Religious Profession Translates Divine Inspiration into a Living Liturgy
(November 21, 2011)

For three weeks, now, we have been talking about the new translation of the Roman Missal. Our considerations have focused on the new words to be used beginning next Sunday. But the real focus of the translation is not just new words; it’s primarily about a renewed and reinvigorated experience. Hopefully, with time, that will happen and we will all come to an even greater appreciation of the sacred liturgy.

And even though we’ve already covered all the parts of the Mass, I’d like us to keep our attention on the work of translation, but this time of a different kind. As is our custom, on this day that we remember the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, we Oblates will present ourselves to renew our religious vows … and in doing so, I suggest, we translate a divine inspiration into a living liturgy.

(1) For what does it mean to “translate” except to build a bridge across meanings. We usually think of this in terms of translating words, bridging the gap in meaning from one language to another. And when such a translation is done well, it makes possible and facilitates an encounter between those who are trying to communicate across a linguistic divide.

Now, that end result – an encounter between persons through communication – makes the work of translation something much more significant than merely choosing the right words or expressions. Rather, the art of translating is ultimately about who we are and how we relate to others.

If you think about it, each of us is constantly translating. Every time we express a thought or sensation, we build a bridge between what’s going on in our heads or hearts and what comes out of our mouths. Or, as one of my favorite philosophers (PAUL RICOEUR) puts it, “to think, to speak, is always to translate even when one speaks to oneself.” In this respect, translating enables us to be narrators of the story that is our own life.

But this personal dimension to translation is even more evident when it comes to communicating with someone else. How is it that we share who we are with another person? To do so is an effort to express what is incommunicable; we try to share our unique and distinctive “self” with others by saying and doing things that they can hear and see. Then, those other people have to translate our words and deeds into something they can comprehend in their own way. So it is there – in the space between us, as it were – that we communicate. And because the you and the me who are trying to communicate with each other are uniquely irreducible human beings, the work of translating is always only partial, never really finished … which is why we keep talking to one another!
Now, consider what happens when one of those who speaks to us and to whom we wish to speak is God. If we need to translate in order to converse with other human beings, imagine how much more this is needed when it comes to communicating with the divine (especially since God doesn’t speak English!)

One way this bridge-building between human and divine happens – not the only way but certainly one very distinct and clear way - is in what you will see and hear this evening: the renewal of religious vows. The words that we will say are the way in which we take what we have heard in the depths of our being, translate its meaning, and respond in kind. They are, in this case, radical words, words that go to the very root of who we are and form the core of who we will be. They are words that speak our “selves” to the world around us. And by way of this speaking - in the words that give shape to our religious lives - God’s inspiring presence gets translated for the world to know.

In renewing these vows, our words are not new. There are still three vows and they’re still the same ones! But in saying these words that we’ve already spoken several times before, we translate again the unfinished story of our lives. We re-experience a spiritual dialogue with God, and we re-enact our personal response. And, as we have been saying about the Roman Missal, this is what liturgical words are meant to do ... they are to bring about an experience of God. In the same way, the profession of vows is meant to bring an experience of God to the world that hears what we say and sees how we live.

That is why I suggest that what we do this evening is a work of translation. It renders divine inspiration into an intelligible meaning – the meaning of a life. And like the new translation of the Roman Missal, the vowed religious life mimics the language of the liturgy:

The Lord has been with us, and with our spirit, inspiring us to this way of life. When we first professed these vows, we began with an act of penitence, prostrating ourselves on the floor at the feet of the Lord. (We won’t do that tonight, because I’m afraid most of us wouldn’t be able to get up afterward!) Our profession is a response to the Word of the Lord, hearing the Gospel call to seek perfection by giving up all things to follow Christ, to be the grain of wheat that must die in order to yield a harvest. Our words make the Creed more immediate, for the life of the world to come that we look forward to is a union with God that we profess even now. And it is right and just that we do this, as a preface to eternal life. For we do this in memory of Him who gave his life for our salvation. And, once the profession is ended, we go forth into the world to make that salvation known by the whole of our religious lives.

That is what we celebrate this evening, and we are delighted that you have joined us. Even more so, we hope and pray that what we are translating this evening will be meaningful for you – not in the sense that you’ll understand the words (you should ... after all, you’re college students now!), but meaningful in the sense that at least some of you here will one day narrate your own lives with these same religious words.

Every one of you comes to this 5:00 Mass regularly to speak to God. That’s a good thing – no, that’s a great thing – and we rejoice that you do so. But how many of you come here to listen? If you really want to communicate with God, then sometimes, indeed most times, you need to stop speaking and just listen.
Listen to the voice of the Spirit within you. Listen with your heart and your head to the God who wishes to speak directly to you. **God is calling you.** God wills for you a way of life that he has destined for you even before you came into existence. Perhaps God wants you to follow Him in the vowed, religious life. You'll only know if you let God speak. And you'll surely know when you translate that inspiration into a decision to follow Him. You could spend forever wondering about it and discerning what God wants; only when you decide to live by what you hear will you be free.

So, let us now translate for you what that divine call and that human response sound like, as we Oblates come forward and renew the profession of our vows.

D + S + B


*Religious Superior – Wills Hall Community*