

Hed: “The Sacredness of Language”

Homily: Red Mass, Diocese of Harrisburg

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It’s one of our favorite stories from Genesis. There’s so much in its telling. It’s in Children’s Bibles and coloring books. It is the Tower of Babel, the story where the people thought they could build a Tower high enough to reach Heaven, and challenge the very authority of God.

We are told that God responded by reducing humanity to a babel of tongues unable to understand each other. The people run from each other, and scatter to the four corners of the world in chaos.

Though it captures our imagination, the Tower is actually only a minor figure in the story (see Gen. 11:4-5). The real meaning of the story is how humanity’s hubris—the same Original Sin reflected in the Garden of Eden narrative—leads to the end of humanity’s unity. Language became a divider, a source of conflict, war and hatred. Language had lost its holiness.

Let's go forward to a New Testament narrative, the story of Pentecost from the Acts of the Apostles (2:2-8). Jesus' followers are gathered in an Upper Room in Jerusalem.

And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim.

They were astounded, and in amazement they asked, "Are not all these people who are speaking Galileans? Then how does each of us hear them in his own native language?"

It was the new miracle. The holiness of language had been restored, Babel was blessedly withdrawn, and in a very real way became the underpinnings of the encouragement which Saint Paul gives to his coworker, Timothy, in tonight's first reading: "I ask that supplications, prayers, petitions, and thanksgivings be offered for ... kings and for all in authority, ... that in every place [all] should pray, lifting up holy hands, without anger or argument" (I Tim. 2:1-2, 8).

And then there's today.

Paul's words today have almost become a dare. Or a threat. Open your email. Open your Facebook. Open your Twitter. You never know what will be in

there. Although, really, you and I do know what will be there. And what you and I might be called.

Politicians or civic administrators, lawyers or judges, teachers or journalists, athletes, or deacons, priests, bishops, the guy down the block or the gal behind the sales counter, we are all getting it in this day and age. Hateful language, obscenities, *ad hominem* vilification, vicious personal diatribes, demonic accusations. Then, there can so often be the anonymous racism, ugly and frightening sexual threats, evil distortions. It has all been there at one time or another if you are active and available on social media. It is even there in your snail mail. Hatred and hateful language—anonymous or not—has gone viral.

The motivations for it can be anything or nothing. As many of you may remember, last year, Saint Patrick's Day fell on a Friday during Lent. In traditional Catholic discipline, Lenten Fridays are days to abstain from eating meat. In America, where the Irish Catholic population is so numerous, particularly in urban centers, it is not unusual to waive the discipline when Saint Patty's Day is on a Lenten Friday. As bishop, I did so last year in the Church of Pittsburgh. And following my decision, my mail and email were filled with all kinds of nasty comments and accusations. Everything from charging me with destroying Catholic

tradition, to purposely undermining the faith or paving someone's journey straight to hell, simply because I said that Catholics who wanted to celebrate the feast day could have corned beef and cabbage.

Pro athletes get routinely accused of throwing games for money and destroying the integrity of the sport, because they missed a play at second base or threw an incomplete pass. Journalists are accused of undermining American freedoms because they often confuse opinions with facts. Judges and lawyers, deacons, priests and bishops are vilified and sometimes threatened because we stand up for truth and not for conventional wisdom.

Allow me to share a small story, related by a friend. He had stopped in a chain restaurant for lunch. The bartender was a 20-something young lady, and another customer a few stools down was a 30-something professional woman working on her soda, soup and salad.

The young fellow's cell phone rang and he then proceeded with a conversation everyone could hear laced throughout with one profound obscenity. Over and over and over again. One profound obscenity dropped like a bomb and used in one single sentence as the subject, the object, an adjective and the verb. My friend told me that there were two things about this exchange that came to his

mind. First, the bartender and the woman had no reaction whatsoever. He might as well have been listing the midday stock report. Second, it became clear that the fellow's angry cell conversation was with his wife.

And there it is! The new normal! A profound obscenity that becomes ho-hum with its sheer common use.

But I believe the link is direct between such routine obscenity and the vileness of our discourse among each other. Public obscenity didn't cause it. But it is a link in the chain. I'm not comparing a word hidden in the newspapers by an asterisk to the coarseness we find now in the public arena. But we live in times when public racial and sexual slurs, public bigotry, public anti-Semitism, public anti-Catholicism, public hate have become part of the conversation. It all goes together in one vile stew that has made such language normative.

At some point, we have to reclaim the sacredness of language, the holiness of language. To reclaim the beauty of words, and the critical importance of how we speak to each other and how we speak about each other. We need to reclaim the beauty of words because we have made language a weapon, a vicious weapon wielded every day.

Several Saturdays ago, our sense of tranquility was disrupted by a protest, ugly, violent in nature.

The horror of Charlottesville still lives with us. We can't get the images out of our heads. Our collective memory conjures up memories of school doors blocked in Alabama, and civil rights marchers hosed and beaten in the 1960's.

I'd like to think that Charlottesville was a wakeup call. But I don't believe it was. I see nothing after the tragedy of Charlottesville that has led or will lead to a movement away from the hate that was embraced, celebrated, echoed and, finally, used as an excuse to kill.

I heard and saw things coming out of Charlottesville several weeks ago that 50 years ago as a seminarian I hoped I would never see, hear or feel again in my lifetime. I was wrong. So, so wrong!

So, here is the question. How did we get from back then, the 1960's, to the here and now? How did we get back to Babel from Pentecost? How did we lose the sense of holiness, the sense of the principle of God thriving within every life, and within the great power of words? "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). How did we return to a place

where racism, the KKK, violent shouts and violent words are out in the open and motivating killers? And they always do. On the other hand, how can we get back to the point to where we take seriously the advice that Paul gave to Timothy?

I don't pretend to have a clear answer to the "why" or to the "how." Why are expressions of language that my parents would never have tolerated, let alone spoken or written, becoming common? Why are hateful expressions, vile language, crude insults employed even by the allegedly righteous—not just the self-righteous—acceptable in public discourse now?

I do know that the language of hate in the last 20 years has exploded in our popular culture, in our political culture, in our social media culture. We exist in a culture that celebrates hate—uses it, embraces it, employs it. Some actually laugh about it on social media, kind of an "Oh well, that's the free expression the new technology celebrates."

But that cannot be us, followers of Jesus Christ and respective and respectful of our prayerful gathering tonight—we who are entrusted with protecting and advancing the common good. As a matter of fact, it is our responsibility as leaders, as members of the bench and bar, as deacons, priests and bishops—every one of us, all of us—to address hatred and hateful language.

But where we have to be careful is to never succumb to the temptation to fight hatred with hatred. Our goal must always be to convert; never to give a hater a means to keep hating.

Remember Thomas More, who is near the center of our thoughts and is an inspiration to our prayer tonight. This English lawyer, social philosopher, statesman, author was also Chancellor to Henry VIII for the better part of three years.

Opposed to the king's separation from the Catholic Church, Thomas More refused to acknowledge Henry as the Supreme Head of the Church of England. He refused in principle to take the Oath of Supremacy to Henry VIII. He was convicted of treason. He was beheaded. But remember his words at his execution. He did not fight hatred with hatred. Rather, his own words? "I die the king's good servant, but God's first."

We need to recapture the sacredness of language, the holiness of the words we use. It is through words that we express life; it is through words that we express all that we love, all that we hold close, and Who we fundamentally believe in, namely, Jesus the Christ. We must not compromise the sacred gift, the holiness of language.

And the best way to recapture the sacredness of language, the holiness of the words we use, is to bow before the Word made flesh, to drop to our own knees in acknowledgement of Jesus our Savior.

Paul was right in his advice to his good buddy, Timothy: "I ask that supplications, prayers, petitions, and thanksgivings be offered ... that in every place [ALL] should pray, lifting up holy hands, without anger or argument."

Let me close with two prayers. The first (while it probably comes from the early 20th Century), has been traditionally attributed to our brother, Francis of Assisi. It is universally embraced. Saint Francis transcends our differences and represents our best human aspirations. The Holy Father chose his name wisely.

Here's what has been prayed and dreamed in the name of Francis. Let it establish a mission for each of us today:

"Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

where there is sadness, joy.

"O, Divine Master,

grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;

to be understood as to understand;

to be loved as to love;

For it is in giving that we receive;

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life." Amen.

The second prayer comes from the heart of this preacher with and for you, distinguished members of the bench and bar, entrusted leaders in government, much valued daughters and sons of God Himself. I pray that you and I tonight leave from here in peace. I pray that you and I live in peace tomorrow. And I pray that you and I pledge with our language that we may be instruments of peace.

God bless!