

Winter 2012

From the Editor: Watch your language

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Recommended Citation

Fitzpatrick, P. (2012). From the Editor: Watch your language. *Spiritan Magazine*, 36 (1). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-tc/vol36/iss1/4>

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Watch your language

Pat Fitzpatrick CSSp

It comes as an admonition — mind what you’re saying, where and to whom you’re speaking. Bad language is not acceptable in our house. It shouldn’t be acceptable in church either.

There is bad language in the sense of foul language. But also in the sense of inappropriate language — language that doesn’t communicate, language that’s not understood by the people you’re talking with or writing for. Many legal documents may be written in English but they remain incomprehensible to ordinary people. We’d need a translator.

In language there’s the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, the appropriate and the inappropriate. There’s the spoken word and the written word, the technical terms and their everyday equivalents, the transplanted word and the homegrown word.

In church there is public speaking, public praying and personal communion — with varying degrees of formality. But do they sometimes become too formal, even unnatural?

Can you just translate word for word from one language into another? Anyone who has tried to learn a foreign language soon learns that the answer is no. But some people never take No for an answer. So we get Latinized English.

Churchspeak

These and other aspects of language came to mind as I prayed out loud two very different “Collects” at two recent Masses (why have we gone back to a Latin word “Collect” instead of the much more understandable “Opening Prayer?”):

“O God, who enlightened the Slavic peoples through the brothers Saints Cyril and Methodius, grant that our hearts may grasp the words of your teaching, and perfect us as a people of one accord in true faith and right confession.” Who uses the word “perfect” as a verb today?

“O God, who have prepared for those who love you good things which no eye can see, fill our hearts, we pray, with the warmth of your love, so that, loving you in all things and above all things, we may attain your promises, which surpass every human desire.” Having already said, “Let us pray” before this prayer, why is it necessary to repeat “we pray” in the middle of the prayer — especially when it interrupts the vocal rhythm of a too long one-sentence prayer?

Don’t try to sound profound

First Nations storyteller, Thomas King, remembers some good advice he got: “Words can be dull. Deadly dull — especially religious words ... Tell a story. Don’t preach. Don’t try to sound profound. Don’t show them your mind. Show them your imagination.”

Jesus was a teller of short stories — sometimes one-sentence stories. Is that what made him such a great teacher? He made connections. His “mind’s eye” joined heaven and earth. He brought God down to earth. From the Word made Flesh came words of everyday life.

Belfast born, Brian Moore, recalls his childhood days through the prologue of John’s gospel: “In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was NO. All things came from that beginning. ‘No, don’t do that, Joe,’ Mam said. ‘No, not now,’ Daddy said. ‘No, you can’t go out today. No, God bless us, what’s the matter with you now? No, you can’t have another apple.’ The Word recreated a whole family scene.

Our vocabulary of faith — is it inviting or off-putting? Does it bore us or beckon us? Language can do so much good. Language can do so much harm. Sunday worship has been described as “An hour-long barrage of heavyweight theological terminology. The language of a land with no known inhabitants.”

Keep it simple

Contrast that with a radio short story limited to fifty words spoken by two voices:

“Welcome home, son!”

“Hello, father.”

“It’s so good to see you. It’s been a long time.”

“Yes, father, a very long time. It was hard. Hard as nails. Hard as wood.”

“I know. Which was the hardest?”

“The kiss, father. The kiss.”

“Yes. Come here and let me hold you.”

Five two-syllable words. Forty-five one syllable words. Keep it simple. Use words of everyday life. Take for a motto the end of the Pentecost story: “We hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God” in language we can understand — not in heavyweight theological terminology, but “in our own tongues.” ■