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'Under my roof'

By Msgr. Richard Antall *

In his apostolic exhortation, “Verbum Domini” (“The Word of the Lord”) Pope Benedict XVI advocates for a much more aggressive biblical formation in the Church, even recommending diocesan-level programs of study for the laity.

In connection with the subject of catechesis, the pope says: “A knowledge of biblical personages, events, and well-known sayings should thus be encouraged; this can also be promoted by the judicious memorization of some passages which are particularly expressive of the Christian mysteries.”

This emphasis on knowledge of the Scriptures is reflected in the liturgical renewal fostered by Blessed John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. The new English translation of the Mass is part of a concerted liturgical pastoring by both these popes and in many elements is very strictly biblical.

That is the case of the change of the prayer of the assembly directly before communion. The priest holds up the host (and maybe the chalice with it) and says: “Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb.” There are a few notable changes, although these are stylistic and not theological.

The double “behold” reflects the two times the Latin says, “Ecce.” The word used to translate “Beati” has been changed in the new version. Formerly, this word was rendered as “happy.”

This reflects the ways in which the word “beatus” can be translated

from Latin to English. The Latin itself is in turn a translation of a Greek word, “makarios” that includes ideas like “blessed,” “happy,” and “fortunate”. It is easy to see that true blessedness means happiness and is also good fortune. A comparison of the translations of the Beatitudes reveals the different nuances of the single Greek word.

The blessedness of being invited to the supper of the Lamb calls forth a response from the faithful, which the priest must also recite, “Lord I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.”

This is based on the prayer of the centurion from Matthew 8:5-13 and Luke 7:1-10. It is certainly worth our while to go to the Scripture to understand the words we repeat and apply to ourselves. The Church invites the centurion to Mass with us each time we celebrate the Eucharist.

He is invisibly present to us because our memory makes him so. Although we don’t see the plumes of his helmet we hear him speak in our own voices, as we repeat his words. We want to have his humble attitude of faith in Jesus and we seek to imitate it.

Why is the memory of this Roman officer so important that the Church should makes his words echo around the globe each day? We do not even know his name, just some details of his life. He was a compassionate man, concerned about his servant. The word in Greek is “doulos,” which is also translated “boy,” even though it is important to note that this is not his son but his slave, a usage of the time. The centurion also was respected by the Jewish community and his leaders were grateful to him. He had built the synagogue, St. Luke tells us. When he heard about Jesus, he assumed that the prophet could heal his servant.

We know also that the Roman official was a no-nonsense sort of

guy. His respect for the Jewish religion must mean he considered its God the true one. And he had no pretenses about his own worthiness. The prophet did not need to come to his house. He was asking a favor but he knew in his heart that the mere presence of Jesus would be another undeserved blessing.

The few words the centurion speaks and his plain but clear military example about authority bespeak a wonderful sincerity and a lack of pride, something usually rare among troops occupying a foreign land. In fact, St. Luke says that the centurion didn't even feel worthy to speak to Jesus personally. Instead he sent the Jewish leaders to him, and then some "friends" with messages.

The discrepancy between the two Gospel accounts is interesting, although not irreconcilable. St. Matthew has the official speak directly to Jesus, St. Luke through intermediaries. This could be because the official did not speak the same language as Jesus.

There are disputes about whether Jesus spoke Greek, which the centurion would probably speak along with Latin. I think he did because he grew up in Galilee, but I also think it a good bet that his circle of disciples did not necessarily speak it, or at least were not fluent in the language.

St. Luke's detail might be just a case of stricter accuracy. What the centurion said he did so through others. But the variation also has a thematic function because it underscores the interior disposition of the Roman soldier. He was so humble, so convinced of his unworthiness, that he did not speak directly to Jesus but sent messengers.

His humility and his faith elicited the praise of the Son of God Himself. "I assure you I have not found such faith in Israel," Jesus said (Matt. 8.10).

This statement represents an invitation by Jesus to his Jewish listeners to a humble trust in imitation of the pagan foreigner. It is the wisdom of the Church that we recall this anonymous centurion of Capernaum before we receive the Lord because we need his awareness of the surpassing greatness of Jesus Christ.

The Son of God comes to us and offers us intimacy, a personal communion with him. We need at least to recognize the disproportion of God's mercy. His love is certainly not congruent to our unworthiness.

That is why there is a poetic justice to the humility of reciting the centurion's prayer before partaking of the bread from heaven. We receive the Lord not into our homes but into our hearts in communion. We beg the healing not of a servant boy but of our very selves.

It is as a recognition of the tremendous gift of God's love that we use the words from the Scripture. The ineffable generosity of God beggars our vocabulary. The metaphor of coming under our roof is inexact, in fact a terrific understatement, but it is right to clothe our thoughts with the prayer of another because otherwise we would be speechless.

The Lord himself used the metaphor of a house when he spoke of communion with his disciples. "Here I stand, knocking at the door. If anyone hears me calling and opens the door, I will enter his house and have supper with him, and he with me" (Rev. 3:20).

This could have been said in other language, without the imagery of someone opening up a door for a guest, but the Lord chose to speak poetically. When we say "under my roof" we can recall these words of Jesus about coming into a house to dine and thus our words will have a double scriptural resonance.

Let us recall the quote from “Verbum Domini” with which I began this reflection: “A knowledge of biblical personages, events, and well-known sayings should thus be encouraged; this can also be promoted by the judicious memorization of some passages which are particularly expressive of the Christian mysteries.”

The short prayer of preparation to receive has all of these things: personages, events, well-known saying and a little memorization.

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