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Dedicated to Mary, Mother of God

Salus Animarum Suprema Lex Esto (Canon Law 175)

The Salvation of Souls is the Supreme Law in the Church

Language as an Agendum:

The Abuse of Language in the Church

The Odd *Alpha-privative*

What is *Really* Being Said in Church?

Every generation has articulated itself through nuance — political, social, ideological, psychological, and, relatively recently — ecclesiastical. Nuance is, after all, equivocal: it is of the very essence of nuance. In this sense, perhaps its primary sense, it is a way of stating things, not so much tentatively, as subversively. A political ideology, a social agendum, a psychological interpretation, can be held with the firmest conviction ... as long as an avenue of

retreat or retraction exists that is sufficiently wide to permit egress with some semblance of aplomb. We “fervently believe, maintain, hold to be the case” — given that we can also, and with equal fervor, belief, and conviction, repudiate what we passionately posit — at least in any univocal sense. We must be clearly understood as not being too clearly understood. The important thing, after all, is to be right, or “correct,” and failing that, at least not be wrong. Among all possibilities, this alone is inadmissible. This is the value of nuance.

The art of political nuance has been honed for thousands of years to a deadly edge. Every political utterance is fraught with nuance, and for this reason is held, by most reasonable people, to be largely meaningless. Because of its carefully crafted linguistic iridescence, we are never quite sure what to make of a political statement given the metamorphosis of meaning to which it is perpetually subject through nuance. In politics we have come to expect nearly incalculable permutations of meaning — and therefore no meaning at all. We have come to accept the acquisition of this dark art as a right of civilized passage that has ever been inchoate in every expression of power as the pinnacle of politics.

The Passage from Meaning to Absurdity

In ecclesiastical circles, clerical and lay, we find a subtle but burgeoning movement that is gaining impetus through a growing consensus on the mutability of meaning — seemingly innocuous — or meaning as epicentric to notion, as epicyclical to some otherwise established deferent which we presume to know and understand. We fail to see that the constantly revolving epicycle of meaning which ought to be centripetal in verging ever more closely, ever more precisely, on the

deferent, has rather suddenly assumed an inverse relation to meaning, and has become centrifugal in nature, moving farther and farther from the sphere of meaning, of intelligibility, and ultimately becoming remote, even detached, from the reality it once signified. It is not a permutation of meaning resulting from some corresponding permutation in what is signified, and neither is it a gratuitous, still less, spontaneous. The provenance of the problem I leave others to speculate upon, although the problematic itself, I think, is strongly implicative.

What really ought to concern us is what appears to be — but is not — an apparently gratuitous and innocuous evolution not in language as such, but within a particular universe of discourse; one that pertains distinctly, if not uniquely, to the Church. It is not an evolution, as I have said, in language, nor is it a simple matter of ellipsis, although it closely resembles elliptical utterances; it really is a matter privative in nature (much in the way that evil is understood as a privation of a good) and emerges— mutates really — from the simplest of forms in grammatical structure within the English language, and every other language that makes use of the definite and the indefinite articles. It is, in fact, precisely here that that the problematic arises: not in the use, but rather in the omission of, the definite and indefinite articles as they apply to nouns specific to discourse in the Catholic Church and theological circles, however broadly understood.

The Alpha-Privative

It is not simply vexing; it is confusing and disconcerting. In the end, it is really quite momentous, even ominous. Let us take an example. The utterance, used increasingly, that “We are Church” certainly appears harmless; at worst, perhaps a bit odd — at least to native speakers of the English language accustomed to the

definite or indefinite article (“a” and “the”) preceding the noun —it strikes us as quirky, “trendy,” avant-garde, even hyper-modern. Immersed as we are in a Western culture that makes use of the definite and indefinite articles in its language, such apparently gratuitous omissions — which oddly enough occur only within discourse on the Church, and not, as far as I am aware, in discussions or statements about secular society at large — not only sounds rather queer, but more than queer, portentous.

Consider the following examples:

- “We are city”
- “We are constituency”
- “I am citizen of town”
- “I go to voting booth”
- “We eat sandwich”

Such utterances are, indeed, innocuous grammatical solecisms to those of us who have learned — as our primary language — another language to which we are not native, one in which articles (“the” and “a”) do not occur. A close Vietnamese friend, terribly bright, still has not adapted to this linguistic convention after 30 years, so it is not a matter of perspicacity.

But when someone we know who natively speaks any language to which the definite and indefinite articles are intrinsic, quite suddenly begins omitting them from their speech, we are perplexed. Immediately, instinctively, we ask ourselves, “Why? To what end? For what purpose?” One does not simply and gratuitously

abandon accepted rules of grammar without purpose.

The statement, whatever it may be, suddenly acquires something more than the nouns invoked within it. Something latent, occult (L. *occultus*: hidden), ambiguous, equivocal, appears to be implied by the omission. I say “implied,” because the purpose of the blatant omission is never stated, nor prefaced for understanding. It is a violation of grammar for which no explanation is proffered, and this leaves us uncomfortable, curious, unclear. It is the rich soil of nuance. Perhaps history can lend us an example: Latin, for all its melliflence and beauty, was nevertheless considered (in the way of linguistic precision) a language inadequate to nuance, especially philosophical nuance of the type, for example, from which classical Greek did not suffer. A *locus classicus* of this deficiency is found in the *Johannine Prologue* of the New Testament:

“In principio erat Verbum, et Verbum erat apud Deum, et Deus erat Verbum.” (St. John. 1.1)

The words *Deum* and *Deus*, in Latin, can be alternately translated as either the definite “God” or the indefinite “a god.” This linguistic ambiguity, inherent in Latin, made it unsuitable for the precision of language required in philosophic discourse ... an ambiguity that has been exploited, for example, by some sects, to deny the Divinity of Jesus Christ in His Consubstantial Unity with the Father. But the point is clear nevertheless: the absence (not omission, as in our case) of definite and indefinite articles not only emphasized the linguistic limitations of Latin in the way of precise philosophic inquiry, but illustrated the confusion — in this case, resulting in nothing less than a heresy — engendered by the absence of such articles.

“We are Church ...” (!)

What is really being said? — and more importantly, *why* — when it is said, “We are Church” rather than “We are the Church”? Why the omission of the definite article? It sounds trendy enough (if that is a good thing). But again, what is really being said and why?

I more than suggest the following (in fact, I am inclined to see it as a significant fragment of a much larger agendum): by a devilishly clever and subtle linguistic device, the Roman Catholic Church is, we find in such utterances, quite suddenly one among many churches (presumably all equal in nature, correct in doctrine, and authentic in interpretation ... albeit in perpetual contradiction to one another). *It is divested of its uniqueness as the ordinary means of salvation ... a means now distributed without distinction among other churches*, even as the one competes and contends with the other. It is a curious state of affairs.

“We are *the* Church,” on the other hand, is quite another thing. It is a statement implicitly but nonetheless clearly predicating of the Catholic Church something unique and distinguishable in nature ... the Church understood as holy inasmuch as it is “set apart” (a notion repugnant to our democratic instincts), indefeasibly unique and not simply a church (among many churches), but the Church ... What is more, the statement itself is essentially contextual in nature: The Church of Whom? It is a question we cannot ask of a church, except inasmuch as it is regarded as the Church.

Let us take another tack:

Caiaphas, when interrogating Christ, asked Him not if he was “a Messiah,” but if He was “**the** Messiah;” not “a Son of a Living God,” but “**the** Son of the Living God.” The monotheism of the Hebrews stood in stark contradistinction to its contemporary religious milieu in which there were numerous and often competing “gods” — a god of fertility, a god of war, a god of the nether world, etc. The Sanhedrin completely understood the value of the distinction between definite and indefinite articles — the one would exculpate Jesus, the other would crucify Him. Once again, and with growing concern, what are we to make of such utterances as “We are Church”? There is surely something at least a little bit comical, if not shamefully black-face, in listening to a Westerner speak as though he or she were a recent visitor from Asia who had not yet sufficiently grasped English to understand the role of the definite and indefinite article in the most casual conversation.

Several such linguistic malapropisms immediately come to mind:

- “We are Church”
- “We share Eucharist”
- “We come to Table (the Altar)”
- “It is gift”
- “We are gift”
- It is “giftedness”
- We were “gifted with” a statue from a closed parish.” (not the logical and linguistically correct “we were given” — or, it was a “gift”).

Solecisms?

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This odd and deeply factitious dialect is the veritable vernacular of “Woman Church” in America, and all the pernicious aberrations that ineluctably follow from it. This is cause of deep consternation, irrespective of any issue implicating gender, for it is, I suspect, ultimately the alpha-privative of Christ, and His Body the Church. In the end, this deliberate skewing of language is deeply revealing, for *it is of the essence of the alpha-privative to negate*.

Small wonder that the Italian composer Arrigo Boito, in his opus magnum, *Mefistofele*, sums up evil as the “the spirit of negation.”

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