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From Italian to Latin, words on wall say what need not be said

Melissa Musick Nussbaum | Apr. 12, 2011 My Table Is Spread

Some years ago, my husband and I visited a Norbertine Abbey in Belgium. The abbot's chair looked like a throne. But just across from the chair, on a wall the abbot faced every day, was a carved skull. Underneath the skull the name of each former abbot was carved into the stone, with space left for the current abbot's name and for the names of those yet to be appointed abbot. Memento mori. (That's Latin for "Don't take this seat personally.")

A different kind of wall art has appeared in this country. It is the decorative plaque, supersized, and freed from the constraints of a frame. Suburban homes across the country feature these word-covered walls. The house as plaque.

You will walk through thousands of Christian bookstores before you find a decorative plaque with these words from scripture: ?And Judas went and hanged himself.? For the point here is uplift, uplift and encouragement and that most American of needs, affirmation. ?God Bless This House? in cross-stitch has been transformed into ?God Has Blessed This House? in large and elaborate script.

At the high end there is hand-drawn calligraphy. At the low end there is the peel-and-stick vinyl strip. The peel-and-stick vinyl strip allows for flexibility. The ?Dear Santa, Define Good,? can come down for the Valentine-themed ?Live. Laugh. Love.? But the hand-drawn lettering has the appeal of permanence, and ?Laundry Room, Drop Your Drawers Here? or ?Children, Touch the World With Love? are statements for all seasons. Even when children touch the world with something else, like ketchup or mucus, and we have to adjourn to the laundry room.

Some of the ?pre-designed statements don?t make any sense. ?We Have Fallen Into the Place Where All Is Music.? Are the bodies stuffed under the lid of the Steinway grand? Still, even if they do work out to be clues in a murder mystery, these words are not downers. They?re uplifting. Dismembered behind the whole house surround sound system, maybe, but at least the deceased have fallen into a place where all is music.

Sometimes the kitchen walls are adorned with recipe instructions: ?Whip. Sauté. Chop. Grind.? Though, because cooking is a violent business, you can see where this could get out of hand: Sear. Dice. Slice. Debone. Broil. Boil. Butterfly. Fillet. Fry. Smash. Mash. Mince. We?ve fallen into a place where all is hot oil and sharp knives.

Most people opt for Italian in the kitchen. Like non-Chinese-speaking teenagers who choose Chinese characters for their tattoos, and so spend life walking around with ?No MSG? emblazoned on their arms, so non-Italian-speaking homeowners choose Italian phrases for their cucinas. This one is popular: ?Viva Bene, Spesso L?Amore, Di Risata Molto.? It?s the popular ?Live. Love. Laugh,? though it might be ?Hooray for Benny. Love Your Spesso. Lotsa Risata.? At least we?ve fallen into a place where all is pasta, which is another popular option, a wall covered with the Italian names for all sorts of macaronis.

Most of this wall art is in kitchens where nobody cooks and in dining rooms where nobody eats, though no one yet has come up with a peel-and-stick of the Domino?s delivery number (719-444-8888, for those of you in Colorado Springs, Colo., and that?s from memory).

But because this is uplifting -- and edifying -- scripture abounds.

One company offers the fruits of the Spirit from Galatians (one per riser) for the stairway. That only works if you have eight stairs, though nine will work if you use one riser for the citation. Now I suppose a more editorially-minded homeowner (with more stairs) could also include the works of the flesh from Galatians, even angling those words off to the mother-in-law suite or the room of a rebellious teen. ?Licentiousness? will take a good foot, foot and a half, so it?s out for those narrow attic stairs, but it will make the point on the way to the troublemakers? hall.

One company skips the stairs themselves and adorns the stairway hall with the full text of the 23rd Psalm, King James edition. That really combines the best of all Paul?s fruits, good and rotten, by including the line, ?Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,? which ought to get everyone thinking on the way to bed.

No one has a peel-and-stick for information you really need, like ?This Door Sticks? or ?The Handrail Is Loose.? Even in nursing homes, or ?retirement centers,? of which I?ve toured a few lately, I notice that all the wall art, while uplifting, is entirely unhelpful. I?ve never seen ?Keep Breathing? or ?Lift Your Feet? or ?The Call Button Is Here? or ?It Will Soon Be Over? written in flowing calligraphy and decorating the corridors. Though I?ve also never also seen ?Whip. Chop. Grind.? in a nursing home or ?We?ve Fallen É? well, into anything, music included. Context matters, even in wall art.

Like nursing home wall art, master bedroom wall art puts up a good front. ?Always Kiss Me Good Night? may be found over the headboard, but I?ve searched in vain for ?If You Don?t Stop Snoring I?m Going in the Other Room.?

Written wall art, and that phrase may be copyrighted, has been around for a few years now, but I was surprised last week, on a trip to Texas, to see that it has, in one form or another, invaded Catholic churches. This parish is new and newly built, standing out on the prairie like a sacred windbreak. It was designed and paid for by people who live according to the general principle that ?Things Have Gotten Out of Hand? -- which could be, on all sorts of levels and from different perspectives, the Texas state motto.

One of the ?things? is clearly, and this has become a singular noun, ?the reforms of the Second Vatican Council,? or ?Vatican II.? One of the ?things? is a perceived confusion between the lay and ordained state. I don?t know any Catholic who is confused about exactly who is the priest and who is the layperson. Anyone. The only layperson in my experience who ever donned priestly vestments was a young mentally ill man named Angel. He used to hang around our cathedral and was known to pinch the Marian vestments and wear them downtown until he was caught. Even then, no one mistook Angel for a priest. Or a sane person.

But maybe this is a problem in the Texas parish I visited. Because the wooden presider?s chair, just to the south

of the altar and just to the north of the tabernacle and east of all the pews, all by itself except for the shorter, smaller and unadorned deacon?s chair beside it, had words carved around the inside border of the chair back. In flowing wall art calligraphy, where all of us in the pews could see, the words read, ?In Persona Christi,? that is, ?in the person of Christ.?

It was the unfortunate answer to the nuance of the Belgian abbot?s chair. One is there for those who will see to see -- like a house where people are cooking and cleaning and laughing and fighting and forgiving without captions -- and one is there to say what need not be said. In Latin.

Just as Italian makes the food sweeter and Chinese the tattoo more intriguing, so Latin, it seems, makes the pronouncement more solemn. And official. And enforceable. And pedantic.

At last, We?ve Fallen Into a Place Where All Is Law.

[Melissa Nussbaum is an *NCR* columnist who lives in Colorado Springs.]

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