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Fortnight of words

Phyllis Zagano | Jul. 3, 2012 Just Catholic

I'm not sure what the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Fortnight for Freedom accomplished except to send folks to their dictionaries for the definition of "fortnight." This new word from the traditionalist lexicon joins the unpronounceable "consubstantial." I haven't heard "perichoresis" anywhere yet, but it's coming.

Should church be a place where you need flashcards to figure out what's going on?

It's a problem of ecclesiology. Where once the folks to be evangelized were outside the fold and everybody inside got involved (you know, the whole church), now it's the top-down, we're-in-charge bishops who own the words, and the target audience is all the baptized, especially the former, sort-of and once-in-a-while Catholics who occasionally turn up in church. A special target audience is the keep-your-mouths-shut theologians (male and female) and, for that matter, all women.

For the bishops who see themselves at the pointy end of the pyramid, it's all reduced to a marketing problem. A couple of U.S. bishops say they need "more sophistication" in their "messaging" and someone to "strategize" for them.

Good grief.

The corporate PR concept has even caught on in Rome -- witness ex-Fox newscaster Greg Burke's new communications role, invented not long after Cardinal William Levada said central command needed assistance with "product identity."

The language is getting scary. Where once, shall we say, "product identity" was carried by location (your basic cathedral) and clothing (cassocks, chasubles, birettas), the buildings are now tourist sites and the clothing is connected to antiquated ideas, mostly in Latin.

Meanwhile, the messengers who say they own the message can't seem to figure out what it is.

Not sure you need high-powered PR, gentlemen. The message is simple. Beyond the belief that all (not "many") are made in the image and likeness of God and deserve honor and respect, the outlines are already mapped out for you in the Gospel. I rather like Chapter 25 of Matthew. You know, the part about feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and all that. For the record, that's Matthew 25:31-46. Then there's the stinger in Matthew 6:14: forgiveness of injuries. And, by the way, the instructions say you go out to all the world to proclaim the good news.

But, I digress.

Well, actually, no, I do not digress. The problem is not "messaging," it's the messengers. The problem is not who will "strategize," it's who acts on the strategy. As for "product identity," well, I cringe at the phrase. Greg Burke is a nice guy, but even without the butler's Xerox machine, information control is impossible in the

labyrinth of the Curia.

The message of Christianity, dear bishops, is simple. But who talks about the Gospel? From the point of view of the people in the pew, the latest -- expensive -- fortnight of words from the USCCB has something to do with national health care and contraception. As they hear the bishops' words and the preacher somehow connects religious freedom to his mother, the women there in church continue to steam. The mothers among them are more likely wondering where to find the $20 per child "donation" for the bishop's confirmation stipend than how to challenge Congress.

The problem with the fortnight message was the "packaging," to use a marketing phrase. As the bishops seem to keep arguing with Congress and all women, a quarter of the country hums a tune from "My Fair Lady": "Words! Words! Words! I'm so sick of words!"

The fact of the matter is, it's the women who've carried the "message" all along. The women answered the cries of the hungry, the homeless, the sick and the imprisoned. The women took the time to listen to the folks still resolutely sitting in the pews and trying to make sense of all the big words. Those good people say, "Show me," and the women do just that. All they get from the clerical wordsmiths is an episcopal glance, a handshake and a push aside.

It's not a question of theology or policy; it's a question of doing instead of saying. The bishops got the message when they were ordained deacons. Handed the Book of the Gospels, they were told to "Receive the Gospel of Christ, whose herald you now are. Believe what you read, teach what you believe, and practice what you teach."

It's not that easy, but it's not that hard.

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