

July 03, 2005
The Martyr Hyacinth

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

I suppose that if we always thought about the meanings of the individual words we use, we should probably speak so slowly as to lose the track of our sentences, to say nothing of our paragraphs. Weighing each word, as each word on its own deserves, we would probably speak a great deal less. Speaking less, on the other hand, we may actually finish by saying more.

Perhaps the best times to reflect on the meanings of words are those occasions when we are not obliged to say much, or anything at all. I am thinking of those instances when nothing much is happening, and we are simply thrown back on the contents of our own heads.

Now I confess my good fortune in only rarely being reduced to the contents of my own head. Usually there is at least a bit of a reading material lying around. One doesn't need much to read if he pays attention to the words.

One day, for instance, several years ago, I found myself waiting for a bus in a small town, and I was obliged to make do with just four words of text. As it turned out, those were words particularly dense with meaning and occupied my mind richly for about forty-five minutes until the bus arrived.

The full text was composed on a sign on the hardware store in front of which I was waiting for the bus. The sign read: "True Value Home Center." Even though I regretted the lack of a verb, and therefore the absence of a sentence, those four words are arguably among the richest in our vocabulary. One could feast on them all day.

The first thing to be observed was the balanced blend of Saxon and Norman sounds in "True Value Home Center," a combination suggesting the entire drama of 1066. The alternating, reconciled, and utterly free-spirited juxtaposition of a pair of Northern words (True and Home) with two Southern words (Value and Center) stood like the solid four sides of a castle.

I began by leaning the words against one another, considering how the mystic associations of Teutonic "Truth" (such as trust and troth) sustained the high Mediterranean ideals of "Value" (such as valor, validity, and the Latin leave-taking wish, "Vale!" meaning "Be strong!").

From there I pressed on to consider the propriety of associating the warm, earthy Germanic "Home" with the abstract Greek precision of "Center."

Having reflected on the wondrous union of these four words with one another on that most felicitous hardware sign, I then weighed the heavy freight of each word in turn. I had not attained beyond the second or third word, however, before the bus arrived.

When I entered the bus, a veritable library awaited my attention, such as the signs around

the upper walls. Some of these signs, in fact, even contained numbers, so that the mind could break away from solid words for a while to breathe in those pure, airy, abstract references that cleansed the struggling heart of Pythagoras.

Then, what should I behold lying on the floor but an old matchbook, the quick inspection of which revealed that it contained printing on both sides. Here was a robust literary treasure to fill a bus ride of a mere thirty minutes.

One doesn't always have such rich resources to hand, however, and it may be necessary sometimes to ponder words already inside us. For such occasions it is useful to carry around a ready supply of them to enjoy at leisure.

One of these, let me suggest, is the word "geometry," four syllables that contain, I submit, the full vocation of the human mind. The first two syllables of geometry refer to the world around us, the earth (ges), discerned through our five senses. The earth is the reliable source of all the raw material that we imagine and remember.

Even as the earth enters our senses, however, we give names to its component parts, such as ground, sky, plant, and so on. Already then, in our immediate perception of this earthly home of ours, we put our intelligible mark and measure upon it. We humanize it in the very act of recognizing it. That is to say, we impose our human "measure" upon the earth, a narrative activity indicated by the final two syllables of the word "geometry."

From the consideration of the earth, the mind rises to study those internal, mental processes by which we measure it. We ascend from grammar to logic, mathematics, then to philosophy, and thence to the Creator of them all.

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