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'My most grievous fault'

By Msgr. Richard Antall *

One of the phrases in Latin from the old liturgy that survived in literary writing, at least, was “mea culpa,” which means “my fault.” In the old Confiteor, this was said three times: “Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa. This declaration of guilt was accompanied by the movement of hitting the breast with the right fist. The gesture communicated acknowledgment of guilt and symbolic penance.

Somehow the intensive triplication of: “my fault, my fault, my most grievous fault” got lost in the new translation. This was I suppose, because the criteria that the translators used saw the repetition unnecessary. Hebrew uses the triple repetition as a superlative, as in “Holy, Holy, Holy,” but English does not.

So instead of the triple breast beating and the repetition of guilt, there was the laconic, “that I have sinned through my own fault.” The fact that most Catholics forgot to raise fist to chest when this was said, despite the rubrics explicitly asking for the gesture, says it all for me. The repetition helped.

People who forget to do the gesture leave something important out of the choreography of the liturgy. The beating of the breast is an outward sign of inward contrition. The pain on the inside is mimicked by that of the outside. The gesture is not one common in our culture, although we use the words “breast-beating” in certain contexts.

We strike our breasts in the liturgy because it is a nonverbal way of saying in the Bible that you are repentant. Remember the Publican and the Pharisee? The first was beating his breast, as the Jews did on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, and said, “Have mercy on me

a sinner.” It was a public gesture, because it is not hidden from others. The Greek of the New Testament said that the Pharisee was praying “to himself” (in more senses than one, probably) while the Publican is making a spectacle of his grief for his sin and his desire for reconciliation with God.

In the first Eucharistic prayer there is an example of a single striking of the breast by the priest when he says, “To us, also, your servants, who, though sinners.” That has fallen beneath the radar of some American Catholics because those words are not used so much in many parishes, because of the ever-popular second and third Eucharistic prayers.

Soon, however, we will be beating our breasts with the best of them when the new translation comes into effect this Advent. For me, it is a welcome change because we will be able to rescue the publican’s gesture and because there is something about threes in the Bible, and that is nice to remember that in the liturgy.

Many times Bible stories insist on repetition and this has something to do with human nature and not just Hebrew grammar. What is repeated is important. Poets know this. Gertrude Stein could have said, “A rose is a rose,” and left it at that. Shakespeare has Macbeth remark about, “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow,” creeping in its petty pace when he could have said it without the repetition. English does not like repetitions, generally, but neither does it outlaw them. And a repetition like, “my fault, my fault, my most grievous fault,” is both more memorable rhetorically and more effective psychologically.

There is also the psychological resonance of repeating our guilt three times that is helpful. It should remind of a very famous example. When St. Peter said that he would never be among those who denied the Lord, Jesus said to him that he would deny him

three times, “before the cock crows,” meaning before the night was over. All the evangelists have the Jesus’ prediction of the denial and Peter’s lapse of loyalty, but only St. John presents us with the reconciliation of the saint with his Lord on the shores of Galilee.

There are three sets of three. Jesus predicts the denial saying that before the cock crows three times. Then there is actual denial. And, when it is all over, and it appears that Peter has gone back to fishing fishes instead of men, there is a reconciliation with his threefold declaration of love for the Lord. Peter’s redemption is symmetrical with his fall.

The penitential act of the Mass in the new translation has us say, “I confess to almighty God and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have greatly sinned, in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and in what I have failed to do, through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault.”

The prayer should make us feel as uncomfortable as Peter did when the Lord asked him three times, “Do you love me?” It is a moment in which we can analyze a bit the dichotomy in all our lives between what we want to be, or what we ought to want to be, and the way we are. The trouble with ritual is that, even when you repeat some words three times, and have a gesture indicating contrition, one can go through the motions and make the noises but not really invest the prayer with personal integrity.

I knew a couple and they had a kind of routine, especially when a special situation had developed. The wife would extravagantly praise her husband in front of her friends and he would say comically, “She don’t mean it.”

What a scare it would be if there would be some divine epiphany while we piously recite our own contrition, “through our most grievous fault,” and God would say, “You don’t mean it.” Because

that is the real issue behind the change of words in the new translation. It is about the meaning of the words of the Latin Rite and it is about meaning what we say in our own language.

Think of what that implies for our personal lives with this prayer for forgiveness. We have greatly sinned. We want to change. That means we appeal to God's mercy. And we ask the prayer of intercession of the blessed Virgin, all the saints and all the people at Mass.

How could you do that if you were not really repentant? If you didn't have the slightest feeling of contrition for what you did and no plans to better your discipleship? If you were embittered with someone who was in the next pew, someone you had just asked to intercede for you?

Obviously some will make the point that the people at Mass are not usually reprobates (or at least not all) and thus not in need of tremendous conversions. Once a nun friend told me that she did not like the preaching of a priest at Mass who tended to use the Scripture as a means of examining consciences, especially at the early morning Mass. "You just get up in the morning and you're trying to feel good about yourself when he dumps a guilt trip on you," she said. Well, there are guilt trips, and there is the journey of conversion. Conversion is a process that never ends. Our egos are subtle and find ingenious ways to look for compensations, even in the most ordered of lives.

The greatest of saints referred to themselves as the greatest of sinners because their holiness gave them greater insight into their own souls. Our self-image is a lot less work when we are focused on God than when we seem to think that we are the center of the universe. And that is why it will help to say frequently, "through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault."

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