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You can't go Rome again

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Oct. 7, 2011 Bulletins from the Human Side

Nobody would ever accuse the so-called Reform of the Reform of a lack of transparency. You can see right through its almost weekly moves to return Catholicism to the Eden of church life that they perceive on the far side of Vatican II.

Sometimes these moves, such as imposing a literal translation of the Latin on the Mass texts, not only aims to transport Catholics back to somewhere around 1925 but also to restore the "Attend a a Protestant Service/Support a False Religion" mentality that prevailed in that era. The Congregation of Divine Worship now makes clear, in the document *Liturgiam Authenticam*, that it wants to do just that. It prefers an awkward concrete rendering of Latin "to avoid a wording or a style that the Catholic faithful would confuse with the manner of speech of non-Catholic ecclesial communities or of other religions..." This, according to *The Tablet*'s Robert Mickens, drives "a stake into the heart of ecumenical efforts at composing common texts."

Should we expect the pope, who seems as pleased with all this as a burgermeister at Octoberfest, to issue an Encyclical, *Humerus Frigus*, or *Cold Shoulder*, for this is apparently what he wants to turn toward other faiths by opting for a translation that lessens and limits the liturgical opportunities for Christians to discover how much they share or to pray comfortably with each other.

Mickens also analyzes Benedict's curial appointments, concluding that, after the internationalization of leadership in the Church that followed Vatican II, he is restoring the Italian domination of key curial positions. What could move the Roman furniture more surely back to the 1925 style than placing the keyboard of the Vatican piano back into the hands of Italians who long ago mastered the intricate sonatas of survival?

Perhaps we should not expect a German Pope to be subtle but he was anything but that when, on his recent visit to Spain, he announced that "I will shortly declare St. John of Avila a Doctor of the Universal Church." Aside from writing *Run through that again* letters to St. Teresa of Avila ("What you say about God teaching the soul without the use of the imagination ... is safe, and I can find no fault in it.") he is celebrated for his role in the *Counter-Reformation*. In short, exactly the intellectual hero the Pope wants for the Reform of the Reform.

This is time travel as it was imagined, if St. John will excuse the word, in Jack Finney's famous novel, *Time and Again* (1970), in which careful recreations of past eras are sealed off from the modern world. In one of them a man sits on the front porch of a 1920s house. As a supervisor of the project explains, "The man on the porch is actually living in that house. It's complete inside, and a middle-aged woman comes in to cook and clean for him. Groceries are delivered every day and ... twice a day a mailman in a gray uniform delivers mail.... The man ... putters around the house. Waters the lawn. Reads. Passes the time of day with the neighbors... Right now he's reading a freshly printed newspaper for September 3, 1926..." All this elaborate stage craft in anticipation that at some moment they will strike just the right combination of tones and details, and the man will look up from his paper and find that he has traveled back to Calvin Coolidge's America.

Such playing at time travel would be relatively harmless and charming in the way that sunlit autumn leaves are if that is all there was to this massive effort to transport the Church back to the same era sought in the novel,

when the notoriously autocratic Pope Pius XI expected Cardinals to remain kneeling when visiting his office on official business, the Mass was in Latin, and equal as mortal sins were murdering somebody, allowing a sexual thought to wait in the vestibule of your mind before you evicted it, or eating meat on Friday. Yes, those certainly were the good old days.

The Reform of the Reform may be better understood not as an exaggerated exercise in nostalgia as much as the debilitating side-effect on being unable to adjust to the Space/Information Age that has ended the division between the earth and the heavens that was the theoretical basis for hierarchical structures. By healing the centuries old presumed rift between earth and the heavens the Space/Information Age also healed the separation of the human person into antagonistic elements of body and soul, flesh and spirit. It is difficult for hierarchs to adjust to the Space/Information Age because they cannot get their bearings easily unless they sit atop an hierarchical array; they fear going into free fall in the universe in which there is no center, no up and no down, and so they want to reconstruct the times and places, the Time and Again of an age before Vatican II in which they feel that they will be comfortable again.

There is something poignant about these would-be time travelers who pull back from the future that is already enveloping them. They remind one of the travelers in the desert described by Freud in explaining the difficulty many people have in letting go of the past. When the sun goes down and the air turns bitter cold, such pilgrims long to return to the remembered warmth of campfires they had left behind them. They cannot return to them because they have cooled to ashes and the winds have mixed them with the billowing waves of sand. The Reform of the Reform is built on just such understandable but misplaced longing, is bound to disappoint those who invest their hearts in its success, may generate centrifugal pressures in the heart of the Church, and one day, long after it has failed, be judged not as an inviting oasis worth a long journey but a cruel and seductive illusion of the unforgiving sands of time.

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