



Our Language reveals our Lived Experience
"...out of the heart the mouth speaks"[Lk 6:45]

The contexts in which we live and relate are always changing. Here in Oceania as we move around the Pacific, or meet People from other parts of the Pacific we hear different Greetings in different languages. In Fiji we hear "Bula vinaka" meaning "Live well", or "Namaste" meaning "reverence to you"; in Tonga we hear "Malo e laumalie" meaning "best of life for you" In Wallis we hear "Malo te mauili" meaning "good life" In Samoa we hear "Malo soifua" meaning "good life" In New Zealand "Kia Ora" means "be well/healthy" [all as approximate translations].

These words are born out of cultural contexts here in Oceania and express a relationship of welcome, of respect, of honour. They carry weight, and depth.

When we read the Christian letters in the Scriptures we find words also of richness and depth being used in greeting others: "Grace, Peace, Mercy" [Paul]; "Greetings" [James]; "Grace and Peace" [Peter]; "My Dear Friends" [John]; "Mercy, Peace, Love" [Jude]. These are words of relationship. They are born out of a relationship with God, and flow on to a relationship with fellow Christians. They are words which honour, nourish, and sustain the relationships expressed.

It's good for us to take stock of the language we use with each other, as the culture of a secular globalization continues to pervade the context in which we live and move and have our being. It is a culture largely shaped by function, and more about things than about people and relationship. It's more about getting things done quickly and efficiently, than reflecting about consequences and values.

A classic manifestation of this is in the words commonly used for greetings and farewells now in our digital age. Instead of words rich in meaning of relationship, as noted above, we now hear the word "Hi" for greeting, and the words "Kind regards" or "best wishes" for farewell or signing off. These are neutral words, with little, if any, depth of relationship. Perhaps they are okay in the secular world of function. But for us, in relating to one another as confreres, and as brothers and sisters in Christ, and as ministers of the Gospel – surely we are called to more?

In a single generation we have witnessed the disappearance of the written greeting "Dear" [are we no longer valuable to one another?] Gone are the farewell words of "Yours sincerely", or "Yours faithfully", or "Yours truly" ; let alone "God Bless you", or "Yours in Christ". Even the word "Fraternally" seems to have been largely relegated to the missing domain.

As agents of the New Evangelisation surely we must be called to re-introduce, in our ever-increasingly secular global culture, language and words that are born of our religious experience. We need words which reflect our relationship with God, and with one another, in the context of that sacred relationship. If we fail to use these words then are we not also in danger of failing to seek, nourish, and maintain these relationships? How are we to call non-believers to hear of a different reality to the one they live in and out of, unless we use the appropriate language – different to the world around us?

If we think we are not being 'evangelized' by the words of the world then let us ask ourselves how often we use, outside of formal Church settings, in daily life conversations, words that are fundamental to our Christian

relationships and experience: words such as Grace, Sin, Discernment, the Devil, Virtue, Heaven, Hell, Eternity, Evil, self-sacrifice, and the names of the Divine Persons.

If we are not using these words then the implication is: either we are not living a life in touch with these realities, or we are allowing ourselves to be submerged in, and subjected to, the language of the superficial secular world swirling around us.

Words are formed from relationships, and in turn they are forming of relationships: they reveal what is in our heart: whether we are living on the surface, or living out of depth and of substance.

Words from a Christian heart, and more-so from a consecrated heart, are sacramental – they reveal the Beyond: they point to the Mystery of Being in the world.

Words of substance invite silence and contemplation: creative words, sustaining words, healing words, forgiving words – they are words born out of silence, and they lead back into silence.

As human beings, created in the image of God, we are essentially relational – since our origin is in God’s own Trinitarian nature. As consecrated religious, gradually being transfigured through, with, and in the Word made flesh – we are called to use language which expresses, reveals, forms, and redeems relationships.

The broken world, on the other hand, uses language that is at best shallow and superficial: and at worst damages and destroys relationships.

With the Church, and in the Church, we are now preparing to enter the Year dedicated to Mercy. This is timely for us as Marists - for we are called to be Instruments of Divine Mercy. It also gives us the opportunity to reflect on the meaning of Mercy. The Latin word for ‘mercy’ is ‘misericordia’ which translates literally as ‘suffering of the heart’. From this we get an understanding of mercy being the pain of one person for the pain of the other. But it goes further than compassion or empathy. Mercy means taking pain to do something about the pain of the other. The word must find its fulfilment in action.

An outstanding woman of our own time who was moved by mercy to do something beautiful for God, to do something about the pain of the other, is Mother Teresa of Calcutta. She was a woman of reflection and action. She was also a woman of life-giving words. The following are some of her words which seared themselves into my memory; words, which reveal her own experience of living in union with the Eternal Word. She exhorts us to:

“Know the Word, Love the Word, Live the Word, Give the Word.
Mary, Mother of the Word, make me humble like Jesus, like Jesus”.

As we encourage each other in living out our consecrated life in union with the Eternal Word, let us also encourage one another to find and use words which enrich the Mystery of Relationship in our own lives. And may these words attract and invite those who hear them, into a deeper relationship with God, and into the Community of God’s People.

[Acknowledging the Paper of Fr Michael Whelan sm : “Human Words” This paper is available on request].

For Personal and Communal Reflection / Prayer

- I call to mind some of the words of Scripture which have nourished my mind, my heart, my life, over the years. I thank God for these words.
- I call to mind some life-giving words I have received from a significant person in my life. I thank God for these words, and this person.
- I ask for the Grace to treasure and use life-giving words in my conversations and relationships: particularly the difficult ones in my life at this time.