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Mapping a liturgical sentence

by Isaac McDaniel



FICTION

"Thank god at last we have a real pope," shouted Bill Barker, grand knight of the local chapter of the Knights of St. Sepulcher. "Oh don't get me wrong, Father. Pope John Paul was a good man, God rest his soul. But this new Holy Father really knows his business." He paused to take a breath. The force of his conviction caused the plume on his hat to shimmer and his sword to clang against the folding chair.

"Take this New Missal, for instance. We'll finally get to pray the way that Moses and the early Christians prayed. Why, these new prayers were translated straight from Latin, the language Jesus spoke when he talked down to the crowds and his disciples."

Fr. Dan Wiggins stared in silence at the paper tablecloth and idly rolled the peas around his Styrofoam plate. He silently thanked God that he could barely hear Barker over the roar of diners who had gathered in the parish gymnasium for the Knights' annual fundraising dinner to stop the trafficking in frozen embryos from China.

Barker nudged the priest to gain his attention and asked, "What do you think, Father Dan? Don't you like these new prayers the Holy Father has given us?"

Father Dan impulsively took the bait and said, "Well, Bill, it's easy enough for you to applaud the changes. All you have to do is memorize a few phrases. But like everything else that comes from Rome, we priests will have to do all the heavy lifting. I don't mind the return to more traditional language, but the new liturgy is too wordy. Some of the Eucharistic Prayers are so long you could see them from outer space. The sentences run on forever. Not even a long-winded priest could pray them out loud without stopping to catch his breath. Why, even the best English teacher in the world couldn't diagram some of these sentences."

Barker knew a potential wager when he heard one. He leaned over, put his arm around his wife's shoulders and said, "You know, Father, my little Martha has been teaching high school English for 30 years. I'll bet you \$50 that she can diagram any sentence you give her from the New Missal."

Martha looked over at the priest and smiled wanly, with a long-suffering look in her eyes.

"You've got a bet," said Father Dan, as he rose from his chair and left the crowded hall. Ten minutes later he returned with a copy of the New Missal, two pencils and a small stack of typing paper. He set them down beside the coconut pie in front of Martha Barker, handed her a pencil and pointed to a sentence buried deep in Eucharistic Prayer One.

Martha straightened her shoulders, pushed up the sleeves of her cardigan sweater and read the sentence: "To you, therefore, most Merciful Father, we make humble prayer and petition that your Incarnate Son might deign to bless these unworthy sinners, who have strayed from the eternal light of your love bestowed upon your Holy Catholic Church ? " the sentence ran on and on, like one of those great rivers in India that starts high in the Himalayas, meanders across wide, vast plains and cuts through crowded cities before finally dumping into the Bay of Bengal.

Martha recited the sentence to herself several times. Then she took a deep breath and sketched a first draft. Lines began to sprout in all directions on the paper as adjectives branched off from nouns and reached out to connect with dangling participles. Before long, a crowd gathered and stared at the cat's cradle of loosely connected words and phrases. Somebody said it looked like the skeleton of a pterodactyl. The president of the parish council thought it resembled a street map of Paris. A small boy asked if it was supposed to be a family of octopi on a picnic.

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The diners soon grew bored and drifted away, accustomed as they were to watching contact sports. Martha crumpled one sheet of paper after another and tossed them into a nearby wastebasket. It wasn't long before she asked for more paper. Later she called for Scotch tape and a yardstick. She sent the parish secretary to find a copy of "Strunk and White." After an hour and a half, she asked for hot tea and a Xanax.

Finally, her husband handed her \$10 and said, "Honey, I'm calling it a night. Call a cab when you're finished." By this time, the gym was nearly empty as volunteers swept the floor and turned off most of the lights. Afraid to disappoint her husband, Martha labored through the night. Around two o'clock she lost herself in the sentence and couldn't find her way out, like one of those hapless tourists who panics after getting trapped inside a hedge maze. Her mind began to reel, her heart palpitated and her breath grew shallow. Pious phrases swarmed in her head like the dark bats in "Fantasia," and the words took on a life of their own and seemed to taunt her as they floated around the page. Eventually Martha lost all sense of

time and began to hallucinate.

A security guard found her the next morning hunched over a mountain of crumpled paper, gripping a pencil with both hands and muttering to herself. When he asked if she was alright, she told him to leave her alone and explained that she was channeling Catherine of Siena.

The pastor called an ambulance. When Martha resisted the medics, they suspected that she was having a bad acid trip and threatened to subdue her with a Taser. Father Dan told them to back off and suggested that she might be speaking in tongues. Bill Barker insisted that his wife was possessed by a demon, and he signed the forms to have her carted away in a straitjacket. As he heaved himself into the back of the ambulance behind the gurney, he turned to the priest with a look of desperation. Convinced that only the strongest spiritual medicine could save his wife, he asked, "Father, when you anoint her, would you do it in Latin?"

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