

not happen unless everyone is prepared to work at it, particularly those in authority.

The minimum that we need is a catechesis that engages with, and does not just stamp on, the misgivings that many good people have about both the content of the new translation and the processes of its gestation. More importantly, we need those in authority to show a sense of real conviction in its introduction of their text.

There are many English-speaking bishops who voted in approval of the 1998 Missal translation, then voted in approval of a radically different version 10 years later, and who are now expected to welcome and promulgate something different again. Roman Catholics may rightly be asked to obey their pastors, but when members of the Church have to accept what they don't want, they need to feel that the requirement is coming from a good, Spirit-filled place.

If we don't ourselves have the conviction and energy for what we are being asked to do, we have a need and a right to expect it from our superiors. Leadership of that kind enables us to grow and change through the awkwardness. In its absence, Christian obedience degenerates into an immature shifting of responsibility.

It really would help if some bishops who changed their minds about liturgical translation policy would share with us something of how the Spirit led them to do so. We need that leading too. We know nothing of it. It might help us change our minds – and our minds need to be changed if the introduction of the new Missal is to succeed.

Perhaps this plea is unrealistic, and the conviction just isn't there. Perhaps our pastors had no real conversion experiences, but just routinely accepted what their staffs and experts put in front of them. If this is the case, then the process really was seriously at fault. Its results are not trustworthy, and we should call a halt, even now. The liturgy shapes the devotional life of every practising Catholic; major decisions about it need to be taken with discernment, not because it suits bureaucracy.

No one can doubt that the new Missal translation has been mandated juridically by the highest authority in the Church. But the good of souls, which is the Church's supreme law, demands, except in extreme cases, more than juridical correctness.

Bishops should govern first "by counsel, persuasion and example"; when they use their sacred power and authority, they do so "only to build up their flock in truth and holiness" (*Lumen Gentium*, 27).

If we are to proceed with any confidence that the new translation represents God's will for the whole Church, we urgently need this building up. Conformist zealotry will not suffice. We need intelligent, knowledgeable and sensitive leaders who really believe in this new text to go a lot more public than they have done so far.

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'The evidence suggests marriage is still highly regarded, even among those who cohabit'



The Conservative Party, when last in government, brought in the notorious "Section 28" law, making it unlawful for local authorities to promote gay relationships as being equal to straight ones. Now the Tory-led coalition Government is moving in the opposite direction eight years after Labour repealed that law. First it proposes to relax the ban on civil partnerships being celebrated in church, and now it has been flying kites in the media about the possibility of allowing gay marriage itself, in church or out.

What should the Christian reaction be? Are civil partnerships and gay marriages a threat to marriage as we know it, to be resisted to the last? Or are they, on the contrary, a tribute to the institution of marriage, showing it to be held in such high esteem among homosexual men and women that they want to participate in it too? The evidence suggests that marriage is still highly regarded among the general population, even among those who cohabit. Contrary to the axe grinders in the media, to be happily married remains the dearest wish of the great majority.

There was a time when gay-rights campaigners could be assumed to share a Marxist-feminist view of marriage, calling it "the locus of the oppression of women" (and sexual minorities generally). It was in that light that requests for gay marriage were seen as a deliberate attack rather than as the sincerest form of flattery. We must revise that view. We must also avoid falling into the trap of looking for spurious empirical grounds for what are in fact visceral objections – the line that goes "homosexuals make us uncomfortable, so whatever they want they must not be given". Homophobia is a bad counsellor. And devoutly to be avoided at all cost is a British version of the "culture wars" that have besmirched American politics in the last decade.

Yet it is undeniable that opening marriage to gay and lesbian couples would change the definition of marriage in law, and in the English language as well. It was because of such objections from Churches that

the last Labour Government preferred civil partnerships to gay marriage – that, plus a difficulty that the Home Office lawyers apparently ran into in defining "consummation" in the case of a lesbian couple.

Does any of this matter? What important truth about marriage or about human nature is being denied if marriage is no longer regarded as between male and female? One truth being denied is that there is a givenness to the basic monogamous relationship we call marriage, proposing instead that we are free to reinvent it however we wish. This is very like the once fashionable feminist theory that gender identity and sexual orientation are also entirely "socially constructed" and can therefore be deconstructed and reinvented in whatever form we like.

Things have moved on and basic gender differences are now generally recognised to exist. Gay marriage may again call into question this hypothesis of givenness – of a pattern discovered in nature, not invented to suit ourselves. If we allow gay marriage then why not bigamy and polygamy? Why have marriage laws at all? On the other hand, can human nature be relied upon to assert itself in due course – to be self-correcting, so to speak – and meanwhile to tolerate a small-percentage deviation from the norm? Or would even a marginal exception to the rule fundamentally weaken or undermine "marriage as we know it"?

I am undecided, but I don't find the argument more persuasive for being overstated. I am sure that one criterion stands above all others as the basis of judgement. What strengthens family life? What is best for children? What conditions lead to loving, stable, enduring relationships between parents that give a growing child the right balance between loving care and personal autonomy, security and freedom? The answer we have worked out as a society over centuries is now under threat: a family headed by a man and a woman, one of each, bound in matrimony. The fact that it doesn't always work out doesn't invalidate the model. That is not the same as saying "marriage as we know it" is on all fours with Christian teaching, especially the definition of it in the Catholic Church. The English law of marriage departed from that long ago. The great Church-and-State debate now boils down to this – on what grounds can a secular nation still be persuaded to align its laws to traditional Christian teaching? Discuss.