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Rome is burning, new texts are fiddling

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Dec. 1, 2011 Bulletins from the Human Side

I must credit my wife for the best observation I heard as we drifted out of Mass among other grumbling survivors of the wreckage of the most over-ballyhooed maiden voyage since that of the Titanic a century ago. Rome, as she observed, is indeed burning, and the pope, surely winking like a German paterfamilias aware that he isn't fooling anybody in his Santa Claus suit, boasts that the Catholic church is leading the way in the war against sex abuse.

One regretfully concludes of the introduction of the new liturgical texts that we must look beneath the surface of this much ado about nothing episode for the real reasons for all the time and treasure Rome invested in imposing it on its bishops, priests and people.

Perhaps this is best understood as another element in the so-called reform of the reform, the main thrust of which is to restore the mixed blessings at best of a revived clericalism that raises the priesthood like a gilded monstrance above the heads of, and surely out of the reach of, laypeople. This return to hollow and brittle wordings that supposedly echo the pre-Vatican II Latin texts is another clumsy effort to repeal the rich theological documents of that epochal council and to recreate the lost and gone world of Vatican I.

An old vaudeville song suggests that when the performers lack any substantial material they should "bead and feather" the audience, that is, divert them with clamor and tricks so that they won't notice the show's lack of content. Our pastor here in Naples, Fla., did just that in a pre-Mass pep talk in which he stressed -- and nobody could make this up -- the burden, far greater than that borne by the parishioners, that the changes have placed on the shoulders of priests.

"It only affects 14 percent of what you say," he insisted, downing a self-pity pill, "but 98 percent of what the priest says."

What neither this pastor nor Roman officials grasp is that their people, many of whom are at least as theologically sophisticated as they, have long ago been scotch-guarded against the windy precipitation of such interventions. "Practiced Catholics," as I term them, can easily sift the chaff from the wheat in church documents, sermons and the restoration of antiquated practices and forms. Their faith is deeper than the superficial patter of unprepared sermons or ill-thought-out liturgical translations. They may be annoyed, but they are not touched by distracting clerical maneuvers. They are instinctively Catholic in their whole beings and understand that such switches in the name of increased piety were condemned by Jesus as the pretentious "lengthening of their phylacteries" and other liturgical garb by the religious leaders of his time.

Good Catholic people have learned to accept and tolerate a great deal of sleight of hand on the part of the clerical class. So they seemed, with brief asides about its insignificance and it unjustified expense, to absorb this supposedly new translation as largely irrelevant to them and to the greater world around them. These changed words screech like the fiddles being played so loudly by its officials while Rome crackles with the still unextinguished fires of the sex abuse scandal and its still not fully investigated source.

As long as churchmen offer beads and feathers along with bread and circuses, practiced Catholics will experience the new texts more as a form of abuse than a form of inspiration.

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