

Words of Worship Can Sustain Us

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On September 19 we remember Saint Trophimus, a man who had a special connection with words.

Trophimus and his friend Sabbatius were committed Christians who lived during the late third century. They happened to arrive one day in the city of Antioch just as a boisterous, bawdy pagan festival was taking place. Feeling sorry for the misguided revelers whose children were seeing such an indecent spectacle, they prayed that God would guide the pagan worshippers in a better path.

But the pagans were in no mood to welcome Christian prayer. They reported these strangers, who were neither sacrificing to the gods nor toasting them with wine, to the governor. The two men were arrested and, refusing to renounce Christ, were tortured. Sabbatius died of his wounds but Trophimus survived, only to be sent on to the city of Synnada where he would face more suffering.

As he was paraded around the city for days wearing sandals fitted with upright sharp nails, Trophimus refused to say anything except the words of Psalm 33/34:19, "Many are the afflictions of the righteous person, but the Lord delivers him from them all." Trophimus endured terrible pain and humiliation before finally being beheaded, but these words sustained him through it all.

In a recent article in "Christian Century" Magazine, religious writer Carol Zaleski praises a new translation of the Roman Catholic Mass which restores to that Liturgy many words and phrases that the Orthodox have used all along. Zaleski also recognizes the ability of words of worship to sustain us, and refers to the new translation as "a chance to rediscover the shape of the liturgy and the essentials of Christian belief and hope."

She favorably compares several of the restored words to the ones they replace. For example, in the new translation when the celebrating priest addresses the congregation with "The Lord be with you," the people answer, "and with your spirit." Zaleski writes that these words are more vivid, theologically interesting and faithful to the original Latin than the merely "functional" words of response used in the earlier translation, which were "and also with you."

Similarly, she mentions the words "all things visible and invisible" in the Creed. She says that this descriptive phrase "maps the the material and spiritual cosmos more adequately" than the words "all that is seen and unseen," which were used in the earlier translation. She adds that "threefold petitions and rhythmic repetitions, once stripped from the English [translation of the Latin] in the interest of simplicity, evoke a sense of mystery that surpasses prosaic speech."

The words of worship can sustain people in different ways. For Saint Trophimus they were a means of remembering the promises of God in the midst of intense suffering, so that the suffering could be borne, and even become a way of glorifying Him.

Kontakion - Tone 8

As the foundation of athletes and the confirmation of piety
the Church honors and glorifies your brilliant suffering,
wise and glorious Trophimus, ever-praised and blessed athlete.
Together with your fellow sufferers, ask cleansing for those who hymn you,
for you are invincible.

For believers today, words can be reminders of our glorious eternal destiny. When we all share the same words, they can be calls to unite the Christian Church.