

Opinions

Letter to the Editor: One linguist's perspective on the Magis

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"What will awaken you to the Magis?"

That motivating question was asked of all those attending the Inauguration Ceremony of our new university president, C. Kevin Gillespie, S.J. It is a question with presuppositions. Students of linguistics will recognize that its phrasing presupposes the existence of the Magis, and that one can be awakened to it. But beyond the declarative signs on City Avenue, the free car magnets, the online campaign reminders, and the creative television commercials, what does it really mean? And is it synonymous for us all?

Though phonetically similar for some speakers, Magis clearly does not reference 'Dean Madges' of the College of Arts & Sciences. In fact, Latinists inform us that the "a" of magis sounds like the "a" in 'father' and that its "g" is similar to the "g" in 'magazine' and unlike the "g" in 'magic'. The speakers of some languages might be tempted to pronounce its "i" as the 'ee' in 'keep' rather than the shorter "i" in 'gist'. Nevertheless, International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) specialists represent its Latin pronunciation as [máɡɪs]. As occurs predictably in a language, popular usage promotes modifications, and most at St. Joe's have comfortably adopted [mádʒɪs], pronounced with the "a" as in 'father', the "g" as in 'magic', and the "i" as in 'gist'.

Interestingly, the Magis has a strangely familiar counterpart in pop culture and shares etymological

roots with the slogan displayed on Taco Bell product packaging: "Live más". Indeed, this Spanish word for 'more' descended from our Latin Magis. Evidently living greater and living more are somehow interrelated – perhaps encompassing Chihuahuas and pinto beans.

But surely that doesn't give us the whole story. Seeking God in all things probably doesn't include the seemingly inconsequential realities proclaimed by plastic food wrappers. Or does it? Could the motivation behind the selection of a single-word

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catch phrase be exactly that? Could its stark simplicity serve to sensitize a faculty and a student body to the importance of life's details as well as the bigger issues of our human experience? Living greater should involve caring in the broad-

est sense. Very practically, the Magis requires recycling those plastic containers in Campion and doing one's part in local sustainability efforts. On a relational level, it means responding to our students' emails promptly and with sincere attention to them as individuals. In our social context, it pushes us to engage and create meaningful connections with those of diverse linguistic backgrounds. And morally, it should embrace a commitment on the part of both faculty and students to act with integrity in all of life's contexts: in the conference room, the academic classroom, the residence hall, and on the playing field. We should not allow the experience of St. Joe's Magis to go the way of its lexical counterpart, morphing into "more" that is somehow less.

Rather, perhaps we could teach each other a second language and become proficient speakers of the Magis. Not acquired without intentional effort, this two-syllable word is rich in meaning and application. We don't all have equal opportunities to travel to faraway places or contribute to the important projects that make headlines. But we do all have the chance to live the Magis – however we choose to pronounce it – in our daily lives by serving and studying with integrity before God who gives us the ability to use language in the first place. Looking to the future on a truly linguistic note, one wonders if perhaps its contribution will ultimately be an analogous shift in syntax: rather than being awakened to the Magis, just maybe the Magis will awaken us.

Exclusion from sacraments misguided

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Unfortunately, it has become all too common for Catholics to see the sacraments of the Church entangled in political battles over issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage. The use of these ministries as political tools has become more frequent as the hierarchy of the Church finds itself at odds with social changes. Many Americans remember when 2004 presidential candidate John Kerry was denied Communion due to his pro-choice beliefs, a fate which also met other Catholic politicians. This practice was decried by many both within and outside of the Church as an inappropriate and irreverent use of one of the most sacred aspects of Catholic belief and worship. Nevertheless, the trend still continues.

As questionable as this practice is, one even more shocking recently garnered national headlines. In mid-November, a 17-year-old Minnesota Catholic, Lennon Cihak, was denied the sacrament of Confirmation due to his support for same-sex marriage. Cihak and his family were notified of this decision by pastor Gary LaMoine after the priest discovered a picture posted on Facebook that showed the teen holding a political lawn sign related to the Minnesota Marriage Amendment. The sign, which urged voters to vote "yes" on the measure to ban same-sex marriage, had been altered; Cihak had replaced the "yes" with "no" and written "Equal Marriage Rights!"

While there are many better ways to voice your opinion on same-sex marriage than defacing a lawn sign, this act was clearly meant as a harmless exercise of speech. By no means should a post on Facebook disqualify a Catholic from receiving the sacraments of the Church. In a letter to the parish explaining the controversy, LaMoine states that he did not deny Cihak Confirmation, since he verbally

withdrew. However, the pastor acknowledges that he would have prevented the teenager from receiving Confirmation anyway, which leaves the point moot.

This situation is disconcerting and unwarranted for many reasons. Confirmation is focused on entering the Church enlightened by the power of the Holy Spirit; it should not be used as a means of excluding from the community those who hold dissenting views on social issues. Furthermore, as a teenager Cihak is still in the process of maturing and form-

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ing his beliefs and opinions, and receiving Confirmation should be a way for the Church to influence his personal growth. Instead, he was rejected and has led many to become sympathetic to his cause.

Furthermore, LaMoine's reasons for the decision misuse the Church's teachings. In his letter he writes, "Rejection of the teaching on marriage is...similar to the rejection of the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity or...of Christ as being both human and divine." This notion is completely preposterous. Equating the Church's opposition to same-sex marriage as a teaching of equal weight to the triune nature of God or the divinity of Christ demonstrates a severe lack of understanding for the central tenets of Christianity. While the faithful do hold firm to the precepts of the Creed, opposition to same-sex marriage is not one of them. LaMoine's assertion that same-sex marriage is

as important to Catholic teaching as the nature of God is truly unheard of and has no basis in reality.

The targeting of a teenager for his support for same-sex marriage also raises another pertinent question: Why does the Church focus so much on certain issues, while almost completely ignoring others? This election cycle, Catholics have heard much about the Church's opposition to abortion, contraception, and same-sex marriage; however, very little attention was given to issues such as social justice, care for the poor, and respecting human dignity by opposing torture and capital punishment (all of which are also facets of Catholic social teaching). This discrepancy is illustrated by the hierarchy's reaction to Catholic vice presidential candidates Joe Biden and Paul Ryan. As predicted, Biden's position on social issues led several bishops to deny him Communion. While the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops did author several letters criticizing Ryan's infamous budget plan for its disproportionate effect on the poor and vulnerable, none went as far as to exclude him from the central sacrament of the Church.

These situations are very troubling to Catholics who are committed to their faith but who feel rejected due to their struggle with certain aspects of the Church's teachings. This sense of condemnation or unwelcome is unwarranted; there should be no litmus test on current events or social issues to be a member of the Church. Only by reaching out to all who seek faith and membership in the community can the Church hope to increase its influence in society and carry out its mission. Militant speeches and harsh condemnations may please those on the extreme end of the spectrum, but for most of us this sanctimonious use of authority is appalling. So instead of denying teenagers Confirmation or playing politics with the holiest sacraments of the Church, we should adopt an understanding and compassionate tone. If Jesus could embrace the outcasts of society, so should the Church.