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Humpty Dumpty in the Vatican

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Commentary

TOKYO -- In *Through the Looking Glass*, Lewis Carroll?s sequel to *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice meets Humpty Dumpty.

?When I use a word,? Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, ?it means just what I choose it to mean -- neither more nor less.?

?The question is,? said Alice, ?whether you can make words mean so many different things.?

?The question is,? said Humpty Dumpty, ?which is to be master -- that?s all.?

The egg-man is convinced that whatever nonsense he utters makes sense because he says it does.

Pope Benedict XVI?s offer to allow Anglicans who enter into communion with the Catholic church to continue to use many of their liturgical traditions reminded me of this scene.

Commenting on the offer, Cardinal William Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, said, ?Insofar as these traditions express in a distinctive way the faith that is held in common, they are a gift to be shared in the wider church. The unity of the church does not require a uniformity that ignores cultural diversity, as the history of Christianity shows.?

As I read those words, I had a vision of Humpty Dumpty wearing a *galero*, the traditional headdress of a cardinal, and jostling other egg-men as they waddled through curial corridors at the Vatican.

Despite what the cardinal says, the recent history of Catholic Christianity shows that for the Vatican, ?the unity of the church? precisely ?require[s] a uniformity that ignores cultural diversity.?

The church in Japan and the rest of Asia is preparing new Mass translations. The rule that Rome has issued for this work is that Asian Catholics must celebrate a Western liturgy using literal translations of a Latin text as well as gestures that come from a Mediterranean cultural context.

So, Japanese bishops have had to argue repeatedly against reinserting the kissing of the altar into the liturgy here. In Japan, the kiss is a sexual gesture, not one of reverence as it sometimes is in European countries. Yet, the Roman insistence on uniformity has made even that little recognition of cultural diversity a struggle. It appears that since sex enters the picture, the curial officials involved have finally agreed to back down and allow some form of bow instead.

The response to the greeting, ?The Lord be with you,? presents another difficulty. The Latin text that must be translated literally is, ?*Et cum spiritu tuo*? (?And with your spirit?).

However, there is no Japanese equivalent to the Latin word *spiritus*. The only words that come remotely close mean ?spook? or a word that is usually used in a hypernationalistic way about ?the Japanese spirit.? The curial response to native Japanese speakers who try to point out that difficulty has been that they just do not know their own language well enough.

The problems are not limited to Japan. The church in India, for example, faces the same frustrations in trying to develop a way for Indian Catholics to actually experience that ?the unity of the church does not require a uniformity that ignores cultural diversity.?
In 1659, the predecessor to the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples issued an instruction for mission in Asia.

?Make no endeavor and in no way persuade these people to change their rites, habits and mores as long as these are not very manifestly contrary to religion and good mores. Indeed, what would be more absurd than to introduce Gaul, Spain, Italy or some other part of Europe to China? Bring not these things but the faith, which neither rejects nor harms the rites and customs of any nation provided they are not perverse, but which rather desires them to remain intact.

?And because it is almost the nature of men to prefer in estimation and love their own things, and especially their own nation, to things that belong to others, there exists no cause of hatred and alienation more poignant than the tampering with native customs, above all, of those which men have grown accustomed to from the memory of their forefathers. Especially is this true when you substitute and bring in the mores of your own country in place of those you have removed. Therefore never interchange the practices of these people with European practices; rather with great diligence become accustomed to their practices.?

It appears that the curia in ?the bad old days? was more open-minded than it is today.

However, it does no good to simply gripe about curial officials. After all, they are bureaucrats, and so perhaps it is natural for them to be as insensitive as Humpty Dumpty toward those who seem to misunderstand ?which is to be master.?

The bigger problem, perhaps, is right here in Asia, with our bishops, our clergy and our laypeople. Are we too willing to defer to those bureaucrats?

There is a myth in the churches of Asia that confrontation is not the Asian style. Only people who do not pay attention to the daily news can believe such nonsense. When Asian people feel aggrieved they are fully capable of fighting back.

In the matter of liturgy as in much else, might it be time for us to nudge Humpty Dumpty off his wall?

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