



# The Holy See

---

APOSTOLIC LETTER  
ISSUED «MOTU PROPRIO»

OF THE SUPREME PONTIFF

FRANCIS

*“Magnum Principium”*

BY WHICH CAN. 838  
OF THE CODE OF CANON LAW IS MODIFIED

The great principle, established by the [Second Vatican Ecumenical Council](#), according to which liturgical prayer be accommodated to the comprehension of the people so that it might be understood, required the weighty task of introducing the vernacular language into the liturgy and of preparing and approving the versions of the liturgical books, a charge that was entrusted to the Bishops.

The Latin Church was aware of the attendant sacrifice involved in the partial loss of liturgical Latin, which had been in use throughout the world over the course of centuries. However it willingly opened the door so that these versions, as part of the rites themselves, might become the voice of the Church celebrating the divine mysteries along with the Latin language.

At the same time, especially given the various clearly expressed views of the Council Fathers with regard to the use of the vernacular language in the liturgy, the Church was aware of the difficulties that might present themselves in this regard. On the one hand it was necessary to unite the good of the faithful of a given time and culture and their right to a conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations with the substantial unity of the Roman Rite. On the other hand the vernacular languages themselves, often only in a progressive manner, would be able to become liturgical languages, standing out in a not dissimilar way to liturgical Latin for their elegance of style

and the profundity of their concepts with the aim of nourishing the faith.

This was the aim of various Liturgical Laws, Instructions, Circular Letters, indications and confirmations of liturgical books in the various vernacular languages issued by the Apostolic See from the time of the Council which was true both before as well as after the laws established by the Code of Canon Law. The criteria indicated were and remain at the level of general guidelines and, as far as possible, must be followed by Liturgical Commissions as the most suitable instruments so that, across the great variety of languages, the liturgical community can arrive at an expressive style suitable and appropriate to the individual parts, maintaining integrity and accurate faithfulness especially in translating some texts of major importance in each liturgical book.

Because the liturgical text is a ritual sign it is a means of oral communication. However, for the believers who celebrate the sacred rites the word is also a mystery. Indeed when words are uttered, in particular when the Sacred Scriptures are read, God speaks to us. In the Gospel Christ himself speaks to his people who respond either themselves or through the celebrant by prayer to the Lord in the Holy Spirit.

The goal of the translation of liturgical texts and of biblical texts for the Liturgy of the Word is to announce the word of salvation to the faithful in obedience to the faith and to express the prayer of the Church to the Lord. For this purpose it is necessary to communicate to a given people using its own language all that the Church intended to communicate to other people through the Latin language. While fidelity cannot always be judged by individual words but must be sought in the context of the whole communicative act and according to its literary genre, nevertheless some particular terms must also be considered in the context of the entire Catholic faith because each translation of texts must be congruent with sound doctrine.

It is no surprise that difficulties have arisen between the Episcopal Conferences and the Apostolic See in the course of this long passage of work. In order that the decisions of the Council about the use of vernacular languages in the liturgy can also be of value in the future, a vigilant and creative collaboration full of reciprocal trust between the Episcopal Conferences and the Dicastery of the Apostolic See that exercises the task of promoting the Sacred Liturgy, i.e. the [Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments](#), is absolutely necessary. For this reason, in order that the renewal of the whole liturgical life might continue, it seemed opportune that some principles handed on since the time of the Council should be more clearly reaffirmed and put into practice.

Without doubt, attention must be paid to the benefit and good of the faithful, nor must the right and duty of Episcopal Conferences be forgotten who, together with Episcopal Conferences from regions sharing the same language and with the Apostolic See, must ensure and establish that, while the character of each language is safeguarded, the sense of the original text is fully and faithfully rendered and that even after adaptations the translated liturgical books always illuminate

the unity of the Roman Rite.

To make collaboration in this service to the faithful between the Apostolic See and Episcopal Conferences easier and more fruitful, and having listened to the advice of the Commission of Bishops and Experts that I established, I order, with the authority entrusted to me, that the canonical discipline currently in force in can. 838 of the *cic* be made clearer so that, according to what is stated in the Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, in particular in articles 36 §§ 3.4, 40 and 63, and in the Apostolic Letter *Motu Proprio* *Sacram Liturgiam*, n. ix, the competency of the Apostolic See surrounding the translation of liturgical books and the more radical adaptations established and approved by Episcopal Conferences be made clearer, among which can also be numbered eventual new texts to be inserted into these books.

Therefore, in the future can. 838 will read as follows: Can. 838 — §1. The ordering and guidance of the sacred liturgy depends solely upon the authority of the Church, namely, that of the Apostolic See and, as provided by law, that of the diocesan Bishop.

§2. It is for the Apostolic See to order the sacred liturgy of the universal Church, publish liturgical books, recognise adaptations approved by the Episcopal Conference according to the norm of law, and exercise vigilance that liturgical regulations are observed faithfully everywhere.

§3. It pertains to the Episcopal Conferences to faithfully prepare versions of the liturgical books in vernacular languages, suitably accommodated within defined limits, and to approve and publish the liturgical books for the regions for which they are responsible after the confirmation of the Apostolic See.

§4 Within the limits of his competence, it belongs to the diocesan Bishop to lay down in the Church entrusted to his care, liturgical regulations which are binding on all.

Consequently this is how art. 64 § 3 of the Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus* as well as other laws are to be interpreted, particularly those contained in the liturgical books concerning their revision. Likewise I order that the *Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments* modify its own “Regulations” on the basis of the new discipline and help the Episcopal Conferences to fulfil their task as well as working to promote ever more the liturgical life of the Latin Church.

Everything that I have decreed in this Apostolic Letter issued *Motu Proprio* must be observed in all its parts, notwithstanding anything to the contrary, even if it be worthy of particular mention, and I hereby set forth and I dispose that it be promulgated by publication in the daily newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano*, that it enter into force on 1 October 2017, and thereafter be published in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*.

*Given in Rome, at St. Peter's, on 3 September of the year 2017, the fifth of my Pontificate*

FRANCISCUS PP.

---

Note: Canon 838 in the light of Conciliar and post Conciliar sources  
A key to reading the motu proprio "Magnum principium"

---

©Copyright - Libreria Editrice Vaticana