

European Catholics grapple with Lord's Prayer translation

Pope Francis has encouraged a new translation—but is also letting local bishops decide which one to use.

by [Tom Heneghan](#) in the [February 28, 2018](#) issue



A banner with the new French translation of the Lord's Prayer on sale in a religious goods shop in Paris. RNS photo by Tom Heneghan.

Translations of the Lord's Prayer are currently the subject of lively debate among Roman Catholics. The French recently updated theirs, and the Italians plan to adopt a new version later this year, while the Germans have just said a firm *nein* to any change.

Pope Francis, who in his native Spanish prays a version that is slightly different from all of the above, has praised the changes made in French. He also championed another reform—giving local church hierarchies a greater say in how the original Latin texts of prayers are translated.

Welcome to the confusing world of Catholic translations, where linguistics, theology, ecumenism, and power politics clash. A key point of discord: in Latin, the Roman church's official language, the sixth petition is *ne nos inducas in tentationem* ("lead us not into temptation"), while the Greek original, which ends with the word *peirasmos*, can also be translated as a "trial" or "test of faith."

Some non-Catholic churches have used the Greek version. An ecumenical translation by liturgists from around the English-speaking world translated it as "save us from the time of trial."

But Catholic congregations want to avoid straying too far from the Latin. Theologians disagree on how to transfer that phrase from a dead language into living tongues.

The current confusion began when Catholic bishops in France switched to a new translation on December 3, changing the sixth petition from "Do not submit us to temptation"—the wording used since the 1960s, rendered into English—to "Let us not enter into temptation." They argued that God would not tempt the faithful into sin, so a new translation was needed to avoid the impression that God would willingly do the devil's work. French-speaking Catholics in Belgium and Benin had already introduced the change in June.

In an interview with the Italian Catholic television station TV2000 a few days after France's change, [Pope Francis agreed that the older version was faulty](#). God "is not the one who pushes me into temptation," he said. "A father does not do that. . . . The one who leads into temptation is Satan."

The Catholic Church in Italy proposed almost a decade ago to replace "do not lead us into temptation" with the phrase "do not abandon us to temptation," but announced only recently that its bishops would meet in November to approve its use at mass.

In 2001 a Vatican directive titled *Liturgiam authenticam* stated that all translations of prayers must be as close as possible to the Latin, which forced local churches to review all the work they had done and get approval from Rome for the slightest change. Denounced by critics as a bid by conservatives in the Vatican to exert control over national churches, this policy led to years of haggling between Rome and commissions of bishops from the major language groups.

Vatican authorities insisted on translations that critics in several language groups, especially English, thought sounded stilted to native speakers and were hard to recite out loud.

Pope Francis, who frequently criticizes Vatican centralization, acted to end this tension in September by issuing an edict saying that national bishops' conferences would decide how to render prayers from Latin into their own languages.

Robert Sarah, the cardinal who heads the Vatican department that oversees translations, claimed in October that his office still had the power to impose its versions on recalcitrant bishops. A week later, the pope took the unusual step of publicly telling Sarah he was wrong.

One effect of this devolution of responsibility became clear in late January when the German bishops conference, an influential subgroup within the world Catholic hierarchy, announced it did not agree with the objections that others, including the pope, had to the traditional translation.

"The petition 'lead us not into temptation' . . . does not express the suspicion that God could want people to fail, but the belief in his justice and mercy," the conference wrote.

The statement mentioned ecumenical reasons for sticking with the old version. Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, bishop of the Evangelical Church in Germany, had said a week prior to the Catholic bishops' statement that churches could not simply rewrite biblical texts.

The stance posed a problem for German-speaking Austria, where Christoph Schönborn, a cardinal from Vienna, agreed with Pope Francis. The bishops conference there now has to decide whether to follow the pontiff's advice or keep in step with its larger neighbor and not change anything.

In countries with two or more languages, Catholics can pray differently according to where they live. In Belgium, the Wallonia region adopted the new French translation, while Flanders switched in 2016 to a new Dutch translation that says "bring us not to the test."

Switzerland has a German-speaking majority that has not changed its wording, a Francophone minority that will follow the French example at Easter this year, and an

Italian-speaking minority that will make the switch when Italy does.

Adrian Schenker, professor emeritus of Old Testament studies at Switzerland's University of Fribourg, noted in the newspaper *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* that if the petition were translated back into Jesus' native tongue, Aramaic, or the Hebrew used for prayers in the synagogue, the original words could have been understood both ways.

"Both translations and both understandings are possible and so they must have been intended," he said. "Wherever the biblical speech has several meanings, we must understand it in its ambiguity." —Religion News Service

A version of this article, which was edited on February 12, appears in the print edition under the title "European Catholics grapple with various translations of the Lord's Prayer."