

Guard the narrative

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Some years ago, the recited creed at Catholic Sunday Mass received a new first word. We stopped saying/singing “We believe in...” and recited the direct translation of the Latin Credo in unum Deo: “I believe in one God...” In the next sentences, Catholics profess: “I believe in one, holy, catholic (small ‘c’) and apostolic Church...”

Each word is operational similar to the way mathematical symbols are operational. We do not say words or symbols are unimportant just because they appear to be tiny. We recite this creed weekly for just such times as we are living through.

By 2019, my offices were leaning into a Eucharistic renewal. Plans to address Evangelization, Catechesis, and our actions (words, gestures, music) within Eucharistic celebrations were getting more attention. These priorities shaped department structures and guides our process for new diocesan hires. A context of civil unrest and COVID-19 made our work more difficult.

If we do not deliberately recall our explicit faith focus, including our personal call to holiness, then we diminish the power of the narrative with which we are charged. At the heart of the narrative is God’s initiative: God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him may not die, but may have eternal life (Jn. 3:16).

Now to the point. It is possible to lose the narrative or have our attention to it diverted. Just talking about the Church or morality does not mean we carry into those same conversations our primary mission of proclaiming the living Christ. More to the point, we must flavor such conversations with own personal encounter with Christ’s love, friendship and forgiveness. This comes with a caution: we can be distracted from divine initiatives by important but secondary narratives. For example: the history of clerical sexual abuse, including the McCarrick report; pandemic health safety regulations; whether faith is sufficient to protect us from contagion; new assignments for pastors; the identification of conscience mandates with a political party; whether or how we frame conversations about social justice and environmental topics. Add to this list a mistaken assumption that the U.S. Conference of Catholic bishops as having national governance authority over diocesan bishops. Canon law states that each diocese is a self-governing church headed by a bishop with the power to ordain and provide for the seven sacraments. Conversely, one bishop has no jurisdiction to tell another bishop how to administer his diocese. The Holy See has that privilege, and now and then deputizes a bishop to investigate and intervene in another’s diocese.

Yes, we can talk about difficult questions. Adults should be able to discuss their concerns. Catholic adults should be able to speak about anything, provided that we know the difference between facts and opinions. We have to be willing not to talk past each other. Counselors and mediators are aware that various parties often fail to engage on the same level. The puzzlement about whether specific public persons should receive Holy Communion is fueled when those of us who are alarmed are unaware of the different kinds of concern. As the philosophers might say, we fail to engage on one conversation plane at a time. These planes or levels might be: authority, power, sacramental theology, morality, canon law. Have we accounted for the fact that terms such as communion (and Communion), scandal, and

sacramental presence each have multiple definitions? If we assume that every person with whom we speak is using the same definitions and understandings as us, we produce more heat than light. Add to the mix not only intellectual but emotional freight related to whatever subject, and we can glimpse a magnitude of the challenges.

I am not excusing just any opinion, or just any behavior, because of overarching complexities. Nor do I suggest that raw decrees can successfully bring order to vexing situations, many of which were decades in the making.

This is why I mentioned that we bishops, priests and staffs have been attending to effectively evangelizing and catechizing our own church members. Again, why? To better share and guard our Christ mandated mission which is our primary narrative. We were renewing our efforts long before the pandemic hit in early 2020.

If we have not regained our momentum, it is because effects of the pandemic are still with us. The contagion itself has not yet passed. Add to this a persistent temptation to get caught up by secondary narratives. Picture what happens when the communion of believers mindfully professes, "I believe in one God..." When we daily remind ourselves that God is molding us (me!) into the image of his Son (2 Cor 3:18), the possibilities for mission, community and witness assume their proper dimensions. Let us pray.