

“ONE GOD” IN THE TRINITARIAN FORMULA OF THE COLLECT
A Doctrinal Concern in Translation

The Trinitarian Formula of the Collect

The English translation of the *Trinitarian formula* of the prayer, now customarily known as the *collect*¹ that concludes the introductory rites of the mass, has been the subject of a letter sent on May 13, 2020 by Cardinal Robert Sarah, then prefect of the *Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments* (CDWDS), to the Presidents of English-speaking Episcopal Conferences represented in the *International Commission on English in the Liturgy* (ICEL). In that letter, Cardinal Sarah remarked that the English “one God” in this formula which translates the Latin “Deus” before “*per omnia saecula saeculorum*” could cause doctrinal confusion and could thus be construed as mistaken and problematic (*infra*).

According to the *General Instruction on the Roman Missal* (GIRM), the collect, following ancient tradition,² is usually addressed to God the Father, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit, and is concluded with a Trinitarian formula in three ways:³

1. If the prayer is directed to the Father:

*Per Dominum nostrum Iesum Christum Filium tuum,
qui tecum vivit et regnat in unitate Spiritus Sancti,
Deus, per omnia saecula saeculorum.*

2. If it is directed to the Father, but the Son is mentioned at the end:

*Qui tecum vivit et regnat in unitate Spiritus Sancti,
Deus, per omnia saecula saeculorum.*

3. If it is directed to the Son:

*Qui vivis et regnas cum Deo Patre
in unitate Spiritus Sancti,
Deus, per omnia saecula saeculorum.*

In all three endings, the text is the same: *Deus, per omnia saecula saeculorum*. Incidentally, this formula also occurs in other prayers other than the collect. It is the translation of “*Deus*” in this

¹ The “collect” used to be called “opening prayer” in the old English sacramentaries. It literally translates the Latin “*collecta*” to refer to the prayer after the Gloria that gathers or sums up the intentions of the faithful as they acknowledge their sinfulness and offer praise to God. It is recited though by the presiding priest alone.

² As reference for this ancient tradition, the GENERAL INSTRUCTION ON THE ROMAN MISSAL (GIRM), n. 54 cites (*in footnote 56*): TERTULLIAN, *Adversus Marcionem*, IV, 9: Corpus Christianorum, Series latina, Turnhout, Belgium, 1953, 1, p. 560. PL 2, 376A; ORIGEN, *Disputatio cum Heracleida*, no. 4, 24: Sources chrétiennes, H. deLubac et al., ed. (Paris, 1941-), p. 62; *Statuta Concilii Hipponensis Breviata*, 21: CCL 149, p. 39.

³ See GIRM, n. 54.

formula to “*One God*” in the English translations of the Roman Missal and in these prayers that conclude with the same formula that CDWDS (through Cardinal Sarah) was concerned about.

The English Translation and Its Counterpart in Other Languages

During the period of transition from the Traditional Latin Mass to the *Novus Ordo*, namely, the pre-ICEL period, the English translation of the Collect’s ending simply read, « *God, forever and ever* » which corresponded to the Latin « *Deus, per omnia saecula saeculorum* ».⁴ Beginning with the 1973 Roman Missal, however, such ending of the Trinitarian formula has always been translated into English as « *One God, forever and ever* ». The 2008 (*editio typica tertia*) and the 2010 (*editio typica tertia emendata*) English editions of the Roman Missal retained the same formula.

With the addition of “*one*” before *God* (one God), such an English translation is clearly *literally* inconsistent with the Latin text which simply mentions “*Deus*”, becoming thus one of its kind when compared to translations of the same text in other languages. Consider, for instance, the following:

- Italian:* Per il nostro Signore Gesù Cristo, tuo Figlio, che è **Dio**
(through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who is God)
- French:* per Jésus Christ notre Seigneur et notre **Dieu**
(through Jesus Christ our Lord and our God)
- Spanish:* Por nuestro Señor [...], y es **Dios**
(Through our Lord [...] and is God)
- Portuguese:* Por Nosso Senhor Jesus Cristo, vosso Filho, que é **Deus**
(through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who is God)
- German:* Durch Jesus Christus, deinen Sohn, unseren Herrn und **Gott**
(through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord and God)
- Dutch:* Door onze Heer Jezus Christus, uw Zoon... **God**
(through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son...God)
- Gaeilge/Irish:* Trínár d’Tiarna Íosa Críost do Mhac [...] ina **Dhia**
(through our Lord....”who is” God)
- Polish:* **Bóg**, przez wszystkie wieki wieków
(God, for ever and ever)

In all of these translations, the mention of “*God*” in the ending of the formula is in reference to *Jesus Christ* and is thus an affirmation of his divinity as the second person of the Blessed Trinity.

⁴ See for instance *The Sacramentary*, P. J. Kennedy & Sons, 1966. This was published following the approval granted by U.S. National Conference of Bishops on September 3, 1965.

The CDWDS's Notification

The defect of the English translation was pointed out by CDWDS, through Cardinal Sarah himself in a letter of May 13, 2020, namely, that modifying God with “one” (*one God*):

(On the one hand, it) could serve to undermine the statement of the Son's unique identity within the Trinity which the Latin formulae so strongly convey. On the other hand, it could also be interpreted as saying that Jesus Christ is “one God”. Either or both of these interpretations is injurious to the faith of the Church. The (word) “one” risks suggesting that Jesus became a god independent of the Blessed Trinity and is one god among many. Contrary to the Arian heresy, Jesus Christ, who is God, did not become God. He is God from all eternity, and taking human flesh at his incarnation, became man. According to the ‘lex orandi,’ what we pray needs to express what the Church believes, requiring that, in liturgical formulae, we uphold the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity.

*It is clear from the Latin texts that the doxology emphasises the divinity of Our Lord, Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, who as the Incarnate Son, intercedes on our behalf to the Father, the prayer being made “in the unity of the Holy Spirit.” Thus the Son's role of priestly mediation is made clear. To transfer the Trinitarian relational element *in unitate* as meaning *unus Deus* is incorrect.⁵*

There is nothing necessarily heretical about “one God,” but it is clear that the “God” in the conclusion is meant to refer to Jesus Christ and is thus a Christological affirmation of his divinity, not an affirmation of Trinitarian unity.

The correctness of the CDWDS's observations is founded on both historical and grammatical grounds. *First*, the Trinitarian doxology in Latin is of ancient provenance as it dates back to the 4th century. As the CDWDS stressed, it was meant to emphasize the *divinity of the Incarnate Son, Jesus Christ*, and his role of priestly mediation – as God and man, he intercedes in behalf of the faithful to the Father in the Holy Spirit. The purpose of the formula then was to counter the Arian heresy, thus the insertion of the word “Deus” before “*per omnia saecula saeculorum*” (*Deus, per omnia saecula saeculorum*).

Second, the formula is preceded by a relative clause in two forms: a) when the collect is addressed to the Father and the Son mentioned towards the end: “*qui tecum vivit et regnat in unitate Spiritus Sancti,*” and b) when the collect is addressed to Jesus himself: “*qui tecum vivis et regnas cum Deo Patre in unitate Spiritus Sancti.*” The relative clause in turn refers to the preceding line “*per Dominum nostrum Iesum Christum Filium tuum*” (when addressed to the Father). The relative clause then without doubt points to Jesus himself. This is all the more true when the prayer is addressed to Jesus himself.

One might have expected the relative clause to have been introduced in this formulation by the accusative *quem* to match the accusative *Iesum Christum Filium tuum*, yet we find the nominative

⁵ See <https://www.praytellig.com/index.php/2020/10/17/possible-changes-to-collect-conclusions/>

qui instead. This can only be explained by the fact that its referent is *Deus* (before *per omnia saecula saeculorum*), which is also in the nominative.

The sense and grammatical structure, therefore, of the entire formula clearly points to Jesus Christ himself, which, according to CDWDS is obscured by the English translation with the insertion of the word “one” before “God”.

In any case, it is on account of this observation that the CDWDS *ruled* that English-speaking Episcopal Conferences modify the English translation of the ending of the Collect by dropping the word “one” before “God” and that the old formula with the word “one” be no longer used. Thus, in keeping with such a ruling, the alternative texts of the Trinitarian formula will have to read as follows:

1. If the prayer is directed to the Father:

*Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God, for ever and ever.*

2. If it is directed to the Father, but the Son is mentioned at the end:

*Who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God, for ever and ever.*

3. If it is directed to the Son:

*Who live and reign with God the Father
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God, for ever and ever.*

Those, however, who do not concur with the change introduced into the text of the Collect as detailed in the GIRM above argue that such a change in the English translation seems wholly unnecessary. The natural reading in English, as the argument goes, is that “one God” appears to refer to all three, that is, to “Jesus Christ”, “you” (i.e. the Father), and “Holy Spirit” – the Trinity. As such, the formula is in keeping with both the Latin and English of the Athanasian Creed: “*Ita Deus Pater, Deus Filius, Deus [et] Spiritus Sanctus. Et tamen non tres dii, sed unus est Deus.*” Thus, the Father is God; the Son is God; and the Holy Ghost is God. But there are not three Gods; but one God.⁶

Such an objection, however, seems to miss the whole point the CDWDS is driving at, namely, that the “Deus” in the Trinitarian ending of the Collect, is supposed to be a *Christological* rather than a *Trinitarian* affirmation. As the CDWDS stressed, “*To transfer the Trinitarian relational element in unitate as meaning unus Deus is incorrect.*”

⁶ See <https://www.praytellig.com/index.php/2020/10/17/possible-changes-to-collect-conclusions/>

The Reactions of English-Speaking Episcopal Conferences

Following Cardinal Sarah's letter of May 13, 2020, the chairman of the *International Commission on English in the Liturgy* (ICEL) wrote on May 27, 2020 the same Episcopal Conferences, reminding them that it was up to them to determine how and when the proposed change is to be made and implemented.

The *Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference* (ACBC) was one of the first English-speaking Episcopal Conferences to act on the CDWDS's letter of notification. On September 28, 2020, ACBC's *Bishops Commission for Liturgy* issued a statement which practically repeated CDWDS's explanation in its letter of notification:

...the inclusion of the word 'one' before God is problematic in relation to the Latin text: 'Deus, per omnia saecula saeculorum'. The inclusion of the word 'one' before God can serve to undermine the statement of the Son's unique identity within the Trinity which the Latin formulas so strongly convey and, on the other hand, it can also be interpreted as saying that Jesus Christ is 'one God'. Either or both of these interpretations is injurious to the faith of the Church. It is clear from the Latin texts that the doxology emphasises the divinity of Our Lord, Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son, who intercedes on our behalf, as the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, to the Father and which prayer is made in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Thus the Son's role of priestly mediation is made clear. To transfer the Trinitarian relational element in unitate as meaning unus Deus is incorrect.⁷

Thus, ACBC accepted CDWDS's ruling that the word "one" before "God" in the collect's ending be omitted. It further approved that this change to the text in question be implemented on 29 November 2020.⁸

Similarly, the *Canadian Catholic Bishops Conference* (CCBC), also sometime in September 2020, following consultation with the ICEL, approved a revision to the General Instruction of the Roman Missal concerning the Trinitarian ending of the Collect. Subsequently, on December 8, 2020, heeding the CDWDS's *ruling*, CCBC issued a Decree of Implementation, adjusting the English-language wording of said Trinitarian ending in the Roman Missal as approved for use in the country. Beginning Ash Wednesday, February 17, 2021 henceforth, the word "one" was omitted from the conclusion of the Collect, as well as from other similar prayers in the liturgy, *e.g.*, the Blessing of Water at the Easter Vigil.

The *Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales* (CBCEW) followed suit when it decided to delete "one" from the conclusion of the Collects in the Roman Missal and decreed on November 9, 2020 that this change would come into effect from the First Sunday of Advent in 2020 (November 29, 2020) onwards.

Issuing an explanatory note, the English and Welsh bishops also simply repeated CDWDS's statements but quoted from these statements more than what their Australian counterparts did

⁷ See https://www.catholic.org.au/images/Changes_to_the_Collects_in_the_Roman_Missal.pdf

⁸ See <https://mediablog.catholic.org.au/change-to-prayers-during-mass-due-in-november/>

to point out that “The (word) ‘one’ risks suggesting that Jesus became a god independent of the Blessed Trinity and is one god among many. Contrary to the Arian heresy, Jesus Christ, who is God, did not become God. He is God from all eternity, and taking human flesh at his incarnation, became man. According to the ‘lex orandi,’ what we pray needs to express what the Church believes, requiring that, in liturgical formulae, we uphold the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity.”

The English and Welsh bishops also affirmed that their decision harmonized with that of the Bishops’ Conferences in *Scotland* and *Ireland*, “as well as with other English-speaking territories,”⁹ – obviously excluding the Philippines as yet at this time.

Reaction in the U.S. was rather late, as the *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops* (USCCB) issued a decree¹⁰ to the same effect only the following year, on February 4, 2021. This was a day after the revised text of the GIRM, n. 54 – as approved by the USCCB on January 29, 2021 – was confirmed by the CDWDS on February 3, 2021 (Prot. n. 228/20). The USCCB ruled that the formula concluding all Collect prayers in the Roman Missal be changed effective Feb 17, 2021 (Ash Wednesday). In accord with this decree, the collect ending would henceforth read “*God, for ever and ever*”.

A Note on the Tagalog Translation

Curiously, in most Trinitarian endings of Collects in Tagalog, the word “God” is not always mentioned. In fact, the formula used in Tagalog missals do not seem to correspond to the Latin endings of Collects detailed in the GIRM (n. 54). Consider the following examples:

Aklat ng Pagmimisa: Ama naming makapangyarihan...
sa pamamagitan ni Hesukristo,
kasama ng Espiritu Santo,
magpasawalang hanggan.¹¹

This formula does not translate the whole Latin text of the Collect’s ending in its integrity as found in the GIRM. First, it does not mention the word “*Dios*” to refer to *Hesukristo*, and it omits altogether the relative clause “*na nabubuhay at naghahari*” (*qui... vivit et regnat or qui vivis et regnas*).

The same formula appears in a booklet for Funeral Masses, as follows:

⁹ DEPARTMENT OF CHRISTIAN LIFE AND WORSHIP (Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales), *On the Conclusion of the Collects of the Roman Missal*, Explanatory Notes on the Decree of 9th November 2020.

¹⁰ The decree has been published in <https://www.thecatholictelegraph.com/change-to-the-collect-formula/72545>.

¹¹ *Aklat ng Pagmimisa sa Roma*, Isinaayos sa Pahayag-Kautusan ng Kabanal-banalang Pandaigdig na Kapulungan ng mga Opispo sa Vaticano at Ipinalathala ng Kapangyarihan ni Papa Pablo VI, Salin sa Tagalog ng Ikalawang Huwarang Sipi, Lupon para sa Wikang Tagalog sa Liturgiya, 1981, with *Concordat cum originali* by Fr. Genaro Diwa (published in 2009 by the Archdiocesan Liturgical Commission, Manila), see examples on pp. 21. 793. The same formula is used in the 4-volume *Ang Bagong Misal*, published earlier by the Archdiocesan Liturgical Commission, Manila in 2006, with a *Concordat cum originali* by Fr. Genaro Diwa, and *imprimatur* by Gaudencio Cardinal Rosales.

Misa sa Paglibing: Ama naming makapangyarihan...
sa pamamagitan ni Hesukristo,
kasama ng Espiritu Santo,
magpasawalang hanggan.¹²

It appears that this booklet, *Misa sa Paglibing*, is only for local use, namely, in the Diocese of Malolos. It appears nonetheless official since it has the *imprimatur* of Bishop Jose Oliveros. A more problematic formula appears in a smaller booklet, the *Collectio Rituum*, as follows:

Collectio Rituum: Panginoong Hesukristo...
Nabubuhay *ka* kasama ng Ama
at ng banal na Espiritu, *iisang Dios*,
Magpakailanman.¹³

First, there is no translation for the Latin “*regnas*” in this formula. Second, “*iisang Dios*” (the one and only or sole God?) is rather ambiguous. It can refer to *ka* (i.e., Jesus), thus a *Christological attribution*. It can also refer to *ka*, *Ama* and *Espiritu* altogether, thus a *Trinitarian affirmation of unity*. As a *Christological attribution*, however, it sounds *heretical* because Jesus Christ is not the *sole God* (*iisang Dios*). If this were to be replaced by “*isang Dios*”, this would also be doctrinally problematic as it can also mean “*a God*” which would make Jesus *a god among other gods*. The only way to strip such formulation then of any heretical implication is to consider it as a *Trinitarian affirmation*, which is not also what the original Latin “*Deus*” in the Collect is meant to convey – that is, to emphasize the divinity of Our Lord, Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son, who intercedes on our behalf, as the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity (*supra*).

Conclusion

Though in use for a little over six decades now, the English translation of the Trinitarian ending formula of Collects has been put into question by the CDWDS. The formula in question is the translation of “*Deus*” before “*per omnia saecula saeculorum*” into “*one God*”. The insertion of the word “*one*” in this phrase, the CDWDS observed, could cause doctrinal confusion. “*On the one hand,*” the CDWDS further noted, “*it could serve to undermine the statement of the Son’s unique identity within the Trinity which the Latin formulae so strongly convey. On the other hand, it could also be interpreted as saying that Jesus Christ is ‘one God.’*” The CDWDS finds “(e)ither or both of these interpretations” as “*injurious to the faith of the Church.*” Justifying why it was consequently writing the Presidents of English-speaking Episcopal Conferences, the CDWDS said it was prompting the Bishops to “*decide how best to translate these formulas in order to safeguard both their Trinitarian form as well as their profession of the Son’s divinity.*”¹⁴

¹² *Misa sa Paglibing at Paggunita sa Yumaong Kristiyano*, n.d. (with *nihil obstat* by Fr. Francis Carson, and *imprimatur* by Bishop Jose Oliveros), pp. 5.47.

¹³ *Collectio Rituum*, Manila Archdiocesan Liturgical Commission, 2012 (with *nihil obstat* by Fr. Genaro Diwa, and *imprimatur* by Gaudencio Cardinal Rosales), p. 83.

¹⁴ This is mentioned particularly in the decree issued by the English and Welsh bishops to effect the implementation of the change they introduced into the Trinitarian endings of the Collect (See footnote 8 *supra*).

If bishops in the Philippines were to respond to this prompting, they should consider two things. *First*, the CDWDS practically *ruled* that *a*) the English translation of the ending of the Collect be revised by dropping the word “one” before “God” and that *b*) this old formula with the word “one” before “God” be no longer used.

Second, most major English-speaking Episcopal Conferences *for a fact* have already decided to modify the Trinitarian formula in question and each has issued a decree of implementation to effect such a change. In fact, the change has already been enforced variably, that is, on the First Sunday of Advent of 2020, on November 29, 2020 (Australia, England and Wales), and on Ash Wednesday, on February 17, 2021 (Canada and the U.S.).

Of course, the Philippine bishops are free to discuss the issue, belatedly that is, for the sake of clarity and adequate understanding, but should they “defy” the CDWDS’s ruling? Should they go along with the decision and the action taken by the major English-speaking Episcopal Conferences, or should they insist on using the old formula (“one God”)?

Whatever the bishops choose to do, one other thing also seems to emerge from all these discussions, that is, for them to have the translation of the Trinitarian ending of the Collect into their own vernacular languages reexamined to ensure its fidelity to the original Latin text. The Tagalog translation is certainly a case in point.

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