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The Most Beautiful Words in the World

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

A friend upbraided me yesterday for stating that the most beautiful words in the world are "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed." My friend is wrong and I am right.

I do not intend to get into an argument about the still new English translation of the Missal. Indeed, to avoid that discussion I had thought, yesterday, of rendering the words in Latin: *Domine non sum dignus ut intres sub tectum meum; sed tantum dic verbo et sanabitur anima mea*. That is how I normally pray these words because I usually attend a Latin Mass on Sunday. The Novus Ordo Latin Mass is my liturgical soft spot. But, while dealing with doggie rehab, I have been walking to the church closest to my house and there Mass is in English. The translation may sound a little clunky, but the words are just as powerful.

The words are drawn from the Gospel. In both Matthew and Luke we find an account of a centurion with an ailing servant. The centurion approaches Jesus and seeks his help and when Jesus offers to come, the centurion says these words, although it is the servant, not his soul, who he seeks to have healed. Perhaps, there is a clue here: In asking for healing for others we help heal ourselves. As a rule, anytime we can root our liturgy more deeply into a scriptural passage, the better. And if the people in pews still find the new translation difficult to get their heads and hearts (and mouths) around, pastors should preach on the significance of these words. When someone says "I do not know what 'enter under my roof' means," it should be explained. Many pastors did a good job explaining the new translation. Sadly, many other pastors still believe that they should never depart in their homilies from giving a mini-exegesis on the readings of the day, and did not explain the new wordings. Whether you like the new translation or not, it was, and is, an invitation to delve more deeply into the significance of the words at Mass.

Why are these words so powerful? They start, as all real and healthy relationships must, with a statement of profound and simple truth: Lord, I am not worthy. These words are, in our time, quite counter-cultural, confronting the cult of self-esteem head-on. We need not be Calvinists to believe in our own unworthiness to approach the Throne of Grace. As Jesus explains time and again in the parables, God has given us everything, given freely, created us, sustaining us, and vouchsafing His own Son for our salvation. Yet, how quick we are to view others as in our way, deficient, an obstacle, a bother. How hard it is for us to forgive others even though God has promised to forgive us everything. We ignore the simple, awesome words of Jesus "Blessed are the merciful, for mercy shall be theirs."

Modernity has a less honest, because more fulsome, estimation of humankind. We live in a Pelagian age in which we think we really do earn our way to heaven. More conservative Catholics think that sexual purity is the key. More liberal Catholics think that social justice is the key. To be clear, both sexual purity and social justice are good things, but they are derivative good things. A sexually abstemious pagan is still a pagan and an atheist who does good works is still walking blind. And, that blindness consists in failing to grasp that it is in the Cross of Christ that we are justified before the Throne of Grace, and only there. The second we think ourselves worthy, we are lost. The truly humble grasp this better than most. Humility is not like the other virtues: One can aim to be more generous, more chaste. One can try to focus upon, and avoid, gluttony and avarice and envy. But, the second one tries to focus on the cultivation of one's own humility, it melts like a snowflake in the palm of one's hand, melted by pride.

Pride remains the deadliest of the seven deadly sins. A blessing on those who live chastely, but shame on them for casting aspersions on those who can't and don't. Judge ye not, we are told, but we judge all the time, and we tend only to be generous in our mercy when it is our own sins that are in the balance. How quick we moderns are to forgive ourselves!

Pope Francis is quite wonderful on the subject of sin. He has said more than once that we Christians tend to grow tired of asking for mercy and can all too easily slip into the belief that it is okay to stop asking, that our shortcomings, our sins, aren't such a big deal. But, the pope always leads with the promise of mercy, which, in turn, invites us to be honest about our sins because that promise of mercy is what banishes fear, and it is fear that cripples. Think of the parable of the talents, which is not a proto-capitalist text. It is about the deadly spiritual consequences of fear. Without that fear, focusing on the boundless mercy of God, it is so much easier to be honest with ourselves about our own sins.

The phrase closes with the words, "My soul shall be healed." My friend who objected yesterday said that he thought there was dualism lurking here, a differentiation between body and soul that has indeed often plagued Christian thoughts. Here, we really are at the mercy of our English language. Our word "soul" does not capture the Latin word "anima." And, our own word "soul" has now largely been displaced in

our understanding of the human person by the word "mind," as Edward Reed detailed in his extraordinary book of the same title, "From Soul to Mind: The Emergence of Psychology from Erasmus Darwin to William James," a book that should be on every bookshelf.

"Anima" is our deepest self, our "I" if you will, which is why the previous English translation rendered the phrase "and I shall be healed." But, "I" does not capture it either or, to put it differently, the "I" in the modern West has taken on its own trajectory and acquired a meaning that is too ridden with autonomy to capture what is meant by "anima." "Anima" is something that unites the human race and the "I" is not understood that way. And, as noted, in the biblical passage, the phrase is "my servant shall be healed." So, what are we to do? If there is no imperfect rendering of the word, let us at least try to excavate what is meant: In our deepest, darkest, most broken selves, the parts where we do not want to let the light shine, where we prefer not even to consider because it just hurts too much, Jesus can shine His light and bring healing. "My soul" or "I" is not the key, is it? The key is the healing.

Which leads us, finally, to the words that connect the opening and closing of this phrase: "but only say the word." The centurion said those words in anticipation, in faith, in hope. What we Christians know is that that word that must be said, that word that will heal, that word has already been spoken. It is the word so resonant it is never even translated in our liturgy: Alleluia. It is the Crucified who yet Lives, that is the Word, the Word that has been spoken two thousand years ago on a hillside in Jerusalem and which is still spoken every time a child is comforted, a poor person is helped, a doubtful person is encouraged, a naked person is clothed, an ignorant person is instructed, a dead person is buried. Blessed are the merciful, for mercy shall be theirs. It is our confidence in God's mercy that permits us to approach the altar and partake of His very Body and Blood. That is holiness, the utter, ineffable, and thorough trust that God's mercy is greater than our sins, that through His Cross and Resurrection, we are truly saved.

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I stand by me assertion: These words, in any translation, are the most beautiful words in the world.

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