beatitude in God alone and the God who delights in sharing his being with creation.

We must draw one further ethical implication from the non-competitiveness of God and the world. When asked why God creates, Thomas responds typically with the formula of the pseudo-Dionysius: bonum diffusivum sui. The good God creates because it is his nature to give. And when asked why God became incarnate in Jesus Christ, Aquinas turns to the same formula. Because it is the nature of the good to give of itself and because God is the supreme good, it is only fitting that God should give himself utterly, superabundantly, and this explains the fittingness of the Incarnation. The being of God, in a word, is a being that gives. But this means that when a human being clings to God as her ultimate good, thereby finding happiness, she is conforming herself to this divine generosity. This is why, in a wide variety of his ethical writings, Karol Wojtyla, John Paul II, speaks of the centrality of the law of the gift in the Christian tradition: one’s being increases and is enhanced in the measure that one gives it away. To achieve the ultimate end of the moral life is not to attain a prize that gratifies the ego; rather, it is to enter into the gracious way of being characteristic of God. One of the tragedies of our time, in my judgment, is that our presentation of the moral life remains conditioned by the assumptions and language of modernity — obligation, law, autonomy/heteronomy, divine demand — rather than by the much more traditional language of grace, co-inherence, and joy.

Conclusion

In our understanding of God, the universe, the act of knowing, and human ethical behavior, we Catholics are unique. Though we can discern family resemblances in the other great religions and even in the best features of the secular culture, the Catholic vision of things is distinctive. It is born of what Chesterton called the “jest” of the Incarnation, the utterly incongruous and unexpected juxtaposition of divinity and humanity. In this great co-inherence of Creator and creature, we spy the Pattern, the basic structure of reality; we touch and see, to borrow the language of St. John, what was from the beginning, the Word of life. Our task, as I see it, is the work taken up by every Christian generation: to narrate the story with joy and panache, to tell again and again the joke which is delightfully on us.

Chapter 6

The Church’s Way of Speaking

ROBERT LOUIS WILKEN

"Thy words were found, and I ate them, and thy words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart." (Jer 15:16)

When St. Augustine abandoned the teaching of rhetoric in Milan to enroll for Baptism he asked Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan, what he would recommend to read in the Scriptures “to make me reader and fitter to receive so great a grace.” Ambrose told him to read the prophet Isaiah. Augustine took his advice, but as soon as he took the book in hand he was perplexed by what he read. “I did not understand the first passage of the book,” he writes, and “thought the whole would be equally obscure.” So Augustine laid it aside, as he explains, “to be resumed when I had more practice in the Lord’s style of language.” In dominico eloquio! An arresting and beguiling phrase!

For the Christian reader Isaiah is a demanding and difficult book once one strays beyond the familiar passages cited in the New Testament or read in Christian worship, Isaiah 9 at Christmas, Isaiah 53 during Holy Week. To the uninitiated the first chapter is particularly daunting with its arcane oracles against Judah and Jerusalem: “Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, sons who deal corruptly. They have forsaken the Lord, they have despised the Holy One of Israel” (Is 1:4–5). For someone like Augustine, formed by the poetry of Virgil and the philosophy of Plotinus, the opening verses must have seemed embarrassingly parochial, taken up as they are with the fortunes of the ancient Israelites centuries earlier. Words such as “sinful nation,” “holy one of Israel,” “daughter of Zion,” “new moon and sabbath” would have sounded alien to his ears, and anthropomorphisms like “I will vent
my wrath on my enemies,” or “turn my hand against you” would have offended his cultivated spiritual sensibility.

Yet Augustine called Isaiah’s language the Lord’s way of speaking and recognized that if he were to enter the Church he would have to learn this new tongue, hear it spoken, grow accustomed to its sounds, read the books that use it, learn its idioms, and finally speak it himself. He had to embark on a journey to acquaint himself with the mores of a new country. Becoming a Christian meant entering a strange and often alien world.

The title of this conference is “Handing on the Faith,” and in the early Church the occasion for the handing on of the faith was the Rite of Baptism at the great vigil of Easter beginning on Saturday evening. There the creed was “handed over” to the catechumens. Ambrose realized there was more to becoming a Christian than putting the creed to memory and being instructed in the “mysteries.” It also meant learning the distinctively Christian language whose lexicon was the Bible. And among the books of the Scripture, Isaiah was preeminent. Jerome said Isaiah was an evangelist as well as a prophet.

Ambrose recognized that “the faith” is not simply a set of doctrinal propositions, creedal statements, and moral codes; it is a world of discourse that comes to us in language of a very particular sort. And language, as we all discover studying a foreign tongue, is not simply a vehicle, an instrument for ideas, beliefs, and sentiments. Language defines who we are. How a people think, how they see the world, how they respond to persons and events, even how they feel are all molded by language. Thinking and understanding, like memory, are not solitary acts—they are mated to the language we share with others. If we forget how to speak our language we lose something of ourselves. As the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz once wrote: “What is pronounced strengthens itself. What is not pronounced tends to non-existence.”

Language, however, is not only the language of a people or a country. There are languages within languages. Just as there is a language proper to science or to medicine, so there is a language proper to Christianity. Our beliefs, our moral convictions, our attitudes are carried and transmitted by very specific words and images. Words, not ideas, bring into focus with compactness and intensity what is honored and cherished. They are the necessary carriers in which the Church’s faith is handed on from generation to generation.

Think, for example, how many terms Christians use in a distinctive way: Father, Son, Spirit, faith, hope, love, grace, sin, mercy, forgiveness, image of God, flesh, kingdom, lamb of God, righteousness, repent, see (as in blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God), know (as in know the truth), believe, truth (as in I am the truth), creation, “male and female he made them,” passion (as in the passion of Christ), face of God, kyrie eleison, and so on. And that is not to mention the many proper nouns, Jerusalem, Mt. Zion, Egypt, Galilee, Sinai, Carmel, Damascus, Mt. of Olives, Bethlehem, Nazareth, and the names of persons, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah and Rebecca, Moses, Samuel, David, Solomon, Isaiah, Paul, James, Mary, Mary Magdalene, Peter.

All of these words come from the Scriptures, and one might say that the lexicon of Christian speech is the Bible. Indeed with some few exceptions, the Greek term homoousios (one in being with the Father) in the Nicene Creed, for example, the distinctively Christian vocabulary is almost wholly drawn from the Bible. Though Christians may speak English or Spanish or Arabic or Russian, they nevertheless use another language, a language within their native language, that is uniquely and recognizably Christian.

Consider the difference between the phrase “Happy Easter” and “He is Risen. He is risen indeed. Allelui.” The one is the language of our society, the other the Church’s speech. Or take the words “nature” and “creation.” The one is the conventional term in our society to refer to the world of plants and animals and mountains and oceans, what we call the natural world, the other the term used by the Bible and Christians to point to a creator and the world as ordered and purposeful. Instead of revered ancestors Christians speak of saints, instead of the birth of Christ we speak of the Incarnation. Even some of our prosaic terms are unique; instead of president we say pope; instead of governor, bishop; instead of convention, council or synod. Christians even have a unique term to refer to the community to which they belong: church.

Augustine said there was a consuetudo loquendi ecclesiastica, the church’s customary way of speaking. As an example he gives the word “martyr”; the term used by Christians for what the Romans call vir, or hero. Recall the opening words of the Aeneid: Arma virumque cano, of the making of war and of a hero I sing. Though the term vir had a venerable history in Latin, and from one perspective it seemed fitting for
the martyrs, Augustine thought Christians should avoid it and use a distinctively Christian word for their valor. "Martyr" bore overtones that were absent from "hero," and "hero" carried connotations offensive to "martyr."

"Martyr" is of course a biblical term meaning witness, and it is used with a very specific sense in the book of Acts. Again and again the disciples are called "witnesses of the Resurrection" (Acts 2:32), that is, someone who knew Christ during his earthly sojourn and to whom the risen Christ appeared. Accordingly a martyr is one who knows Christ and bears witness in death to the living Lord. By comparison the term vir or hero seemed colorless and anemic when applied to the martyrs.

In a sermon Augustine highlighted another feature of Christian language for the martyrs. The Church used the term natalis, birth date, to refer to the day of martyrdom:

Today we celebrate the birthday of the most glorious martyr, Cyprian. This expression, natales (birthdays), is regularly employed by the Church in this way, so that it calls the precious deaths of the martyrs their birthdays. This expression, I repeat, is regularly employed by the Church, to the extent that even those who don't belong to her join her in using it. Is there anyone to be found, I ask you, and I don't mean just in this city of ours, but throughout the whole of Africa and the regions overseas, and not only any Christian, but any pagan or Jew, or even heretic, who doesn't call today the birthday of the martyr Cyprian?

Why is this, brothers and sisters? What date he was born on, we don't know; and because he suffered today, it's today that we celebrate his birthday. We wouldn't celebrate that other day, even if we knew when it was. On that day he contracted original sin, while on this day he overcame all sin. On that day he came forth from the wearisome confines of his mother's womb into this light, which is so alluring to our eyes of flesh; but on this day he went away from the deep darkness of nature's womb to that light, which sheds such blessing and good fortunes upon the mind.4

Another suggestive example is the Latin word passio, passion. It occurs in a verse from 1 Thessalonians, "that each one of you know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like heathens who do not know God..." (1 Thes 4:5). Augustine thought this translation unacceptable to Christians because "passion" was the word used for Christ's suffering and death. "In the church's customary way of speaking," he said the term "passion is not used in a pejorative sense" (as it is here, the "passion of lust"). It should be reserved for the suffering of Christ and of the martyrs.

Augustine even thought that Christians should avoid the Roman custom of referring to the days of the week, for example, Monday, the moon's day, or Wednesday, the day of Mercury (as in the French mercredi). "We do not like this practice," says Augustine, "and we wish Christians would amend their custom and not employ the pagan name." And then he adds: "They have a language of their own that they can use."5 Augustine preferred the simple numeration of the first, second, third day of the week, a practice that is kept to this day in the Latin breviary, feria prima, feria secunda, feria tertia.

The faith, then, is handed on embedded in language. It is not a set of abstract beliefs or ideas, but a world of shared associations and allusions with its own beauty and sonority, inner cohesion and logic, emotional and rhetorical power. The Church's way of speaking is a map of the experience of those who have known God, and the beliefs it hands on cannot be abstracted from the words, nor the words uprooted from the persons that used them. Christian thinking is inescapably historical.

Christian speech is not primarily the technical vocabulary of Christian doctrine — words such as substance, essence, one person and two natures, prevenient grace, atonement, transsubstantiation, and so forth. It is the language of the psalms, the stories of the patriarchs, the parables of the Gospels, the moral vocabulary of Paul's Epistles. Though Christians became very comfortable with the Greek vocabulary of the cardinal virtues — prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance — their native language for the virtuous life comes from St. Paul who spoke of "fruits of the Spirit," "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal 5:22–23). We, in using the Church's language to live together as a community, to breathe together if you will, to think the Church's thoughts, share its loves and live by its precepts.

One of the most beautiful words in the Christian lexicon is "hyssop," in "purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean" (Ps 51:7). In Christian speech it has overtones of repentance and forgiveness, and calls to mind the beautiful line of the psalm, "a humble and contrite heart God will
not despise” (Ps 51:17). Nothing is more characteristic of Christian life than repentance.

Another is the term “patience” in its Old English rendering in the King James translation, “long-suffering” or “slow to anger,” as in the verse: “The Lord is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression” (Num 14:18). Peter says that “God’s patience [that is, long suffering] waited in the day of Noah” and out of mercy God refrained from punishing those who had done wrong (1 Pet 3:20). The ancient Greeks and Romans had no word for this virtue; they spoke not of patience, but of endurance, meaning perseverance in adversity.

About the year a.d. 200 Tertullian, the first Christian to write in Latin, wrote a little treatise with the title de patientia (On Patience), and Cyprian and Augustine also wrote works with that title. In his little book Tertullian keenly observed that patience was not only a divine but a human virtue. The supreme example of patience was Christ’s Passion, an observation later echoed by Augustine: “The passion of our Lord is a lesson in patience.” For Christians the mark of patience is not endurance, sticking it out, but hope grounded in the Resurrection and directed toward an end. For Tertullian (himself an impatient man) it is the premier Christian virtue because it signifies a life oriented toward a future that is God’s doing. Its distinctive feature is longing, not so much to be released from the ills of the present, but yearning for the good to come. Even love, said Tertullian, cannot be practiced, he says, “without the exercise of patience.”

“Mercy” is another beloved Christian word taken from the Bible. St. Caesarius of Arles called it a dulce nomen, a sweet word.6 I recall some years ago sitting in the cathedral of Christ Church at the University of Oxford during morning prayer. I noticed on the stone floor several medallions with the terms justitia, prudentia, fortitudo and realized the medallions represented the four cardinal virtues. But then I noticed that there was a fifth. When the service was over and I could make my way to the front, sure enough I found temperantia but the fifth was misericordia, mercy, a biblical word. Clearly the designers of the church thought that the cardinal virtues (a heritage from the Greeks) were not complete without the addition of a distinctively Christian term, mercy. As early as the third century the Christian writer Lactantius, recognizing the indispensability of misericordia for thinking about the Christian life, chided the Stoics because they had no place in their moral universe for the affections.

Without the distinctive Christian language there can be no handing on of the faith. For that reason the words that embody what we believe and practice, words handed on to us by those in whom Christ was present, cannot be frivolously tampered with, translated into another idiom, or discarded. Language is a defining mark of the Christian polis. As Augustine reminded us centuries ago, the appropriate metaphor for the Church is a city. Like a city the Church draws its citizens into a shared public life, marked by its central cultic activity, the Eucharist, and by other rituals such as the imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday, and processions on Palm Sunday or Corpus Christi. The Christian polis has its own calendar that sets the rhythms of the community’s life, its own polity, the office of bishop, institutions like monasticism, its own law, architecture, art, music, its own customs and mores, history and memory. Christ entered history as a community and over the course of history this community has created a distinctive social and cultural space.

One of the most significant features of the transformation of the Roman world in the fourth and fifth centuries was that Christianity occupied and then re-oriented public space. The classical city with its agora and temples and theaters gave way to a new city plan with the church located at the center. With the Christianization of space came the sacralization of time as the church’s calendar marked the days for celebration and fasting and resting. In the early Middle Ages when kings and their people embraced Christianity, conversion was more than adherence to a new set of beliefs, it brought about a change in public practice.

Over the last hundred years, however, the Church has gradually given up this public face, relinquishing the public space to other rituals, to other calendars, to other buildings, and to other languages. There has been an alarming decline in communal rituals and practice. The Church’s way of life is being chewed up and spit out by the omnivorous society that surrounds us. A good example of the attenuation of Christian life is the way the term “culture.” We tend to use the term “culture” not of the Church, but of the society in which we live. But the Church has its own cultural identity and forms an alternate society. Like the society in which it lives it constitutes a complex social world of practices and institutions with its own symbols, inherited sentiments, beliefs, and behavior. The task of handing on the faith is not primarily a question of how “Christ”
relates to “culture” but how the Christian culture is to be sustained and deepened in the face of another culture that is increasingly alien and hostile.

Implicitly the Christ and culture paradigm assumes that the secular culture is the arbiter of meaning. Consequently a high premium is placed on “translation.” By translation I do not mean from Greek or Latin into English or Spanish, but translation from one idiom to another within the same language. Translation of course is inevitable in any religious transaction, whether it be telling a story from the Bible to a youngster, explaining the sacraments to a recent convert, or preaching the gospel to a people who know nothing of Christianity. If, however, Christianity is a culture in its own right, translation can never be a one-way street. The Church must insist on its own way of speaking and there must be translation into the Lord’s style of language, i.e., adopting and learning to use the Church’s language. More frequently, however, the task of handing on the faith is understood to mean rendering Christian language into the patois of modernity — even in liturgy, the one area where one would expect to preserve the uniqueness and idiosyncrasy of the Church’s way of speaking.

The point can be illustrated by considering the way some prayers in the liturgy were rewritten after Vatican II. Here, for example, is the prayer for Pentecost XI prior to the reforms of Vatican II: “Look mercifully upon our service, O Lord, I beseech you, that what we offer may be a gift acceptable to you and a support to our frailty” (nostre fragilitatis subsidium). In the new version, for Sunday XI in ordinary time it reads: “Look mercifully upon our service, O Lord, we beseech you, that what we offer may be a gift acceptable to you and an increase of our charity” (nostre caritatis augmentum).7

On first reading the alteration seems innocuous, and the reason given by the compilers reasonable: they wished to render the petition positive rather than negative, thereby, it was assumed, making the prayer more dynamic. (What is at issue here is not translation from Latin to English, but the new Latin version.) But the result was the elimination of a vivid word found in early liturgical texts and used for centuries. In its place one gets “love,” obviously a good Christian word, but one that focuses the prayer on the goal while ignoring what stands in the way of attaining the goal, our “frailty.” The prayer as it stands borders on the trite (one should love others), making the language of the liturgy indistinguishable from countless other contemporary sentiments and suffocating genuine religious feeling. Frailty, however, a word one is likely to hear only in the liturgy (except perhaps in speaking of the frailty of age), is sacrificed to a banal platitude.

Another example is the collect (a good Christian word that has been jettisoned) for the Sunday of the Pasch: “O God, who unlocked for us the gate of eternity through your only begotten Son who conquered death, grant, we beseech you, that we who celebrate the solemnity of his resurrection may through renewal of the Holy Spirit, rise from the death of the soul (a morte animae).” The revised version reads: “...through renewal of the Holy Spirit, rise in the light of life (in lumine vitae).”

The new version is not only vacuous, it borders on incoherence. What does it mean to “rise in the light of life”? Here the faithful are deprived of two precious Christian words, soul and death, both biblical, each having connotations that are central to Christian faith. And most important the new version ignores a fundamental truth about Easter — it is not only a celebration of Christ’s Resurrection, but a time of interior renewal for the Christian, a truth that is expressed metaphorically in the phrase “rise from the death of the soul.” I don’t see that the phrase “death of the soul” is any less intelligible to people living in our age than in previous ages. The original plunges the faithful into the deeper caverns of the spiritual life where we struggle against the forces that hold us in bondage. The revision offends Christian sensibility by injecting the fatuous language of new age religion into the Church’s worship.

The changes, mind you, are deliberate, an attempt to accommodate the words of the liturgy to “the modern mentality,” in the words of one of the revisers. The translators display an embarrassing lack of confidence in what Christians believe and practice. Some texts were judged “shocking for the man of today” and “difficult to understand” and for that reason were “frankly corrected.”8 What we have here is a kind of “inculturation” in Western modernity. Though the term “inculturation” is used more often in relation to adapting the gospel to the genius of a native people, it fits just as well for the kind of adaptation that marks this kind of liturgical revisionism. Anscar Chapungco, one of the leading exponents of inculturation, put it this way: “Liturgy must not impose on culture a meaning or bearing that is intrinsically alien to its nature.”9 What this represents, to use John Milbank’s phrase, is a kind of “policing of the sublime.”
The unique gift of liturgy, wrote Roman Guardini in his *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, is to “create a universe brimming with fruitful spiritual life.” Liturgy does not “exist for the sake of humanity, but for the sake of God.” If the Bible is the lexicon of Christian speech, the liturgy is its grammar, a place to learn to know and love the idiom of Christian speech and to be formed by it. For Augustine the reciting of the psalms was a way of making the words of the psalmist his words, and he talked about what the words of the psalms “had done to me.”

Obviously there is always a place for translation, even in the liturgy, but in our present situation the Church has a much greater responsibility to preserve and practice its own way of speaking, to tend to the architecture of the Church’s interior life. Its goal should be to draw people into an alternate way of life, to teach the beauty, truth, and, one might add, usefulness of the biblical and Christian language.

Let me give one example: the phrase “image of God.” Of course it comes from the creation narrative in the book of Genesis. After the creation of the heavens, the sun and moon, the birds and fish, the creeping things and beasts of the earth, God said: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. . . . So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him” (Gen 1:26–27). There is no biblical expression more central to Christian faith than this. That human beings are made in the image of God is the foundation for the whole drama of salvation: made in the image of God, the image defaced and tarnished, Christ restoring the image in those who live in fellowship with him. It is also the pillar on which rests the Christian understanding of the human person. “Image of God” brings into focus what is unique about human beings.

Without the phrase “image of God” Christian witness to the truth about man is hamstrung and crippled.

But does it have a place in our public discourse? Most certainly! Christians must insist on the phrase, for several reasons. First, it is biblical and it occurs in one of the most familiar passages of the Bible. The Bible still has emotional as well as intellectual power. Second, image implies that there is something other than the image, the thing which the image reflects. It points beyond itself to a reality that is more perfect, more true, more beautiful. The image depends on the original, but it can never be the same as the original. Yet without the original there can be no image. Third, it names that reality as God. The term “image of God” helps keep our speech mindful of the transcendent and opens space for deeper reflection on the nature of the human person.

Paul Griffiths has recently shown that one does not have to believe what the Christians believe to make use of Christian language and ideas. Within the last few decades four European philosophers, all atheists, have written major works that draw on Christian thinkers: Terry Eagleton on Thomas Aquinas, Jean-François Lyotard on Augustine’s *Confessions*, Alain Badiou on St. Paul, and Slavoj Žižek on Christ’s willing acceptance of suffering and death. None of these writers embraces the theological views of Thomas or Augustine or Paul, but they employ their language, their ideas, their stories for their own ends. These writers exhibit a “yearning” for something more than what modernity has to offer and the only place, finally, to turn is to Christianity, its language, its mode of thinking, its texts. “This should not surprise Christians,” writes Griffiths. “Our intellectual tradition is long-lived, rich, and subtle, and any attempt by European thinkers to do without it is not likely to last.”

Griffiths’s observations lay to rest the canard that the Church must abandon its unique language to enter the public square. It is the plenitude, depth, and durability of the Christian language that make it attractive to outsiders. Even when they do not believe the things Christians believe, it offers resources and support for their own work.

Like language, Christian ritual has always fascinated outsiders. I was reminded recently when I heard a thrilling performance of Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Great Russian Easter* by the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington. Rimsky-Korsakov was not a believer—he was probably a pantheist—but the *Great Russian Easter*, one of his most popular and stirring compositions, draws deeply on the Orthodox Liturgy and the Scriptures. The subtitle of the piece is “Overture on Liturgical Themes” and it is based on the Obikhod, a collection of Russian Orthodox can- ticles, biblical texts such as “let God arise, let his enemies be scattered” from Psalm 68, and hymns. The piece is ablaze with colors and lights as well as brooding darkness, at once awesome, majestic, austere, and carnival-like effects that would not be possible without the Orthodox Liturgy.

For too long Christianity has relinquished its role as teacher to society. At the beginning of the twenty-first century the time has come for the Church to rediscover herself, to savor her speech, delight in telling her
stories, and confidently pass on what she knows. Only then can she draw people away from the coarse and superficial culture surrounding us into the abundance of life in Christ.

This is not a new strategy but one that has marked Christian thinking from the beginning. Origen of Alexandria was one of the most brilliant Christian apologists of the first three centuries of the Church’s history. His most famous work is a debate with Celsus, a Greek philosopher who had lived seventy years earlier. In his book Against Celsus, Origen gives his opponent a full and fair hearing, citing him extensively and verbatim. At the very beginning he quotes Celsus who said: “Greeks are better able to judge the value of what the barbarians [i.e. the Christians] have discovered…” Celsus believed that the truth of Christianity should be measured “by the criterion of a Greek proof.”

Origen too had been trained in the Greek intellectual tradition, and he knew a thing or two about argument. But he rejects out of hand Celsus’s assumption that the Church’s faith should be measured by an alien standard. The truth of the gospel, Origen insists, is to be judged by a “proof that is peculiar to itself, and this is more divine than Greek argument.” This, says Origen, is what St. Paul was referring to in 1 Corinthians when he spoke about a “demonstration of the Spirit and of power” (1 Cor 2:4). Here is a strategy to be commended at the beginning of the twenty-first century — let the Church appeal to what is peculiar to herself, not to presumed notions about what is meaningful or intelligible or relevant to the society. A robust Christian witness can only be forged by drawing on the fullness of Christ as known in the Church.

At this time in the Church’s history in the United States, it is less important to communicate the gospel to American culture than to rebuild the Church’s distinctive culture, to relearn “the Church’s way of speaking.” There is no dearth of “communication,” whether it be the homilies of the clergy, the catechesis of the young or the formation of catechumens through RCI, the one-to-one conversations of friends and neighbors, the public statements of bishops, or encyclicals of the Holy Father. But while these many and diverse activities go on, there is another urgent task — to restore thickness and density to Catholic life.

I end with two examples of the “Church’s way of speaking,” one from the arts and the other from liturgical language.

The Church of St. Patrick is the oldest church in the District of Columbia, located in the center of the city in what is now a vital neighborhood of apartments, shops, restaurants, theaters, and clubs. St. Patrick’s is a handsome American Victorian Gothic-style building with fine and intricate stained-glass windows including a sequence on the life of St. Patrick in the chancel, a Pieta, several statues of St. Patrick, St. Anthony of Padua, St. Thomas More, and others. When one enters the church, however, it is not the windows that draw one’s attention, but a series of large paintings in the chancel that occupy sixteen tall narrow niches. Painted by the artist Tatiana McKinley in 1996 they depict the saints and blessed of the Americas: St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, St. John Neuman, St. Frances Xavier Cabrini, St. Rose of Lima, St. Rose Philippine Duchesne, St. Isaac Jogues, St. Martin Porres, Bl. Kateri Tekakwitha, Bl. Juan Diego, Bl. Andre Bessette, and others. On a long shelf at the rear of the church the pictures of the saints are reproduced with a brief account of the life of each holy person.

Two things strike the viewer at once. These saints represent Christian holiness of the most varied sort — a religious woman, a bishop, a Native American, a missionary, for example — and they all come from the New World. They present models of the Christian life for the faithful to admire and emulate, but they also help forge a Christian identity that is distinct from the national cultures. By combining saints from North and South America, Canada, the United States, Peru, and other countries, one is reminded that as Christians we are part of another city.

Finally I return to where I began — with language. One Pentecost I was in South Bend, Indiana, and attended a solemn and festive Liturgy in Sacred Heart Church on the campus of the University of Notre Dame. Though the university was out of session and it was the weekend of Memorial Day, there was a full choir. Much to my delight they sang in its entirety the sequence appointed for Pentecost, Veni, Sancte Spiritus. This sequence was written almost a thousand years ago, yet its language was as fresh as if it were composed this spring. It is an example of the ecclesiastica loquendi consuetudo, the Church’s way of speaking, the kind of language that burns the soul with the searing flame of the Spirit. Here are some of the strophes followed by a free translation:

Veni, Sancte Spiritus
et emitte caelitus
lucis tuae radium
Come, Holy Spirit
send out from heaven
the beams of your light

Veni, pater pauperum
Veni, dator munerum
Veni, lumen cordium
Come, father of the poor
come, giver of gifts
come, the light that enlightens our hearts.

Consolator optime
dulcis hospes animae
dulce refrigerium
Dearest and best comforter
the soul’s delightful guest
sweet refreshment

In labore requies
in aetu temperies
in fletu solatium
In labor rest
in noonday heat a cooling place
in grief solace

Lava quod est sordidum
riga quod est aridum
sana quod est saucium
Wash what is filthy
with rain refresh what is dry
heal what is wounded

Flecte quod est rigidum
fove quod est frigidum
rege quod est devium
Bend what is stiff
warm what is cold
redirect what has strayed

Da virtutis meritum,
da salutis exitum,
da perenne gaudium.
Amen, Alleluia.
Give the reward of virtue,
Give a blessed end,
Give eternal joy.
Amen. Alleluia.