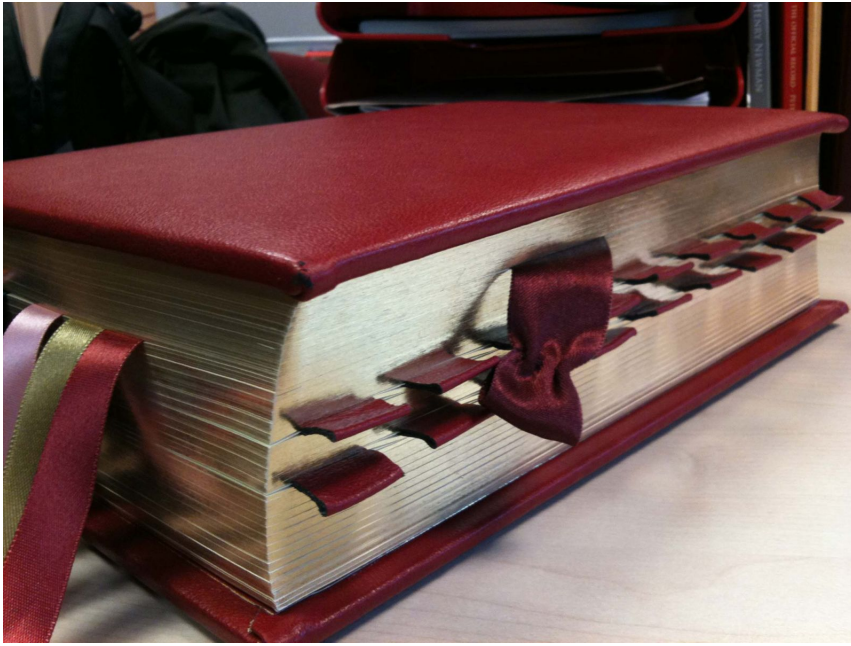


Liturgist: 'I'm at a loss with the new Missal'



Fr Nicholas King's diplomatic and thorough guide to the new translation of the Missal is operating on two levels.

On the one hand, he is bringing out with the authority of an experienced Bible translator the inevitable inexactness and judgement calls involved in any translation, and illustrating these equally from both the 1973 version and the new text now being introduced.

On the other, he is raising some profound questions about whether good liturgy is really a matter of translation at all. He suggests that Christian Latin is not in fact a sacred or elevated language, but rather a workaday, simplified tongue used as a second language across a wide international empire. Specialists will probably cavil here, and surely the Missal, at least, also incorporates court usage.

Nevertheless, the general point is sound: the cultures in which the Latin of the Missal was a living language are now remote from us; our using it as the basis for vernacular texts to be proclaimed publicly, now, in large buildings, may be problematic. It is not surprising that at the end, Fr King disarmingly suggests that a liturgy for today needs to be written in a modern vernacular, from scratch.

There is obviously much to learn from this challenging piece, not least because no one is going to agree with everything in it. But I wonder if *The Tablet*, in commissioning this thoughtful reflection, has really addressed the central difficulties that the new translation will cause. Compared with its predecessor, the new English text of the Mass images the divine in a more remote, orotund way.



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This change is controversial; its theological justification is unclear and unpersuasive; for many it will cause pain. A Church that can stretch its provisions to accommodate the liturgical sensitivities of Tridentinists and of Ordinariate converts could surely give a little leeway to those who have been reasonably contented mainstream Catholics for the past generation and really do not see what was so drastically wrong with the Missal we had.

Moreover, though Fr King is surely right at the level of theology to acquit the new version of "any systematic attempt ... to roll back ... the Second Vatican Council", the case is not so clear at the level of process. The Vatican's subversion of the collegial mechanisms that were operating quite satisfactorily for a revision of the 1973 text – the matter is authoritatively treated in Bishop Maurice Taylor's memoir – raises serious questions about the appropriate exercise of authority and about the curia's commitment to the reality of Vatican II. These questions won't be dispelled by lame calls to unity and obedience.

There are serious questions of integrity here. Mainstream Catholics are having imposed on them profound changes that are not self-evidently for the better. The real challenge of the new translation centres on how we handle those human and ecclesial realities. It is on this point that our most gifted priests and our wisest theological heads need to give better guidance that we have received so far. For my part, I am at something of a loss.

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