



Episode 15: Liturgy & Language

SUMMARY

A frequent question, especially in light of the translation of the third edition of the Roman Missal, concerns the language of the Mass. Why do the words of Mass sound so different from the language we use in everyday life? Human beings express spiritual realities through cultural language, gestures and actions. Thus the Catechism teaches that one source for understanding Mass is found in human culture. Every culture has its own language. Every language develops within the context of a particular culture. Eskimo culture, for example, uses many different words for “snow.” French culture has an entire vocabulary focused on wine and wine-making and another for bread and bread-making.

We know instinctively to use a particular kind of language that is suited to the circumstances or occasion: we speak to children one way, but use different linguistic registers when speaking to loved ones, friends, colleagues, or employers. An anecdote from American history provides an interesting example of this. On July 4, 1863, after the Union Army’s victory at Gettysburg,

some reporters asked President Lincoln for comment.

“How long is it—eighty odd years—since on the Fourth of July for the first time in the history of the world a nation, by its representatives, assembled and declared as a self-evident truth that ‘all men are created equal...’ This is a glorious theme, and the occasion for a speech, but I am not prepared to make one worthy of the occasion.” Months later, that language was revised to reflect the solemnity of the occasion. At the dedication of Soldiers’ National Cemetery, the President took up the theme with an enriched vocabulary: “Fourscore and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation...” (November 19, 1863)

Something similar occurs in the Mass. When speaking of the awesome mystery which is God, we use language that is appropriate to the context and the solemnity of the occasion. The language of the Mass is not the language of Main Street, USA, but of Main Street, Heaven.

Our task is to make our language less like this world and more like that of the world to come.

IN THE TRADITION

“Lord, who can comprehend even one of your words? We lose more of it than we grasp, like those who drink from a living spring. For God’s word offers different facets according to the capacity of the listener, and the Lord has portrayed his message in many colors... Be glad then that you are overwhelmed, and do not be saddened because he has overcome you. A thirsty man is happy when he is drinking, and he is not depressed because he cannot exhaust the spring.”

St. Ephrem,
Commentary on the Diatessaron

human representations. Our human words always fall short of the mystery of God.”

CCC, n° 42

✠ “[T]he greatest prudence and attention is required in the preparation of liturgical books marked by sound doctrine, which are exact in wording, free from all ideological influence, and otherwise endowed with those qualities by which the sacred mysteries of salvation and the indefectible faith of the Church are efficaciously transmitted by means of human language to prayer, and worthy worship is offered to God the Most High.”

Liturgiam Authenticam, n° 3

THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH

✠ “A sacramental celebration is woven from signs and symbols. In keeping with the divine pedagogy of salvation, their meaning is rooted in the work of creation and in human culture, specified by the events of the Old Covenant and fully revealed in the person and work of Christ.”

Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), n° 1145

✠ “In human life, signs and symbols occupy an important place. As a being at once body and spirit, man expresses and perceives spiritual realities through physical signs and symbols. As a social being, man needs signs and symbols to communicate with others, through language, gestures, and actions. the same holds true for his relationship with God.”

CCC, n° 1146

✠ “God transcends all creatures. We must therefore continually purify our language of everything in it that is limited, image-bound or imperfect, if we are not to confuse our image of God—the inexpressible, the incomprehensible, the invisible, the ungraspable—with our

IN THE PRAYER OF THE CHURCH

O God, save me by your name;
by your power, defend my cause.
O God, hear my prayer;
give ear to the words of my mouth.

Entrance Antiphon
Friday, Fourth Week of Lent

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What prayers or words of the Mass remind you that our true home is in heaven?
2. What makes the setting at Mass different from other settings where we encounter people every day?

FOR FURTHER READING

Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Liturgiam authenticam: fifth instruction on vernacular translation of the Roman liturgy*, (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2001).