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Shakespeare & The New Roman Missal

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 1, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

Unlike many of my colleagues here at NCR, I am not filled with dread by the new Roman Missal translation we shall all be using come Advent. Yes, we can pull out a few clunky turns of phrase but you can find plenty of clunky turns of phrase in the current Missal. And, thank God we are nixing the first, and by far most commonly used, Memorial Acclamation: "Christ has died, Christ is Risen, Christ will come again." Everywhere else in the Mass, the people of God pray to the Son in the second person: "Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world..." for example. (The Lord's Prayer is an obvious and understandable exception.)

Nor am I worried about the return of some archaic language. It may be true, but very sad, that the average person in the pew is unfamiliar with the meaning of the word "ineffable" but I would submit that it is well nigh to impossible to find a better adjective to describe the Godhead - and our limited intellectual capability to exhaust the meaning of God. And, besides, if we need to avoid archaicness in the liturgy, why is the priest still dressed in what was once a toga?

But, instead of getting all in a lather, maybe we need to think of the new translation the way we think of Shakespeare. Admit it, before you go to see a play by the great bard, you re-read the text because otherwise you will miss the meaning of some of the play. Maybe it is not such a bad idea if parents read through the missal with their children before Mass. (Pastors - in the bulletin, indicate which eucharistic prayer you will be using the next week, so parents can do this! And, include the current and upcoming antiphons, many of which are beautifully poetic.) What we don't do is go to a Shakespeare play and re-write it.

John McWhorter had an interesting essay [1]on Shakespeare last week. He quotes this passage from *As You Like It* in which Touchstone is pondering his marriage to Audrey:

> A man may, if he were of a fearful heart,
> stagger in this attempt; for here we have no temple
> but the wood, no assembly but horn-beasts. But what
> though? Courage! As horns are odious, they are
> necessary. It is said, ?many a man knows no end of
> his goods:? right; many a man has good horns, and
> knows no end of them. Well, that is the dowry of
> his wife; ?tis none of his own getting. Horns?
> Even so. Poor men alone? No, no; the noblest deer
> hath them as huge as the rascal. Is the single man
> therefore blessed? No: as a walled town is more
> worthier than a village, so is the forehead of a
> married man more honourable than the bare brow of a
> bachelor; and by how much defence is better than no
> skill, by so much is a horn more precious than to want.

Like McWhorter, I need to consult the notes in my Riverside Shakespeare to discern the full meaning of that text. But, what is so wrong with that? In short, regarding the new Missal, the time for complaints is over and the time for instruction, and for self-instruction, has begun.

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[1] http://www.tnr.com/article/put-differently/92750/shakespeare-as-you-like-it-language