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'Setting our ecclesial gauges' and liturgical translation update

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

Since Fr. Isaac Hecker founded the Paulist Fathers in 1858, they've been the quintessentially 'American' religious community in the Catholic church. The Paulists' core mission is evangelization, with special emphasis on ecumenism, inter-faith dialogue, and outreach to the alienated and the marginalized. They typically execute all of the above with panache, great balance, and a keen sense of humor.

Among other things, the Paulists run Santa Susanna in Rome, the American parish in the Eternal City. For several years, I distinguished myself as quite possibly the worst parish council member in Santa Susanna's history. On one of the rare occasions when I actually managed to show up for a meeting, I found that I had been pre-listed as 'absent' on the agenda. I'm now well on my way to replicating that dismal record as a board member of 'Busted Halo,' a media ministry of the Paulists targeted at youth.

I recently had the chance to try to make it up to the Paulists by speaking at a June 19-21 convocation in Washington, D.C., marking the order's 150th anniversary. The affair was organized by an old friend, Fr. Paul Robichaud, former rector of Santa Susanna and currently the point man for Hecker's beatification cause. The event was held on the campus of the Catholic University of America, bringing together not only Paulist fathers, but also friends of the order, including its network of associates.

Oblate Fr. Ron Rolheiser, a renowned spiritual writer, was another of the featured speakers, telling the Paulists that over the years he has come to appreciate four things in particular about their community:

- The order's remarkable accomplishments despite its small size;
- The members' creativity;
- The "wide embrace" of the Paulists;
- The order's "sanity and balance."

In my experience, he's right on the money.

Speaking of Rolheiser, I also spent a couple of days in San Antonio this week, keynoting the Oblate School of Theology's Summer Institute. The day I arrived Rolheiser injured his knee, and yet he kept going throughout the three-day event -- leading me to dub him the "Tiger Woods" of the Catholic meeting circuit.

The rest of Rolheiser's presentation to the Paulists was devoted to what he called "setting our ecclesial gauges" correctly in the new century now dawning. Specifically, he offered a list of "Ten Commandments" for Catholic life today, with a bit of commentary on each.

(1) Be Beyond Ideology

Rolheiser urged his audience to position themselves "beyond liberal, beyond conservative" -- in other words, to "have an unlisted number" with respect to the ideological infighting in Catholicism that followed the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Instead, Rolheiser advised being "women and men of faith and compassion," going wherever those instincts may lead.

In that regard, Rolheiser noted the irony that two of the most popular, and most controversial, movies of 2004 were both from filmmakers with a Catholic background: Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" and Michael Moore's "Fahrenheit 9/11." It's remarkable, Rolheiser said, that Catholicism can contain both of these ways of seeing the world, "though not often in the same person."

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Setting one's gauges correctly, Rolheiser suggested, involves being able to see both the wisdom and the defects of each of the Catholic sensibilities expressed in those two movies -- and many others beyond them.

(2) Incarnate both the Kenotic and the Triumphant Christ

The "kenotic" Christ, Rolheiser explained, is the Christ of humility and suffering (from the Greek word *kenosis*, for "emptiness"), while the triumphant Christ is the Christ of glory. The contrast between these two images, he said, forms "one of the great archetypal tensions in the church today."

Christians often appear divided between these two poles, Rolheiser said, as if it's a matter of choosing one or the other. Instead, he said, Christian life needs both.

"Don't be afraid to be everything," he counseled, "and don't be afraid to be nothing."

(3) Be for the Marginalized without being Marginalized Yourself

Sometimes, Rolheiser said, Christians who emphasize service to those on the margins -- the poor, those alienated from the church, and so on -- tend to end up marginalized themselves, stressing the need to

?speak truth to power? to such an extent that they drift out of the mainstream.

In the end, he argued, doing so undercuts the effectiveness of one?s ministry. The trick, he suggested, is to be an effective voice for the margins but from the heart of one?s own community.

(4) Be Leaders without being Elitist

Rolheiser said leadership is badly needed in today?s world, and Christians with a clear vision shouldn?t be afraid to strike out in bold new directions. At the same time, however, he suggested it?s important not to lose contact with the grass roots.

?Be led by the artists, but listen to the street,? he advised.

Later, a member of the audience asked Rolheiser how to strike the right balance. His advice was rather than seeking to construct abstract theories about leadership, the best thing to do is to observe effective leaders in action. In virtually every case, he said, you?ll see a deft combination of personal vision and yet deep sensitivity to the rhythms and perspectives of the community.

(5) Be Iconoclastic and Pious at the Same Time

Rolheiser quoted the great German scripture scholar Ernst Kasemann to the effect that the problem with modern Christianity is that, ?the liberals are impious, and the pious aren?t liberal.? The trick, Rolheiser said, is having the capacity both to ?smash idols? and to ?kneel in reverence,? depending upon what the moment demands.

?It?s the two together that make the great heart,? Rolheiser said.

(6) Be Equally Committed to Social Justice and Intimacy with Jesus

A balanced Catholic, Rolheiser argued, should be ready both ?to lead a peace march and to lead the rosary.? As an example, Rolheiser offered Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker Movement. Too often, Rolheiser suggested, Catholics tend to choose between social activism and a deep spiritual life, when in fact the two belong together.

(7) Be Thoroughly in the World, even as You are Rooted Elsewhere

Quoting the life of a saint Rolheiser said he?d once come across, he called upon his audience to accept a life of ?tortured complexity.? In part, he said, this means a thorough immersion in modern culture, and yet a capacity to allow one?s deepest sense of belonging and identity to be shaped by sources outside that culture.

(8) Ponder as Mary Did

Another way of putting this bit of counsel, Rolheiser said, is to ?eat the tension that?s around you.?

Rolheiser warned that sometimes the Mary of popular Catholic devotion threatens to obscure the Mary of Scripture. He noted that Mary is the only figure in the New Testament described as ?pondering? the words and deeds of Christ; typically, his disciples and the crowds are said to have been ?amazed.?

?Amazement,? Rolheiser said, is akin to an electrical current -- all it does is transmit energy. ?Ponder,? on

the other hand, he compared to a water purifier. It "carries, holds and transforms" what enters it, so that it comes out more pure.

At the foot of the cross, Rolheiser said, Mary wasn't simply "amazed" by the suffering of her son, a response that might have led to a lust for vengeance. Instead, she "pondered" it, so that hate was transformed into grace and love.

"We need ponderers at every level of the church," Rolheiser said.

(9) Incarnate a Deeper Maturity

One of the modern world's most urgent needs, Rolheiser said, is for models of responsible freedom. Christians should never seek to limit human freedom, he argued, but they also understand that real freedom does not mean license to do anything at all. Christians today ought to be "pioneers" in illustrating a life of true freedom.

Applying the point to Catholicism, Rolheiser noted the irony that questions of Catholic identity somehow seemed less pressing in North America in an age in which most Catholics were poor, immigrants, and living in various forms of a socio-ethnic ghetto -- in other words, in a world in which their freedom often chafed under both de jure and de facto restraints.

What we seem to be less clear about, he said, is how to be solidly Catholic in a world in which we're "affluent, educated, and culturally mainstream."

(10) "Make Love to the Song"

Quoting a friend in a rock band, Rolheiser said that real artistry is not about trying to inflate oneself, or even to appeal to the audience. Art begins, he said, when everything else falls away and the focus is exclusively on the song.

"That's ultimately what ministry is," Rolheiser said. If ministers are caught up either in trying to impress others with their skills, or playing to the sensitivities of their audiences, they have not yet "got it."

The trick, Rolheiser said, is to become so caught up in the ministry that doing it well, according to its own inner logic, becomes an end in itself. Once that happens, he said, everything else will usually take care of itself.

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Two weeks ago, I reported on a sharp debate over liturgical translation that unfolded at the spring meeting of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in Orlando, Florida. The bishops were voting on a proposed new translation of the Proper of Seasons, a collection of prayers that forms part of the Mass. Most observers expected approval to be a formality, in part because four other English-speaking bishops' conferences have already accepted it, in part because many bishops are weary of liturgical tussles after more than a decade and a half of debate.

Instead, the vote over the Proper of Seasons produced the most drama of the three-day session, thanks in large measure to a speech by Bishop Victor Galeone of Saint Augustine, Florida.

By all accounts, Galeone's speech motivated a number of other bishops to express their own reservations about the translation, with the result that the voting in Orlando was inconclusive and the outcome now

hinges on mail-in ballots from bishops who were not in attendance. (The result is expected around July 18.)

In the meantime, the International Commission on English in the Liturgy, the translation body which produced the Proper of Seasons, has taken Galeone's criticism seriously enough to respond to it. (ICEL is a joint project of 11 English-speaking bishops' conferences, including the United States. After a Vatican-induced reorganization in 2002, ICEL largely adopted Rome's preference for a more 'sacral' translation style closer to the Latin originals.)

The ICEL secretariat, led by Msgr. Bruce Harbert, produced a 1,000 word response to Galeone, which was circulated initially among the member bishops, and later sent a copy on to me.

In his speech, Galeone argued that the new translation is too 'slavish' with respect to the Latin original, with the result that its prayers are too awkward, too remote from normal English speech, to be proclaimed effectively. In effect, Galeone suggested that the translation amounts to a departure from the post-Vatican II vision of worship in the vernacular languages of the community.

Galeone cited, for example, a prayer after Communion in the Proper of Seasons:

*Fill our minds, almighty God,
with sure confidence
that through your Son's death in time,
to which awesome mysteries bear witness,
you have given us perpetual life.?*

The word 'that,' Galeone argued, suggests a purpose clause in normal English speech, but here it's a simple conjunction, following almost word-for-word the structure in Latin. The result, Galeone said, is clumsy. That's indicative, he said, of problems that run throughout the text.

Perhaps most pointedly, Galeone mocked use of the term 'gibbet' in the new translation, meaning the upright beam from the cross.

'The last time I heard that word was in 1949 in grade school, during the Stations of the Cross,' Galeone said.

The ICEL statement begins by congratulating Galeone for breaking 'new ground in the public discussion of liturgical language' and 'raising the debate to a higher intellectual level.' Previous critics, the statement says, focused on individual word choices, but Galeone raised 'structural and semantic' issues that run through the entire text.

The statement concedes that it would perhaps be clearer in English to phrase the prayer after Communion this way, which is more or less what Galeone suggested in Orlando:

*?Fill our minds, almighty God,
with sure confidence
that you have given us perpetual life
through your Son's death in time,
to which awesome mysteries bear witness.?*

Yet the Latin original, the statement said, ends on a strong eschatological note ('perpetual life') and the translators wanted to honor that structure -- expressing the hope that such modes of expression,

admittedly unfamiliar at first, will soon become familiar.?

Last but not least, the ICEL statement comes to the issue of ?gibbet.? Here I'll quote it in full:

?There remains the issue of ?gibbet?, which Bishop Galeone and others criticize as too archaic for liturgical use. None of the critics of this word seems able to produce a workable alternative. It should not surprise us that an English translation for Latin *patibulum* is difficult to find, since that word denotes an instrument of torture no longer in use. It is made up of the root *pati-*, ?to suffer? and the suffix *?bulum*, which, to quote the Oxford Latin Dictionary, ?forms substantives from verbal bases denoting instruments?.

?As a *stabulum* is a structure devised to facilitate standing (from *stare*) and a *conciliabulum* is a structure devised to facilitate the holding of meetings, so a *patibulum* is a structure devised to facilitate suffering. ?Guillotine?, ?electric chair? and ?syringe? share the purpose of *patibulum*, but not its shape. ?Gallows? denotes a device similar in shape and purpose to a *patibulum*, but in modern speech seems only be used for structures designed for hanging by a rope. ?Yoke? is a possible translation, but it has the weakness that it denotes the shape of the device but not its purpose, whereas the *pati-* element in *patibulum* draws attention to its purpose. A vivid modern translation might be ?death-machine?, but this would be found unacceptable by those many commentators who prefer blandness in liturgical language.?

?In choosing ?gibbet? to translate *patibulum*, [ICEL] has been aware that the phrase ?the gibbet of the Cross? was used by St. John Fisher.?

Regardless of how one assesses the rights and wrongs, the ICEL statement at least seems to make one thing clear: The commission, which generally has the support of the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship, is not prepared to let ?gibbet? go quite yet.

(As a footnote, the U.S. bishops decided in Orlando not to send the Proper of Seasons back to ICEL if it's indeed voted down, but to rework it themselves.)

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