

What Yves Chiron had to say about the Pius XII Psalter:

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The Reforms of Pius XII (1945–1958)

AT THE TIME that Fr Bugnini was launching his first liturgical initiatives, Pius XII had already initiated an ambitious general reform of the liturgy. It manifested itself in decisions of varying import but remained largely unfinished.

The more noteworthy of his occasional decisions are: the mitigation of the Eucharistic fast in 1953; the authorization of evening Masses, first for prisoners unable to attend Mass in the morning because of prison rules in 1946, then for workers obliged to work on Sunday mornings in 1947; or again, the authorization granted to the bishop of Chartres on July 20, 1948, for his diocese to have the Epistle and the Gospel read out in French after their being chanted in Latin.¹ This last permission was soon granted to other French dioceses, and to all of France in 1956.

The Bea Psalter

Revising the Latin translation of the psalms was among the projects closest to Pius XII's heart. He thought, as did a number of theologians, exegetes, and scholars of the day, that the then-current translation used in the Church—the Vulgate—contained too many deficiencies. He was soon to say:

In our day, however, these obscurities and inaccuracies are becoming ever more glaring. For recent times have witnessed remarkable progress in the mastery of oriental languages, particularly Hebrew,

1. *La Voix de Notre-Dame de Chartres* 32 (20 November 1948): 133.

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and in the art of translation. Scholarly research into the laws of meter and rhythm governing oriental poetry has advanced apace. The rules for what is called textual criticism are now seen in clearer light.²

What he wanted was a new translation "to follow the original texts, follow them exactly, faithfully." He therefore had a new translation of the psalter made in the very first years of his pontificate. He did not involve the Biblical Commission; rather, he entrusted the task to Fr Augustine Bea, the German Jesuit president of the Pontifical Biblical Institute. The latter worked at it from 1941 to 1944 with the assistance of five Institute professors. The result, far from being a revision of existing versions, was a new translation of the Hebrew text into classical Latin. This new version, the *Liber Psalmorum*, was published in 1945.

There was much criticism of this new Latin translation. Cardinal Tisserant, president of the Biblical Commission, said nothing in public but reproved its "German pedantry" (four of the six translators were German Jesuits).³ Several theological and liturgical reviews published critical articles. Most noteworthy is the long editorial series put out by *La Maison-Dieu*, the publishing arm of the *Centre de Pastorale Liturgique*, under the title "Débat sur le nouveau psautier" ("A Debate on the New Psalter").⁴ While hailing the significance of this bold initiative ("No one doubts that the appearance of a new psalter, after sixteen centuries of Saint Jerome's psalter being in use, constitutes an event"), the journal, after several critical studies by various Benedictines and Dominicans, judged that the new psalter was "too radically changed" and asked that it should not be "imposed on us as is." It was a stern judgment: the new translation's Latin was too classical, excessively closer to "the language of Cicero and Horace" than to the Latin of the Church. "If greater intelligibil-

2. Motu proprio *In Cotidianis Precibus*, 24 March 1945, AAS 37 (1945): 65; in the *Enchiridion biblicum: documenti della chiesa sulla sacra Scrittura* (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1994), n. 572; Eng. trans. *Orate Fratres* 19 (17 June 1945): 337–40.

3. In a conversation with Yves Chiron reported in the latter's *Journal d'un théologien, 1946–1996* (Paris: Cerf, 2005), 77.

4. *La Maison-Dieu* 5 (1946): 60–106.

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ity of prayer for generations of priests who are less and less imbued with a classical culture is what is sought in a new version of the psalter, one turns his back on the goal in giving them a prayer composed in a special language with a refined vocabulary."

These criticisms hurt Pius XII; he considered them to be a "personal attack," some said.⁵ Fr Bea wrote a book attempting to explain the work of the commission he had directed and to justify the result.⁶

In his motu proprio *In Cotidianis Precibus* of March 24, 1945, Pius XII had offered this new translation of the psalter (without imposing it on the whole Church) "to all who have the obligation to recite the canonical Hours daily," and he gave authorization for it to be included in and adapted to the Roman breviary.⁷

This revised translation, more usually called the "Bea Psalter," was adopted by only a few religious and monastic communities. On the other hand, it was included in the new editions of the breviary to be published. But common opinion insisted that the Bea Psalter *adaugat latinitatem, minuit pietatem* ("increases Latinity and diminishes piety"). It did not manage to impose itself; during the revision of the breviary undertaken during the pontificate of John XXIII, this ill-suited translation was abandoned.

This first liturgical reform of Pius XII's can be said to have been a failure. Yet he was not discouraged. On May 10, 1946, Cardinal Salotti, prefect of the Congregation of Rites, presented to the pope the idea of instituting a commission for the general reform of the liturgy.⁸ The idea was all the more congenial to Pius XII in that it cor-

5. The expression is that used by Cardinal Tisserant and Magr Montini, substitute at the Secretariate of State, within a few days of each other in conversations with Fr Congar; Congar, *Journal*, 76, 108.

6. Augustin Bea, *Die neue lateinische Psalmenübersetzung, ihr Werden und ihr Geist* (Freiburg: Herder, 1949).

7. *Enchiridion biblicum*, n. 575.

8. Besides Giampietro, *The Development of the Liturgical Reform* (see p. 11, n. 4 above), see the (incomplete) edition by Carlo Braga, *La riforma liturgica di Pio XII. Documenti*, vol. 1, *La "Memoria sulla riforma liturgica"* (Rome: Centro Liturgico Vincenziano Edizioni Liturgiche, 2003).

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ONE OF THE main authors for the Church Music Association of America's blog declared (6/10/2022) that the *Father Brébeuf Hymnal* "has no parallel and not even any close competitor." That author also said (6/10/2019) the *Brébeuf Hymnal* is "hands down, the best Catholic hymnal ever published. [...] It is such a fantastic hymnal that it deserves to be in the pews of every Catholic church." • <https://ccwatershed.org/>