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Throwback translation promoters confess without knowing it

by Eugene Cullen Kennedy

Bulletins from the Human Side

The lack of a sense of humor in the self-designated Reformers of the Reform is matched only by their lack of a sense of irony. Otherwise, they would have noticed the squealing dissonance between their assertions for their new/old translation of liturgical texts and the words of Jesus in the Gospel reading for the 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time.

In Matthew 13, Jesus says that "I will open my mouth in parables, I will reveal what has lain hidden from the foundation of the world." He then likens the Kingdom of God to a man who has sown good seed in his field and must wait until the harvest to separate the healthy crops from the unhealthy weeds sown into his field by "an enemy." He then describes the mustard seed, the smallest of seeds that becomes the largest of plants; Jesus also tells us of the woman who mixes yeast into her dough to make it rise into nourishing bread.

Jesus clearly speaks in metaphor rather than in measurement about the Mystery of the Kingdom. He tells stories, identifying Myth as the natural tongue of revelation, the only one that can reveal "what has lain secret from the foundation of the world."

So why do the promoters of the new translation pick this, of all Sundays, to advertise their Big Con, that their soon-to-be-imposed version is right off the Antiques Roadshow of musty formulations that squeeze the Spirit out of the metaphorical language that Jesus proclaims as the only way in which to spread the Good News of His Kingdom?

In a circular distributed in all parishes, somebody using the authority of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, informs us in smug, there'll-be-a-quiz-on-this tone that "the experience of the years

after the Second Vatican Council gave rise to a desire for more *formal and literal* translations of the original Latin texts..." that will include "concrete images."

Following their program of disowning Vatican II documents the way the Nazis did the Versailles Treaty, they portray that Council as the cause of the mostly hysterically imagined liturgical abuses that they will set right for all of us. But what are the implications of their return to "more formal and literal translations."

So anxious do they seem to spread their soon-to-be-imposed translation that they cannot hear what Jesus says about the only tongue that can sing the songs of the Spirit.

To confess that they will provide "concrete images" means that they do not understand metaphor and its rich and nourishing meanings. By its very definition, a metaphor allows us to make journeys that we could not undertake without them. A metaphor (the Kingdom of God as a field, for example) is not understood in its *denotation*, in this case a literal plot of land; its significance can only be grasped in its *connotations*, that is, in the "cloud of witnesses" that it presents to the imagination that is the true object of religious language.

Without realizing it, they confess their plan to smother the Spirit under the concrete blocks of "more formal and literal translations." But if man cannot live by bread alone, neither can he live by *denotation* alone. A Stop sign is a classic example of pure *denotation*, of making a starkly "formal and literal" statement that makes one statement with one single meaning.

Jesus tells us that He sows the field of His Kingdom with the good seed of parables, in the multi-dimensional *connotations* of metaphor that constitute the bountiful mystical harvest, the healthily growing mustard seed, the yeast sown bread rising to its fullness.

To substitute formal concrete language for metaphors of the Spirit is, as Joseph Campbell once expressed it, to order lunch and to eat the menu. The advocates of the new/old translation apparently do not really understand what they are doing but they sure feel good about it. Jesus is not surprised to find these weeds sown in with the wheat in the field of His Kingdom. We wait for the harvest when it will be easy to distinguish the weeds from the real wheat.

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