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Murder on the disoriented express

by Eugene Cullen Kennedy

Bulletins from the Human Side

New missal translation kills off mystery

You need not be Hercule Poirot to understand that murder is about to be committed on the Disoriented Express. Having taken on coal at the mossy Vatican I station, it is now thundering toward its final destination at Trent, the Grand Central gathering place for "Reformers of the Reform."

The assassins' plan is to kill off Vatican II but they are really murdering religious Mystery itself, that defining core of religious experience that sings in the church's sacramental symbolism and in the mythopoetic language of its scriptures and prayer life.

Ordinary believers are the innocent victims of the New Translation's manslaughter of Mystery and of numerous terrorist attacks on the vision and theology of Vatican II. Like ancient crusaders, the present legions believe that as the true believers only they have a right to ransom the True Cross.

Like all terrorists, these campaigners believe that Heavenly mansions await them for the earthly damage they do in restoring religion to the slavery of obsessive masters from whom Jesus liberated it. Not for them the church that respects conscience and other religions, that understands and waits for all us limping humans to catch up with it, that celebrates life and embraces and forgives sinners.

Vatican II makes faith too easy, in their judgment; they reject a faith that elevates people for spiritual growth and propose a regime that puts them down to keep them in their place. Espousing a "tough" religion doesn't do much for anybody else but it certainly makes them feel good about themselves.

Everything, including the New Translation, squeezes the spirit out of familiar liturgical readings and replaces it with hot air. These efforts flow from the sweeping campaign initiated by Pope John Paul II

(Calling him Pope John the Great is part of their program too) to restore the hierarchical church.

The hierarchical church's outdated structure, whose origins were secular rather than sacred, was not a victim of Vatican II but of history itself and the best thing to do is stand clear as it settles into clouds of dust. With his combination of Teutonic rigor and a shopkeeper's smile, Pope Benedict XVI now charges the bishops, as if they didn't have enough trouble, with refurbishing the split-level palace that places the pope alone on top, monsignors and assorted officials on the skybox level and lay men and women on the bottom.

The failure to understand that Vatican II restored the authentic tradition of collegiality to the church has led to a record level of canonizations on the principle that the more saints the better to buttress the multi-level ecclesiastical dormitory. The little murders of these reformers of the reform of Vatican II include the comedy of telling priests who don't know the language that they can say Mass in Latin and the tragedy of making nice with the Lefebvre heretics who are the Confederate money in the church's collection plate.

The New Translation is a big murder, however, because it represents an assault on the language that bears the Mystery of belief. The translation now in use reveals the purity of theologically based phrases. The New Translation now slays that graceful Mystery by throwing out the baby with the baptismal water.

For example, the familiar penitential phrase, "I have sinned through my own fault" is buried in the debris of the antiquated "through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault." The Gloria has been touched up with so much 19th century gilt paint that it resembles an aging countess camouflaging herself for amours that will never be. When the priest says "The Lord be with you" the clean clear response, "And also with you" is replaced with the literal "And with your spirit." The same Proustian longing for a vanished past is found at the Agnus Dei. Catholics must now replace "but only say the word and I shall be healed" with "I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof but only say the word and my soul shall be healed."

This can only lead to further literalization and deadening of the Word of God that, as in the parables of Jesus, is metaphorical. In a metaphor, the connotation is the significant element, that cloud of witnesses to its fuller meaning that hovers around it that are scattered when somebody insists on using the denotation, that flat utilitarian meaning, such as STOP on a traffic sign.

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Choosing denotation rather than connotation in religious language has led to bloody consequences. Those who accepted the literal meaning of Holy Land have been making war over its boundary lines for centuries. Jesus speaks directly to us in Holy Land as a metaphor for a spiritual place we can enter at any time.

As this Disoriented Express rocks along toward the rockslide of Trent, these zealots look mystified when Poirot asks them if they know who the murderer is. They look mystified because they don't have a clue about the nature of religious Mystery and of how its supple metaphorical language must be respected and, indeed, guarded. Ordinary people do understand religious Mystery in their depths and that is why, without being able to explain it rationally, they are reluctant to drink of the cup of the New Translation that is now being forced on them.

[Eugene Cullen Kennedy is emeritus professor of psychology at Loyola University, Chicago.]

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