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From the Editor: Words made flesh

Patrick Fitzpatrick

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Words made flesh

Pat Fitzpatrick CSSp

St Francis of Assisi is quoted as having said, “Preach the gospel at all times; if necessary, use words.”

Nonetheless, words abound — mission statements, documents, goals and objectives, minutes of meetings, position papers, textbooks, lesson plans, homilies ... you name them.

We have a Liturgy of the Word at every Mass — always two, sometimes three readings. If accompanied by a homily, this liturgy takes up more time than the rest of the Mass. I don’t underrate it. I spend a lot of time working at it when I have to give the homily.

I recall the answer Polonius got when he asked Hamlet: “What do you read, my lord?” Answer: “Words, words, words.” Change the question to “What do you hear?” and ask it of the congregation at a Sunday Mass and you might well get the same three-word answer.

The introduction to John’s gospel reminds us: “The word was made flesh and dwelt among us.” The word was made flesh — that’s why we have a Liturgy of the Word at every Mass. Not to hear it and promptly forget it, but to hear it from a homilist who can flesh it out and make it come alive for us.

Mark’s Gospel

This year our Sunday readings come from Mark’s gospel. It contains no infancy narratives, no stories about life in Nazareth. Mark begins with Jesus selecting his team. He calls two sets of brothers: Simon and Andrew, James and John. Where did he find them? At work — four fishermen in their boats, Not on retreat, not in the synagogue — at work. “The human and the holy go hand in hand”: in the office, at the board table, on the shore, in the kitchen, perhaps in church.

Having selected two sets of brothers as his opening picks, Jesus passes by the local tax collector’s booth, looks at the man seated there and says to him, “Follow me.”

Jesus meets future disciples at their daily work. Instead of waiting for this tax collector to volunteer to become his follower, he takes the initiative and picks Levi — a most unlikely choice. Four fishermen and then a tax collector — a motley crew. Levi, in fact, was probably excommunicated from the synagogue because he was working for the Romans. I’m tempted to say, “Things haven’t changed all that much. How many of those in church would pick *me*? How many of *them* would I pick?”

Jesus never turned down an invitation to dinner. So the next time we meet him he’s in Levi’s house. Who else was

there? Levi’s friends — “tax collectors and sinners” — and the four fishermen. A mixed bag — something resembling a typical parish. The holier-than-thou lookers-on were scandalized: “That Jesus of Nazareth sits down to table with that riff-raff and eats with them? And he calls himself God’s Messenger!” They wouldn’t have been seen dead with those sinners around Levi’s table.

“You shun them. I join them.”

Jesus defends his actions and himself. “Just as the sick need a doctor, sinners need me. I’m a mobile healer and the dining table is often my surgery. You dismiss them. I associate with them. You shun them. I join them. You insist they change before you have anything to do with them. I mingle with them

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and invite them to change. You insist that repentance must precede forgiveness. I believe that it is through forgiveness and table fellowship that they’ll repent. I go to them. I don’t wait for them to come to me. Sinners? — maybe they are. Which of you is without sin? Table fellowship — eating and drinking together — that’s my way of calling sinners. As they hang out with me they’ll get the hang of what I’m about. I can wait.”

The lyrics of Nancy Bodsworth’s song for this Year of Faith in the Catholic Schools of Ontario have a lot to say to us: “We walk by faith and not by sight, Standing tall, rooted in Christ, Blooming where we are planted, Succeeding where we are sown. Growing in faith together — Never alone.”

Our walking along with our preaching, our talking along with our listening, our questioning along with our answering, our laughing along with our caring — long before Shakespeare, Jesus took to heart Hamlet’s advice to the actors: “Suit the action to the word, the word to the action.”

Words, yes — when necessary. But always presence and welcome and the human touch. The Angelus prayer is a daily reminder: “The word became flesh and dwelt among us.” ■