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SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 16, 2008

A Serious Issue on the Revised Grail Psalter

JEFFREY TUCKER

Last week, [CNS reported](#) that the USCCB has voted in favor of incorporating into the English translation of the Mass the "Revised Grail Psalter," and there is speculation that this translation will become the universal Psalter in the English-speaking world.

Whatever the merits of this translation, which has apparently not been made public, there is a problem with what to do about the Psalms that are already composed for use at Mass. Better translations are always helpful, but we really don't need yet another mandatory upheaval. This is cause for concern, but nothing compared with the issue I now must raise.

I had vaguely recalled some horrible copyright issue associated with the Grail, such that websites that posted the text were harassed and forced to remove them, but I could never get a precise fix what this situation was, and with the swirl of translations and revisions coming out year after year, it has been a bit of a blur.

It was in the combox of this site that someone directed me [here](#), to find the following statement which clarifies and crystalizes the emerging problem:

The copyright on the new psalter is held jointly by the Conception Abbey and The Grail. GIA Publications, Inc., is proud to serve as the worldwide agent and pledges to administer the rights in an efficient and impartial manner. The first publication of the new text will occur in the form of a book containing the complete text and will be available as soon as the formal imprimatur is received.

Think of what this means. A private, commercial publisher--whose budget and financial dealings is entirely hidden from public view because it is said to be a religious nonprofit--has struck a deal with another huge institution that has the power to mandate the text that all Catholics in the United States use at Mass. This private publisher will control the rights to use the text, charging whatever price they deem suitable and preventing independent composers from setting the Psalms for Mass.

I wrote the GIA as follows:

My question concerns your policies for the newly chosen Revised Grail Psalter. Many composers are setting the Psalms to music and posting the results online for distribution at no charge. As the agent for the copyright holder, you have publicly promised "efficient and impartial" rights administration. Does this include the rights of composers to set the Psalms and post them for free download? Certainly that would be efficient and impartial. Please clarify your precise policy.

and received the following answer:

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Nicola De Grandi

Ambrosian Rite

Email

Thank you once again,

Eric Downs

GIA Publications, Inc.

phone: 800-442-1358 ext. 27

fax: 708-496-3828

custserv@giamusic.com

Philippe Guy

General

Email

Matthew Hazell

History of the Reform

Email

That was Friday. I haven't heard back. I will of course post the answer as soon as I get it. In any case, it is not too early to raise alarm bells about what this new-found power of GIA could portend.

Fr. Thomas Kocik

Reform of the Reform

Email, Twitter

1. The USCCB has chosen a text controlled by one private publisher, at the expense of every other Catholic publisher (one can surmise what OCP, LitPress, and others think about this decision). This company is *already* bragging that it will use its status to be first to market with the officially published book.

Gregor Kollmorgen

General

Email

2. All money to pay the royalty fees will be paid by Catholic parishes and other publishers, which raises barriers to entry into the market and gives a monopolistic privilege to GIA over everyone else. The money paid for these royalties comes directly out of the pockets of faithful Catholics in the pews, who will be charged money just for the privilege of singing the Psalms. That alone is enough of an outrage to inspire protest. But there is more:

Peter Kwasniewski

Roman Rite

Email

3. There will be no public accounting for what GIA will do with the money. We will never know. Will it be thousands or millions?

Fr. Lawrence Lew, O.P.

General

Email, Twitter

4. This is a major threat to Catholic composers, who might be prevented from posting their Psalm settings online for paid or even free download, without jumping through whatever hoops the GIA wants to set up, and of course this institution will have every incentive to hold the hoops high if only to reinforce its own monopolistic position as rights administrator to the text. Anyone who thinks that the GIA won't favor its own composers over independent composers is woefully naive about the publishing business.

Fr. Robert C. Pasley, KCHS

Parish Priest

Chaplain, CMAA

Email

William Riccio

Roman Rite

Email

5. The existing Psalm settings coming from the likes of GIA are not varied enough to warrant holding a monopoly, which is why sites such as the **Chabanel Psalms**, which already garners vast web traffic, and not only because the Psalms there are free for the taking. It is also because they are dignified and fitting for liturgy - and consistently so. You won't bump into any Samba settings there or settings that sound like 1970s rock ballads, for example.

Fr. Augustine Thompson, O.P.

Dominican Rite

Email

6. GIA will clearly favor having Catholics buy their Psalms rather than download them for free, so the question is what is GIA going to do about this? As far as I can tell, GIA is in the position of shutting down anyone who posts Psalms for download, as well as charging high enough fees to exclude smaller and less well-heeled publishers. Just who is going to police the GIA in this regard? Are we just supposed to trust them with this power? I don't think this is a good idea.

Henri Adam de Villiers

General

Email

Kyle Washut

Byzantine Tradition

Email

7. It is of interest to know precisely what kind of financial arrangements that the USCCB has made with GIA in order to bring this result about. Did the GIA pay the USCCB in some form or any form to bring this result about? If not, a flat denial would be a good way to start. If there was some sort of arrangement, Catholics have a right to know what it was. After all, the USCCB has no money that it didn't gain from the voluntary gifts of Catholics in the pews. Everyone has an interest in knowing more about this.

Ben Yanke

Intern

Email

8. What would be the downside of having the USCCB purchase the whole rights to these Psalms (from the monastery, for example) and making them public domain, free for anyone to use? Of course people will say: but what about the money needed to compensate the translators? But consider that we are talking about a monastery here, and surely a one-time payment should cover whatever justice requires. In any case, from my read of the situation, the fiduciary beneficiary of this scheme is not going to be the monastery. It is going to be GIA, which had *nothing at all to do with translating the Psalms*.

9. It is an awful enough situation that ICEL demands the retention of copyright over the text of the Mass. ICEL has been at least gracious enough to say that people are free to post the texts online at no charge and to set the ordinary


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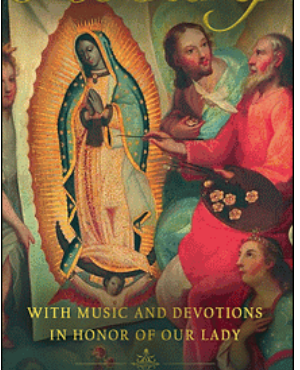
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Cardinals Arinze, George,

chants to music and post those for free download. ICEL is not a profit-making corporation with a massive commercial presence. GIA is a different animal entirely. It is astonishing that the USCCB would permit such a massive company to own and control the monopoly to the Psalms - the very foundation of all Christian song.

10. We must never forget that the very idea of copyright is an invention of positive law, enforced by the state at the point of a gun. The world came to know of such a thing first under the rule of Queen Elizabeth in England, who used the copyright power as a tool for enforcing religious adherence to the Church of England. It is a striking fact that today the Book of Common Prayer uses no copyright protection, for the simple reason that we live in a different age that respects of the rights of religious liberty and encourages wide access to service texts. Meanwhile, we see the Catholic Church making use of these state institution to variously include and exclude people from the field of religious publication and composition. This has done grave damage to the liturgy, since it has enshrined a kind of establishment that has not been accommodating through the years. It is long overdue for the Catholic Church to detach itself from the old forms for enforcement and embrace the new world of digital and rivalrous publication and composition, so that at least people with an interest in improving the liturgy can have a voice in the distribution and shape of the texts of Mass.

This of it: A private company using a legal monopoly to sell at a profit the Psalms we are mandated to sing and using the state to crack down on all who attempt to compete or give them away for free. The GIA and the USCCB are playing with fire here. The Reformation was prompted by injustices less egregious. All Catholics must stand up and insist that this must not be allowed to happen. If the Church is going to authorize the Revised Grail, access must be efficient and impartial in the only way it can be: the rights to the texts must be completely open access.

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GregoryDiPippo — Thank you, Father. Wishing you a blessed Feast of All Saints!

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