

## Is the Translation of the Missal a “Luxury Issue”?

by Mark Francis, CSV

In his April 25, 2015, column in *Crux*, Vatican commentator John Allen wrote an article entitled “Catholics around the world can’t afford ‘Luxury Issues.’”<sup>1</sup> He began by reporting a controversy over a Catholic Relief Services employee who is in a same-sex marriage. Whatever the legitimate concerns raised by this discovery, he characterizes this question as a “luxury issue” that he defined as “the kind of argument that only affluent cultures and churches can afford to have.”

Allen then contrasts arguments over same-sex marriage with the murder of Christian university students by Al-Shabaab militants in Garisa, Kenya. He discusses the aftermath of this horrific event in an interview with a bishop in Kenya directly affected by this slaughter. Moving to another part of the world, Allen offers another example of a serious versus “luxury” issue by describing the ongoing concern of a Greek Melkite bishop from Syria who tells of the kidnapping of Christian clergy by various armed factions involved in Syria’s civil war.

He points out that “even when those Catholics aren’t facing religious persecution or war, many of them are still stuck with the realities of grinding poverty, bad governance, and unstable social and political situations.” Underlining that this reality creates very different priorities among Catholics in the developing world, Allen jumps to the recent translation of the Mass as another “luxury issue.”

Not long ago, that two-thirds world [living outside the West] watched with astonishment as American Catholics spend more than a decade debating the translation of terms in the Mass—for instance, whether people should say “And also with you” or “And with your spirit” when the priest says, “The Lord be with you.” Many were stunned to learn that we apparently have so much time on our hands, and so little of life-and-death urgency to occupy it.

I certainly agree that life-and-death issues trump many of the concerns of “affluent cultures and churches.” Poverty, pandemics like Ebola, immigration, care of the earth, and relief for those Christians being persecuted and mar-

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<sup>1</sup> John L. Allen Jr., “Catholics around the World Can’t afford ‘Luxury Issues,’” *Crux*, (April 25, 2015), <http://www.cruxnow.com/church/2015/04/25/catholics-around-the-world-cant-afford-luxury-issues/>.

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tyred are all issues that should have priority on the list of international Catholic concerns. However, this does not mean that other issues are not worthy of our attention. I am not convinced that it is helpful to trivialize a question like the controversial new Mass translation by saying “there are other issues that are so much more important” or by reducing it to an argument over whether we should say in “And with your spirit” or “And also with you” in response to “The Lord be with you.”

Implying that the translation controversy was only the concern of affluent Americans is clearly not an accurate reading of the story of this latest English edition of the Missal. Other English-speaking countries with Catholic populations were also embroiled in debates concerning the quality of a translation that was, in effect, imposed on the English-speaking Catholic world. This version of the Mass was inspired by the highly problematic 2003 instruction of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments (CDW) on liturgical translation, *Liturgiam authenticam*. It is also well known that a committee established by the Holy See called *Vox Clara* made changes in the text after it had been approved by the various bishops’ conferences in violation of procedures that had been established since the Second Vatican Council.

The English-language translation has not been the only one affected by the new translation guidelines. Significantly, a German translation of the Missal using the translation criteria outlined in *Liturgiam authenticam* was rejected by the German bishops because it was deemed insufficient for the needs of German-speaking Catholics. There have been similar objections in other languages to *Liturgiam authenticam*’s insistence that translations be literal, word-by-word renderings of the Latin text.

A month before John Allen’s article appeared, in the March 5, 2015 edition of the *Tablet* of London, Jesuit Fr. Gerald O’Collins, professor emeritus of Rome’s Gregorian University and an Australian, published an open letter addressed to English-speaking bishops. This eminent theologian argued in favor of setting aside the current 2010 translation in favor of the 1998 translation that had been approved by all of the English-speaking bishops’ conferences. Fr. O’Collins explains why:

This 2010 translation regularly sounds like Latin texts transposed into English words rather than genuine English. Mgr. Ronald Knox, like many others before and after him, wanted translations that “read like a first-rate native thing.” Who could say that of our present Missal? Those who prepared the 2010 Missal aimed at a “sacral style”—something that is alien to the direct and familiar way of speaking to God and about God practiced by the psalmists and taught by Jesus. He never encouraged us to say: “graciously grant, we pray, that you give us our daily bread,” or “may thy will, we pray, O Lord, be done through your prevenient grace.” He asked us to pray simply and directly to God: “thy will be done; give us this day our daily bread.” What would Jesus say about the 2010 Missal? Would he approve of its clunky, Latinized English that aspires to a “sacral” style which allegedly will “inspire” worshippers?

The answer to this last question, of course, would be a resounding “no.” In an editorial supporting Fr. O’Collins, appearing in the following issue, the *Tablet* editorial board spoke approvingly of moving to the 1998 translation, maintaining that it is

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2 Gerald O’Collins, SJ, “Open Letter to English-Speaking Bishops,” *The Tablet* (March 5, 2015), <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/letters/8/4883/open-letter-to-english-speaking-bishops>.

the infinitely better alternative to the version that the Vatican commissioned and imposed in 2011. [This 2010 translation] has not bedded down with time, nor gained the affection that comes from familiarity. It is still as clumsy, clunky and to be frank, as ugly as the day it was introduced.<sup>3</sup>

While not as “life and death” as many issues with which the Church in the Global South needs to deal, the translation of the Missal also touches the lives of Christians in countries using English acquired as a second language. Bishops’ conferences that belong to the International Commission on English in the Liturgy are from countries of the two-thirds world: India, Pakistan, the Philippines, Ghana, Kenya, Malaysia–Singapore, Malawi, Uganda, and Zimbabwe—to name just a few. If the current translation is difficult to understand for those whose first language is English, how much more incomprehensible will this version of the Mass be for those who use English as a second language?

Bishop Donald Trautman, bishop emeritus of Erie, Pennsylvania, and former chairman of the US Bishops’ Conference’s Committee on the Liturgy, also weighed in on March 24 on the website of the Association of Catholic Priests supporting the use of the 1998 translation, describing our current translation as a pastoral “failure.” He is even more direct than Fr. O’Collins:

In the New Missal we have these words: consubstantial, incarnate, oblation, conciliation, ineffable, unfeigned, and so on. And yet the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, which came out of the Second Vatican Council, declared: “The rites should be distinguished by a noble simplicity, they should be short, clear—and they should be within the people’s powers of comprehension and normally should not require much explanation” (paragraph 34). These words of an Ecumenical Council trump any document of a curial congregation on translation.<sup>4</sup>

Bishop Trautman succinctly summed up his position by stating: “The present New Missal does not communicate in the living language of the worshipping assembly; it fails as a translation. It fails to lead to full conscious and active participation.”

While to some the issue of the quality of the English translation of the Missal may not seem like a life and death matter, yet it is crucial to the life of the Church. What is at stake is the liturgical reform desired by the Second Vatican Council. The overarching goal of the reformed liturgy was to lead everyone at the liturgy to that “full, conscious and active participation” required by the rites. If the people (and the priests) do not understand the words of our prayer the church itself is wounded. Prayer then becomes an obstacle to our encounter with Christ and we become less able to see through Christ’s eyes, and prioritize the very life and death issues that John Allen describes.

The Sunday Eucharist is the one privileged moment during the week when Catholics gather together as a community to celebrate the wonderful works of God for us in Jesus Christ—especially the grace flowing from Christ’s suffering, death and resurrection. The ability of people to enter into the celebration of the Mass is not a secondary issue. This ultimately means just as much to those Christians suffering and dying in Africa and the Middle East as it does to those of us living in “affluent countries,” since entering into a profound sense of our communion in Christ requires that we understand the words of our prayer.

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3 “Recover What Was Lost in the Translation,” *The Tablet* (March 12, 2015), <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/editors-desk/1/4936/recover-what-was-lost-in-the-translation>.

4 Donald W. Trautman, “The Failure of the Missal,” Association of Catholic Priests, March 24, 2015, <http://www.associationofcatholicpriests.ie/2015/03/the-failure-of-the-missal/>.

The problematic 2010 English translation of the Missal is not a “luxury issue.” Catholics who use English for prayer—both in “affluent countries” as well as in countries struggling because of poverty, war, and persecution—have a right to worship in a language they understand.