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CARDINAL FRANCIS GEORGE AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Prior to his death in 2015, the late Cardinal Francis George of Chicago was the undisputed intellectual leader of the US bishops' conference. Although his Archdiocese was in the top five most important in the country (along with Boston, New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco) he managed to at least browse through every book that had been purchased by the library at his seminary so that he would know what his seminarians were reading. He also helped to establish the Lumen Christi Institute at the University of Chicago. It grew to become a centre of Catholic intellectual life on this strategically important campus. In short, Cardinal Francis George was a man who understood the importance of the intellectual apostolate and he was keenly interested in the task of the new evangelization. He believed that the culture of the United States, like much of the Anglosphere, was primarily Calvinist, and thus American Catholics had a tendency to be Catholics in their minds, but Protestants in their social practices. While this is not true of all American Catholics he saw this tendency as a danger for all Catholics living in cultures infused with Calvinist sensibilities. His interest in the relationship between faith and culture was the focus of his doctoral dissertation titled *Inculturation and Ecclesial Communion: Culture and Church in the Teaching of Pope John Paul II*. In this work

he made a number of pastorally significant points about the relationship between language and culture.

Theological discussions about the language and culture subject often begin with the statement of John XXIII in his opening address to the Second Vatican Council. John XXIII famously declared that the "substance of the ancient doctrine of the *depositum fidei*" is one thing and its formulation or linguistic expression is something else. This statement was often received by the Council Fathers as an exhortation to present Catholic teaching in the idioms of contemporary philosophical frameworks rather than in classical Greek or later scholastic categories. At the time when the statement was made it was generally thought to be unproblematic. However in the decades since the 1960s linguistic philosophers (not theologians) have drawn attention to what is called the difference between an instrumental understanding of language and the expressivist theory of language. Academic opinion is on the side of the expressivist theory. It holds that culture is prior to language. Concretely this means that we only understand the meaning of words, including theological concepts, if we are first immersed within the culture that created them.

This expressivist theory of language is similar to Theodor Haecker's theory about "heart-tone" words. Haecker (the German translator of Newman and Kierkegaard) argued that there are words used in particular cultures that lie at the very heart of the intellectual life of their cultures that are untranslatable into other languages. In order to understand their full meaning with none of the nuances or textures lost or muted, one needs to be first immersed in the culture with which they are associated. Haecker gave as examples *logos* in Greek, *res* in Latin, *raison* in French, *sense* in English and *schicksal* in German (Haecker 1934).

Another example of the expressivist theory of language is to consider the Australian folk song *Waltzing Matilda*. It begins with the words:

> Once a jolly swagman camped by a billabong under the shade of a coolibah tree
> And he sang as he watched and waited 'til his billy boiled
> You'll come a-Waltzing Matilda, with me.

It's an Australian joke that were Australia to be invaded by another English speaking nation it would be easy to distinguish the invaders from the Australians by asking people to explain the meaning of these lines. A mere fluency in the English language is not enough to decode them. The lines contain idioms that are unknown in the Anglophone world outside of Australia. Translated into international English the lyrics would be mean something like 'a homeless man serenaded his sleeping bag (wife substitute) while boiling water under a tree near

a stagnant lake'. A knowledge of life in the Australian outback in the late nine-teenth century and during the economic depression of the 1930s is necessary to make any sense of this. As the verses of the folk song continue they become even less comprehensible to non-Australians.[1]

To return to Cardinal George, a point he made in his doctoral dissertation is that John XXIII assumed something like an instrumental theory of language where concepts are easily translated from one language to another. He wrote:

> Implicitly, Pope John's statement seems to support an instrumental view of language, regarding language as the means whereby a speaker gives expression to thoughts which exist independently of the language, through the employment of words whose meanings are the object of explicit agreement between prospective speakers. By contrast, an expressivist view of language holds that thought has no determinate content until it is expressed in a shared language (George 1990, 88, fn. 21).

Cardinal George concluded:

> Cultural forms and linguistic expressions are, in fact, not distinguished from the thoughts and message they carry as accidents are distinguished from substance in classical philosophy. A change in form inevitably entails also some change in content. A change in words changes in some fashion the way we think (George 1990, 47).

The Scottish Catholic philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre, while not relating this issue directly to the statement of John XXIII, has also argued that "to abstract any kind of concept, but most notably moral concepts, from the traditions which they inform and through which they are transmitted is to risk dangerous misunderstandings" (MacIntyre 1991, 69). MacIntyre is acutely aware of these dangers because he grew up immersed within four different and in many ways antithetical cultures: one Scots Gaelic, one English, one Catholic and one Presbyterian-style Protestant. He believed that in order to understand the meaning of concepts frequently used in each of these cultural traditions, one needed to be immersed within the culture. One needed to be first a Catholic, a Presbyterian, an Englishman and a Scot. He also had his awareness raised of the problems associated with translating philosophical concepts from one language to another by the experience of George Thomson, a Professor of Greek, who was engaged in a project of translating Platonic dialogues into Irish.

Given this background, MacIntyre has been highly critical of the Church's strategy of adopting concepts from rival traditions (such as the adoption of the

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[1] For a more extensive analysis of the concept of a narrative tradition and the expressivist theory of language see chapter 6 of the authors' *Culture and the Thomist Tradition: After Vatican II* (Rowland 2003).

rights language from the liberal tradition) and then attempting to give the concept a Christian-friendly content. This kind of intellectual practice is in MacIntyre's words, "a dangerous risk", because unless people are professional philosophers or theologians they will not understand that the Church's scholars have given these concepts borrowed from rival traditions, a meaning that is different from that popularly understood to be the meaning of the rival tradition. MacIntyre also argues that proponents of the liberal tradition enjoy creating concepts whose sole purpose is to "paper-over" or camouflage matters at issue between rival traditions. A classic example is the use of the word "partner" in preference to "spouse". Spouse implies marriage. Partner can mean any kind of a relationship. It is therefore a liberal tactic to promote the use of the word "partner" since it socially marginalises the standing of the marital bond. From a Catholic perspective these kind of linguistic practices commonly promoted by the liberal tradition should be resisted.

In the recent publication *Disputed Teachings of Vatican II: Continuity and Reversal in Catholic Doctrine,* Thomas Guarino argued that a majority of the Conciliar fathers wanted to abandon the language of scholasticism with its hundreds of logically interconnected concepts in favour of a more personalist rhetoric undergirded by the philosophical concept of analogy (Guarino 2018). He also argued that the Council's participants and their theological advisors wanted documents that sounded irenic and emphasized what Catholicism has in common with other world-views. This was seen to be an alternative to a dialectical approach that emphasizes difference, uniqueness and thus exclusivity rather than similarities, common ground and inclusivity. Guarino concluded that one of the problems of the post-Conciliar era is that ordinary Catholics (those not formally trained in theology and philosophy) did not always see the continued operation of the Thomistic theology behind the new language. The new language operated as a veil over the predominately Thomistic, but more broadly magisterial theology, that the Conciliar fathers took for granted. The problems associated with the reception of the documents of the Second Vatican Council are therefore the pastoral epiphenomena of the failure of a generation of ecclesial leaders to understand what linguistic philosophers know to be important issues in the relationship between language and culture.

These issues are also highly important in the context of catechesis. One post-Conciliar trend has been to present the teachings of the faith to children in contemporary social idioms. However, if one follows the expressivist theory of language this is a dangerous and even a counter-productive approach. The important

task from an expressivist perspective is to immerse the child within an uncompromisingly Catholic culture and the child will acquire, over time, a connatural understanding of the meaning of key theological concepts. To take the alternative instrumental approach is to run the risk that the baptized Catholic child remains marooned in a secular culture, unable to comprehend the Church's own "heart-tone" concepts. While a six year old child may not understand what the words "the angel of the Lord declared unto Mary, and she conceived of the Holy Spirit" mean, if he or she repeats them every day when hearing the Angelus prayer recited at noon, the Holy Spirit will guide the child in understanding, and he or she will grasp the meaning of the Incarnation in the deepest recesses of his or her soul. An understanding of the Incarnation will become fused with the child's Catholic identity.[2]

These few ideas in no way exhaust the complex topic of the relationship between language and culture and its pastoral significance. However they are an introduction to the research of Cardinal Francis George. His reading in the area of linguistic philosophy (not a common area of study for bishops and cardinals) brought to his attention the fact that John XXIII's assumption that one can easily take the doctrinal skeleton of the faith and dress it up in different linguistic frameworks like updating a wardrobe for a new fashion season, is very problematic. The Church has her own culture, her own "heart-tone" concepts, and the best way to understand them is to be baptised and immersed in her liturgical life. When one knows what it means to live and think as a Catholic one can then start to make some intellectual judgments about how much and in what way, this or that idea or social practice, is consistent with the faith or hostile to it. One can then be a mediator between traditions without fear of becoming what moral philosophers call a "narrative wreck".

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[2] For a recent work that addresses faith, language and culture issues in the context of catechesis see: Bursma, 2022.

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Cardinal Francis George and the Relationship between Language and Culture

A b s t r a c t

The difference between instrumental and expressivist theories of language identified by Cardinal Francis George in his *Inculturation and Ecclesial Communion* helps to explain the problems that arose in the post-Conciliar era with pastoral programs that sought to present the perennial teachings of the faith in contemporary philosophical idioms. Theologians working within the territory of the relationship between faith and culture need to study linguistic philosophy before embarking on ambitious cultural and linguistic transposition projects.

Keywords: Instrumental theory of language, expressivist theory of language, "heart-tone" concepts.

Słowa kluczowe: instrumentalna teoria języka, ekspresywistyczna teoria języka, pojęcia „języka serca".