with you.**’ In Igbo Mass, when the priest says, ‘**Onye nwe anyi nonyere unu**’ (The Lord be with you), the people would respond, ‘**Nonyere kwa gi**’ (And also with you).

Translating the Latin, ‘**Et cum spiritu tuo**’, into Igbo, we would have, ‘**Nonyere kwa mmuo gi**’ (And with your spirit). But this is not going to be easy in the Igbo context, because of Igbo worldview and concepts of spirits and the Spirit. Thus, thorough theological investigations, to be followed by catechesis on Christian theology on the Spirit (Pneumatology) in the Igbo local church, is needed, should the phrase, ‘**Et cum spiritu tuo**’, be translated as, ‘**Nonyere kwa mmuo gi**’ (And with your spirit).

In other words, before allowing the use of the translation, ‘**Nonyere kwa mmuo gi**’, in our local church during the Mass, the people need to be catechized first on the novelty of Christian teaching on the Spirit. This is very necessary if we do not want to put the local people, not yet versed in Christian theology and doctrine into crisis of faith and spirituality.

This last point is very necessary since majority of our local Christians are coming from the background of our African Traditional Religion (ATR), where spirits are believed to loom large, and distinction is hardly made between the world of man and the spirit-world. Moreover, the word ‘spirit’ among the Igbo, for instance, is a kind of conventional term applicable to any of the spiritual being or deities, in their various functions and hierarchy.

Among the Igbo, there is the Supreme Being (**Chukwu**), a multitude of lesser divinities and spirits, the ancestral spirits and evil spirits. **Chukwu** who is **Chineke** (Creator God), is the maker of heaven and earth, he sends the rain and makes the crop grow. Above all, he is the source of life and the source too from which human beings derive their **Chi** (accompanying spirit, destiny or selfhood).

But **Chukwu** is also conceptualized among the Igbo as a metaphysical personality, almost oriental in character. He is a distant Being of vague personality and sacrifices are seldom offered to him directly. Though, he can be invoked directly through prayers. This accounts for the reasons for the presence of lesser spirits and deities in the Igbo worldview. **Chukwu** has left affairs of people’s daily life to his subordinates (deities, ancestors and other spirits). He is nevertheless a good God, so good that he does not hurt anyone.

Subordinate to **Chukwu**, there are many spirits – good and evil. At the head of bad ones is **Ekwenzu** or **akalogeli** (the devil). This great evil spirit’s work on earth consists in causing misfortunes, sickness of different kinds and premature deaths to people. At times, it appears visibly and then it is a sad omen to anyone who see it. There are many spirits of this kind.

Nevertheless, the good spirits are also many. Among these good spirits, is **Ikenga** – the first household spirit sought by a young man or woman at the beginning of his or her career for protection and success in life. There is the **Ala** or **Ana** (land spirit), which is another prominent deity and is regarded as the queen of the earth and the custodian of human morality. There are also deities named after the four days that make up the Igbo week (**Izu**). These are **Eke**, **Oye**, **Afo** and **Nkwo**. There are many other deities (spirits), which are particular to certain villages.

Each of the above has its own special function in the families, individuals and in the village at large.

Thus, most of these good spirits have shrines dedicated to them and various kinds of sacrifices are offered to them in atonement, in propitiating them or in asking favors. People salute, bow, genuflect and prostrate as the case may be, on passing nearby these shrines. However, it is necessary to emphasize here that the Igbo does not bow down to wood and stone. He bows down to the indwelling spirit only and therefore troubles little about the outer husk. No Igbo would for a moment have credited a material thing with spiritual power; it could be never be more than a receptacle for a spirit which worked through it.

In addition to these spirits, the Igbo believe that every human being has a genius or spiritual double known as **Chi**, which is associated with the individual from the moment of conception, to which his or her abilities, faults, and good or bad fortunes are ascribed, and into whose care is entrusted the fulfilment of the destiny which **Chukwu** has prescribed.

All these mean that translating the Latin expression, '**Et cum spiritu tuo**', into Igbo as '**Nonyere kwa mmuo gi**', there is need for a deeper catechesis and teaching of the novelty of Christian Pneumatology to the local Igbo Christians. Otherwise, the new translation may create more problem than it could solve in the spiritual psychic and worldview of the Igbo.

Thus, the new change in the translation of the Order of Mass introduced by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI affects not just the grammatical structure of the phrase under consideration but also its content and form. This, as we have seen, has enormous consequences for translation of the liturgical text in an African language such as the Igbo.

Again, in the Igbo context, we are not only confronted with the old phrase, "**And also with you.**" The new phrase itself, "**And with your spirit**", rocks the entire perception of the traditional spiritual worldview of the Igbo. This is one of the most challenging aspects of inculturation of Christian theology, which came to us in Africa in its Western form and thought-pattern. In it, we meet the divergences as well as the convergences of African worldview and philosophy with the Western thought-pattern and philosophy through which Christian faith was brought to us.

If the old phrase in the Order of the Mass, '**And also with you**', addresses the individuality of the human person as indivisible whole (body and spirit), which is in line with African philosophy and anthropology, the new phrase, '**And with your spirit**', emphasizes the individuality itself of the human spirit, which, in traditional scholastic Christian theology, is the indwelling place of God, the Trinity in human person. It is in the human spirit that God works first in a person in order to transform the entire being of the individual in question from within, in rendering praise and thanks to God Almighty within the worshipping community and the world.

Here we meet the novelty of the Christian faith, which is very important to the African thought-pattern and religious worldview and for authentic inculturation of the Christian faith in the continent. This is the most challenging aspect of the new change in Roman Missal introduced

by Pope Benedict XVI. It has implications for the inculturation of the Roman Missal in Africa through its translations into local African languages.

Again, in the Igbo worldview, which we tried to analyze above, the concept of **Chi** (accompanying spirit), is a better concept that could be used in introducing the Igbo to the Christian mystery and teaching on the indwelling Spirit of God in the heart and soul of the individual. Thus, if the '**Et cum spiritu tuo**' in Latin is translated into Igbo as '**Nonyere kwa mmuo gi (Chi = spirit)**', the Christian who uses that expression '**mmuo gi**' (your spirit (**Chi**)), will know that what is being referred to is the indwelling spirit of God in him and not any other type of spirit or **Chi**.

In other words, the Igbo word, **Chi** (as spirit), in the new dispensation, assumes a new significant on the account of novelty of Christian faith. It is now not just **Chi** (as in the traditional religious spiritual worldview), but the indwelling spirit of God in man which we acquired as a free-gift (grace) of God through the Paschal-Event of Jesus Christ and his gift of the Holy Spirit. This is because for the Igbo, **Chi** represents the individuality of the human spirit, which is the indwelling or rather operative human spirit of the individual.

It is now many years since Pope Benedict XVI introduced the new change in the Order of Mass. But up till now, not much debate is going on in our local Church – among theologians and scholars of different linguistic groups on how to effect these changes of translation of the liturgical text in our local languages. If there are already some individuals at work on this, however, there is need for a wider consultation since it is a community project meant to serve for posterity. Deep studies and research among experts of different fields in theological studies, African culture and linguistics, is needed to produce something we all shall be proud to call our own, and bequeath to future generations for posterity and permanence of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in our land.

This will help the local church not push out to the public in a hurry, a half-hazard translation of sacred and liturgical texts, like the ones the Popes are correcting today, almost two thousand years after they had been in use.

### **The Importance of Inculturation**

Among the Catholics, for example, who knows how things could have been today had the Vatican Council II not directed that sacraments, especially, the Holy Eucharist be celebrated in local languages. In Nigeria, we started from 1970, immediately after the Vatican II to celebrate the Holy Mass in our local languages. After over forty years of that practice, the result is there today for all to see. The active participation of our people in liturgical life of the church is today, second to none.

Again, from the time of Emperor Constantine the Great, when Europe embraced Christianity as their religion, the nascent church in Europe began an aggressive evangelization of the continent through inculturation of the Gospel. This was how Europe transformed itself,

thought and culture through the Gospel. So much so that it may not be an over statement to say that Christianity gave Europe its present identity, culture, civilization and technology.

Through the work of inculturation, the churches of the West and East of Europe from the earliest stages of the evangelization of that continent were able to give their people and land an enviable cultural identity and solid Christian foundation. This is why today, we all see Christianity as the ‘religion of Europe’ and the bedrock of their culture, civilization and thought-pattern. But in reality, theirs was simply an inculturated Christianity which eventually, they used to give their people a new culture of civilization and scholastic philosophy of thought from which modern science and technology came to be born.

The Arab world did the same with Islamic religion and Arab culture. They gave themselves a new culture and civilization through Islam and Arabic language. We should not forget that in the beginning of his mission, Prophet Mohammed was not welcomed in his native land, the present Saudi Arabia. He was sent in exile and his followers took refuge in African crescent of Ethiopia where they were treated with kindness and African hospitality. That is why the Holy Coran forbid any Jihad against the Ethiopians which it described as good people of priests and monks.

It was only many years later, after Prophet Mohammed had gone that the people of Arabia peninsula decided to unite themselves under Islam, Arabic culture and language. Today, the highest weapons the Arabs have in confronting the world is their Islamic religion, Arabic language and culture. These three elements – Islam, Arabic culture and language have given the Arabs an indelible identity, culture and civilization that nothing will ever take away from them.

In other words, there is power in cultural identity and local language of a people. Until we learn and begin to store and live our faith and civilization in our local languages and African culture, nobody will take us serious. This is what Chinese, Japanese, Indians, Koreans, among others, are doing today. These countries and their people are today highly respected by the world not just because of their economic power but more especially, because of their cultural consciousness and identity upon which they have decided to rebuild their nations as modern states. What lesson can we learn from these countries for own advancement not only in inculturation, but also in overall human development and civilization?

Has it worried any of us that till today, none of the agreements African nations, whether individually, or collectively, have entered with foreign nations is written or stored in African languages. All the agreements, African nations, and individuals, have entered with outsiders and among themselves since the dawn of modern era, are all written and stored in foreign languages.

Moreover, all the formal education Africans have been receiving since the dawn of modern era, are all done in foreign languages. No matter how intelligent you may think you are, you can never surpass in originality of thought the owner of the language in which you do your thinking and writing. There is something pathological about language.

No matter how much English grammar you think you know, you can never be more original and creative in that language than the native English speaker who may not have even

received formal education in his or her language. In other words, we shall continue to be second-class citizens of the world until we begin to think and practice our faith and work in our local languages.

### **Conclusion**

The work of translation of basic texts of our Christian faith into our local languages is the most important aspect of inculturation of the Gospel. The local church of Nigeria must show leadership in this regard in the African continent. In fact, it appears we are already behind many African countries in the area of inculturation and translation. We have been overtaken many years ago by the local churches in Francophone Africa as well as Anglophone countries of Eastern Africa. Even Ghana, our nearest neighbor in West African sub-region, is already miles ahead of us in this area of inculturation and translation.

Without inculturation and translations into local languages of the basic texts of our Christian faith in our local churches in Nigeria, the Christian faith will never reach the desired maturity in our land. We shall continue to complain of syncretism living side-by-side with the Christian faith of our people with no solution in sight. We shall continue to complain of charlatan pastors and priests, their multiplication of healing centers of which distressed poor masses are their easiest victims.

One could imagine how our faith could have been today had the Bible not been translated into African languages. In fact, experts in African Christianity tell us that it was from the time the Bible came to be translated into African local languages that the number of African Christians began to increase in a way never seen in the history of modern Christianity.

All this implies that there is no alternative to an authentic inculturation of the Gospel in our land if we want Christianity to take root in Nigeria. The ongoing menace and deformation of authentic African spirituality and Christianity by most of the fake pastors of Neo Pentecostalism and the so-called 'priest-healers' in the mainline churches will fissile away once we have an authentic inculturated Christianity in Nigeria.

Our people will begin to worship God in truth and spirit only when we take serious the work of inculturation and translation of basic Christian texts in our local languages. In fact, until we are able to translate, interpret, live and celebrate correctly the Christian faith and doctrine in our local languages, culture, philosophy of life, idioms and customs, the Gospel of Jesus Christ can hardly take root in our land.

*Francis Anekwe Oborji, is a Roman Catholic priest. He lives in Rome where he is professor of missiology (mission theology) in a Pontifical University.*