

FIRST THINGS

Restoring the Words

Anthony Esolen

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Two workers at the Ministry of Truth, Smith and Syme, sit at a table in an underground canteen. They wolf down spoonfuls of a pink and gray stew, with spongy chunks vaguely reminiscent of meat. Then Syme, filled with zeal, describes for his comrade what a joy it is to eliminate words from the language: “Take *good*, for instance. If you have a word like *good*, what need is there for a word like *bad*? *Ungood* will do just as well—better, because it’s an exact opposite, which the other is not. Or again, if you want a stronger version of *good*, what sense is there in having a whole string of vague useless words like *excellent* and *splendid* and all the rest of them? *Plusgood* covers the meaning, or *doubleplusgood* if you want something stronger still.” Smith, says Syme, doesn’t “grasp the beauty of the destruction of words.” The word *beauty* is a piece of fine irony. The *beauty* whereof he speaks is not the splendor of being. It is the blank glare of absence. “Don’t you see,” says Syme, “that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it.”

Some forty years ago, a team of men were charged with rendering the Latin of the Catholic Novus Ordo Mass into English. They did so, dully and inaccurately, for the common prayers spoken by the people at every Mass. But when they worked just beyond the view of the people, they became different men altogether. Then they felt the fire of zeal. The prayers spoken by the priest—the collects, offertories, prefaces, postcommunions, special blessings, and even the eucharistic prayers—gave them a vast field to ply their talents.

According to their own testimony, the translation they came up with is “faithful but not literal.” That should have made people wary. When one translates poetry, the literal is *especially* to be attended to, since it is the literal that is the vehicle for whole constellations of meaning. Jesus did not say, “The Kingdom of God has relatively inauspicious beginnings.” He said, “The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed.”

They justified their decisions by appealing, selectively, to instructions from the Vatican. Even the instructions they highlighted are but sensible reminders that translation is an art, not a mechanical application of rules. “The total act of communication must be kept in mind,” as well as the “literary form” proper to the respective languages. Latin words, “succinct and abstract,” must be made concrete, while “pompous and superfluous language must be avoided.”

Thence came the mischief. They ignored the poetry. They severed thought from thought. They rendered concrete words, or abstract words with concrete substrates, as generalities. They eliminated most of the sense of the sacred. They quietly filed words like “grace” down the memory hole. They muffled the word of God. *They did not translate*. Or if they did, it was not into English. A more obedient reading of the Vatican instructions would not have produced the thin, pedestrian, and often misleading version Catholics have used these last forty

years, one that depended, for whatever reasons, upon the destruction of words, and images, and allusions (particularly biblical allusions) and the truths they convey.

In their work, the wonderful dictum of Thomas Aquinas, *bonum diffusivum sui*, “the good pours itself forth,” was inverted into *malum diminuendum alterius*, “evil seeks to diminish the other.” Among other things, that meant the petty withholding of words of praise, presumably because they were considered redundant. But is that the mark of love? Is a second smile, or a second kiss, redundant, because there has been a first? And if there has not been a first smile or kiss, are such things unnecessary, because they seem to serve no strictly utilitarian function?

I have searched the 1973 Order of the Mass alone (a mere fraction of all the prayers that have been retranslated) and found thirty instances of such *laudatio interrupta*. Most of the time an adjective of praise, such as *sanctus*, *gloriosus*, *beatus*, and a few others, simply disappears: *sancte Pater* becomes *Father*, *dilectissimi Filii tui* becomes *your son*, *beatae Mariae* becomes *Mary*, *diem sacratissimam*, on Christmas and Epiphany and Easter and all those glorious days in the history of salvation, becomes *that day*. Sometimes, though, a whole phrase is simply dropped as too hopelessly cast in the language of holiness: *sanctas ac venerabilis manus*, when Jesus blesses the wine in Eucharistic Prayer I, vanishes; so, in the same prayer, does *sanctum sacrificium, immaculatam hostiam*; so also *in conspectu maiestatis tuae*. No need, apparently, to dwell upon the holy and venerable hands of the Lord, or the sacred sacrifice and immaculate victim we offer in the Eucharist, or the presence of God’s majesty, which we hope one day to enjoy.

I have reviewed hundreds of pages of Latin text, with the first Novus Ordo’s rendering beside me. I defy any English-speaking Catholic in the world to defend the work, on any grounds whatsoever, linguistic, poetic, scriptural, or theological. Eventually, the Vatican, noticing that the liturgy had in fact not been translated into English, ordered that the job be done. Hence every prayer said at every Mass for every day of the year and every purpose for which a Mass may be said has in the last few years been translated, an immense undertaking.

With what success? Great. I’ll illustrate by choosing a few texts from the English, placing them beside their counterparts in the first English version of the Novus Ordo. I won’t cherry-pick but will turn to the beginning of the Church year and to a feast somewhere in the middle—the Transfiguration, let’s say.

Here is the Collect for the First Sunday of Advent:

*Da, quaesumus, omnipotens Deus,
hanc tuis fidelibus voluntatem,
ut, Christo tuo venienti iustis operibus occurrentes,
eius dexteræ sociati, regnum mereamur possidere caeleste.*

The first thing one notices about the Latin prayers is how rich they are in scriptural resonance. A whole scene from the Gospels may be intimated in the literal meaning of an otherwise figurative word. The word here is *occurrentes*. Its root suggests *running*, and its prefix, *against* or *up to*. The idea is that we are running forth to meet Christ as he comes along the way—waiting for the long-awaited, the anointed of God. We are meant to consider not only the nativity of the Christ child but the Lord’s coming again in glory, recalling his parable of the wise and the foolish virgins: “Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took

their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom” (Matt. 25:1).

The lamps of the wise virgins were filled with oil. We pray then that our lamps too will be filled, with *iustis operibus*, works of justice, or deeds of righteousness. That is the hinge of the poem, because if we answer the grace of God with obedient zeal, we will have those lamps filled and we will run to meet him. Then we will be numbered among the friends of the bridegroom, bound in love with him and with one another, at his right hand, *eius dexteræ*. So the prayer ends by recalling another parable describing the second coming of Christ, not as bridegroom but as judge. For the sheep shall be set on his right, and the goats on his left, according as they did or did not meet him among the least of their fellows: “Then the King will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world’” (Matt. 25:34).

Here is the prayer in the first version, with some English overtones:

*All-powerful God,
increase our strength of will for doing good
that Christ may find an eager welcome at his coming
and call us to his side in the kingdom of heaven.*

Let us notice what is gone. First, there are no verbs of request. The Latin phrase *da, quaesumus*, with its thoughtful pauses before the name of God, is eliminated. If people never use words like *beg*, *implore*, and even *pray*, they may in time forget how to beg, implore, and even pray.

The *works of justice* too are gone, replaced by the vague phrase *doing good*. But words like *justice* and *righteousness* call forth all kinds of precise scriptural memories, including those that convict us of sin. Consider the powerful opening of the book of Wisdom: “Love righteousness, you rulers of the earth, think of the Lord with uprightness, and seek him with sincerity of heart.” We seek justice, as we seek God; in ourselves we possess neither. Instead it seems in the first translation that we already possess a *strength of will for doing good*, and we ask merely that it be increased.

Perhaps that is why the image of running is also gone, and why the echoes of the two parables are smothered. For if we remember that five of the virgins went prepared to meet the bridegroom, we may also remember that the other five were scurrying about looking for oil. And if we remember that the sheep were placed at the *right hand* of the Lord, we may remember that the goats were placed at the left. Those who are rewarded with love for love are *the faithful*, and we notice that those words too are missing.

Beyond the muffled meanings, there’s something else missing, hard to describe. Imagine a world of gray: gray skies, gray dress, gray language, gray thoughts, gray feelings, gray prayers. How to describe red and green and gold to someone whose life is enveloped in gray? The language of this collect rather spreads the gray. It avoids imagery and cadence, the soul of poetry. It is, at best, entirely conceptual. We do not see or hear or touch anything.

Here now is the English of the new translation:

*Grant your faithful, we pray, almighty God,
the resolve to run forth to meet your Christ
with righteous deeds at his coming,
so that, gathered at his right hand,
they may be worthy to possess the heavenly kingdom.*

Behold that muscular line, *the resolve to run forth to meet your Christ*. He is coming our way, and we are running forth to meet him. We can see the scene. We can feel the strength of the verbs *run* and *meet*, and the tenderness of the possessive adjective, *your*. For it is the Christ of the Father whom we await, the anointed one of Israel. If we meet him with our lamps filled with *righteous deeds*, then, in a nice play on words that completes the run of alliteration, we will be gathered at his *right hand*. Then and only then will we be *worthy to possess the heavenly kingdom*, the one that Jesus says has been prepared for the faithful from of old.

Let us now go to the postcommunion prayer of this same Mass:

*Prosint nobis, quaesumus, Domine, frequentata mysteria,
quibus nos, inter praetereuntia ambulantes,
iam nunc instituis amare caelestia et inhaerere mansuris.*

There are four principal elements to this poem, linked in a grammatical rhyme. The first is the *frequentata mysteria*, the *mysteries* we have celebrated. The mystery of the Eucharist binds earth from above, that we might be raised up to partake, under the appearances of bread and wine, of the eternal wedding feast of the Lamb. These mysteries are unlike the second element, the *praetereuntia*, the things that literally pass us by, things that do not last. We are walking among those things, and yet in the Eucharist we are raised beyond them. We are infused with a God-given love for the third element of the poem, the *caelestia*, the things of heaven. This love, we pray, will not slip from us but will be firmly planted, so that, instead of *walking*, we will be *cleaving* to the fourth and climactic element, the *mansuris*, the things that do not pass away but are everlasting.

The Latin, again, is steeped in Scripture. One theme is especially prominent. In Advent we recall that all things in our world of time will pass. So says the prophet, after foretelling the first coming of the Messiah: “All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field” (Isa. 40:6). Knowing this, says St. Peter, who quotes that same passage from Isaiah, we hold fast to the word of the Lord that remains forever, “the good news that was preached to you” (1 Pet. 1:25), “the grace that is coming to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” when he comes again (1 Pet. 1:13).

Let’s take the new translation (the one in English) first:

May these mysteries, O Lord,

*in which we have participated,
profit us, we pray,
for even now, as we walk amid passing things,
you teach us by them to love the things of heaven
and hold fast to what endures.*

It is a splendid work. The first element, *mysteries*, dominates the poem, binding the end to the beginning, and earth with heaven. The alliterating hinge, *profit us, we pray*, is both accurate and profoundly scriptural. For the word of God advises us again and again about things that *do not profit*: “What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?” (Eccle. 1:3, KJV). The generations come and go, those *passing things*, the second element in the poem, and therefore God teaches us, *even now*, even in our earthly walk. Through the Eucharist he instructs us to love *the things of heaven*, the third element, with its verbal echo of the second, and not only to love them but to *hold fast* to them, for they are also the fourth and final element of the poem. They, the things of heaven, are *what endures*. “Seek the things that are above,” says Saint Paul (Col. 3:1).

Here is the poem in the first translation (the Newspeak version):

*Father,
may our communion
teach us to love heaven.
May its promise and hope
guide our way on earth.*

It seems pointless to discuss what’s missing. Pretty much everything is missing. But something else is going on. I have suggested that this version’s language is the language of gray. There are two ways to look at that. One is to see how it drains everything of color—of music, of scriptural memories, of reality itself in all its startling and specific glory. This is the language of *via negativa*. The other is to see how it raises gray as the standard of excellence. This is its *via affirmativa*. Now, the default for human beings, sinners not given to examining their consciences closely, is a gray self-satisfaction. We like ourselves the way we are. That being the case, unless we are struck with poverty or sickness or some other affliction, we like the things around us the way they are too.

So the prayer inverts the message of Advent. A glorious star will shine in the heavens to herald the first coming of the Messiah. The heavens themselves will be kindled to herald the second. But we’ll just plod along. It is not a heavenly mystery that teaches us but *our* communion. And sure, we’ll *love heaven*, whatever that means, but the prayer returns us to earth, where we are going *our* more or less contented way, guided, again, by that communion of ours.

Let us proceed to the preface for the Feast of the Transfiguration:

*Vere dignum et iustum est, aequum et salutare,
nos tibi semper et ubique gratias agere,
Domine, sancte Pater, omnipotens aeterne Deus:
per Christum Dominum nostrum.
Qui coram electis testibus suam gloriam revelavit,*

*et communem illam cum ceteris corporis formam
maximo splendore perfudit,
ut de cordibus discipulorum crucis scandalum tolleretur,
et in totius Ecclesiae corpore declararet implendum
quod eius mirabiliter praefulsit in capite.
Et ideo cum caelorum Virtutibus,
in terris te jugiter celebramus,
maiestati tuae sine fine clamantes:*

The first part of the preface does not vary from Mass to Mass. Its purpose is to build upon the prior response of the people, affirming that to give God thanks is *right and just*. The third part, which admits of some variation, is always meant to unite our prayers with the chorus of the angels. This part often names the angels in a striking way, or balances earth and heaven, or revels in the splendor of God. In the new translation, these parts perform that work. Here they are for the first part of the preface:

*It is truly right and just, our duty and our salvation,
always and everywhere to give you thanks,
Lord, holy Father, almighty and eternal God,
through Christ our Lord. . . .
And so, with the Powers of heaven,
we worship you constantly on earth,
and before your majesty
without end we acclaim:*

This kind of language wouldn't do for the translators of the first version. It is too precise, and too pious.

This is what they did. They severed the preface from the previous prayer, dispensing with the opening adverb *vere, truly*. They ditched the repetition of *right and just*. They ditched the elaboration upon those adjectives, *aequum et salutare*, literally *what is owed by rights* and *what avails for health*. They struck the word *holy*. Why should we trouble ourselves inordinately about the holiness of God? In the third part, they struck the conjunction. They muted the word *Powers*. We should think of the angels as wispy girls with flutes, and not those sword-bearing intellectual beings like Michael who battle for the Lord. They diluted God's *majesty*. They altered the significance of the adverb *jugiter, constantly*, applying it to our joy rather than to our worship. In the first version:

*Father, all-powerful and ever-living God,
we do well always and everywhere to give you thanks
through Jesus Christ our Lord. . . .
In our unending joy we echo on earth
the song of the angels in heaven
as they praise your glory for ever:*

Now for the heart of the preface. The Latin poem is a tapestry of Scripture: "And we saw his glory, the glory of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). The splendor of the Transfiguration is a lightning

flash of the glory of Christ to come: “Rejoice to the extent that you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that when his glory is revealed you may also rejoice exultantly” (1 Pet. 4:13). But between glory and glory comes the Cross. Jesus was transfigured before the eyes of those *electis testibus*, the chosen witnesses Peter, James, and John, so that they would see in light of the Transfiguration the suffering he then foretold: “The Son of Man is to be handed over to men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day” (Matt. 17:22–23). Our eyes are bleared, our steps unsteady. The Cross is to us a *scandal*, or, literally, a *stumbling block* (1 Cor. 1:23), but through it we attain, as the Body of Christ, to the glory that shone forth in Christ, “the head of the body, the Church” (Col. 1:18).

The English translators have been as faithful as possible, rendering the poem in a complete sentence, balancing thought with thought and image with image, building to the climactic final word *capite, head*:

*For he revealed his glory in the presence of chosen witnesses
and filled with the greatest splendor that bodily form
which he shares with all humanity,
that the scandal of the Cross
might be removed from the hearts of his disciples
and that he might show
how in the body of the whole Church is to be fulfilled
what so wonderfully shone forth first in its Head.*

That is just what the Latin says, and how it says it. The translators are not embarrassed by wonder and beauty, so they render the striking phrase *maximo splendore perfudit* as *filled with the greatest splendor*, preserving Christ as the subject. He is the one who literally poured that light into the bodily form He shares with us. They are not embarrassed to remind us that Jesus brought to the mountaintop only those *chosen witnesses* and that they were to proclaim what they had seen, as “eyewitnesses of his majesty” (2 Pet. 1:16). They preserve the sense that a *scandal* is something that obstructs our way. They reflect upon the *hearts* of the disciples. Most emphatically, they preserve the hierarchical connection between Christ and the Church, for whom he gave himself on the cross: between the eternal Bridegroom and his Bride, between the Head and the Body.

But for the first translators, this was too much:

*He revealed his glory to the disciples
to strengthen them for the scandal of the cross.
His glory shone from a body like our own,
to show that the Church,
which is the body of Christ,
would one day share his glory.*

I am tempted to say that this is *true* enough. But it is not true *enough*. The Latin, and the English, deliver a great deal more, and more profoundly.

And so on. I could comment in the same way upon every single prayer in a thousand pages of prayers. Those Catholics who grumble about the new translation without looking at the Latin have no idea how much has been

lost to us English speakers these last forty years. To call the translation “conservative” and “pre–Vatican II” is nonsense. It is a faithful English translation of prayers composed for the liturgy *after Vatican II*. That would be much, if it were all. But there is more.

Imagine a young priest rummaging about in a storage room in the church basement. He turns on his flashlight, and there, lying under a pile of newspapers, empty boxes, and dust is a sculpture of Our Lady. He carefully retrieves it from the rubbish. He wipes away the grime. Indeed it is a lovely work. The gold of her hair against the blue of her robe reminds him of the colors of stained- glass windows from centuries ago. He restores it to the church and watches with approval as people pass by and say, “I remember her!”

The prayers of the Mass are not gray. They are colored with all the splendor of truth. Now the color returns. Beauty removes her shroud. The holy word of God is allowed to speak. Who knows why the translators did what they did? It was doubleplusungood; but that is between them and God. When the springtime comes, who cares to remember the winter? Let it pass. For the flowers appear on the earth, and the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.

Anthony Esolen is professor of English at Providence College and the commentator on the new translation for the Magnificat Roman Missal Companion.