

One night, as I was still working at King's College, I walked through the student center and came upon a group of students in the lounge studying together. One was wrestling with ethics. He knew that we need to treat each other with kindness, dignity, and respect. Earlier, however, someone challenged him on this point: Why do any of us have to treat others with dignity and respect? Upon what basis do we build the foundation for our ethical beliefs and practices? Does this mandate apply to all people, even those who have committed a heinous crime?

Daily swimming in an ocean of religion as a priest, I casually said something that seemed obvious to me. The first book of the Bible tells us that we are all made in the image and likeness of God. Human dignity starts there. The student dropped his notebook and pen, looked up, and said something along the lines of "Wow. That's so simple, yet applies to everything." He was able to make the connection to the Golden Rule on his own. It was a beautiful "Aha!" moment.

These moments are precious. It is beautiful when people translate stories and messages from the Bible into their own lived experience.

Jesus used parables to translate the ephemeral truths of God into the daily lives of the people. Our faith is so very rich in many ways, yet more people today

define themselves as "spiritual and not religious." Many more do not want to believe until they can feel faith touching their lives in a very personal way. The same God who created us in His image, who came to save us by His cross and resurrection, invites us into His story. I believe that our job is to do our best not to get lost in translation and to help those who are. Therefore, whether in a parish, college, or ministry on the streets, I feel like God calls us to educate the heart as well as the mind by translating the wonders of the Gospel into the language and experience of people's everyday lives. As Christians, we are all called to help people "speak the same language," especially by translating through words and actions God's language of real love.

Fr. Eric Schimmel, C.S.C., entered Holy Cross after graduating from Notre Dame with a double major in Chemistry and Theology. He was ordained in April 2002. Since then he has served in several parishes, including his current assignment as Administrator of Holy Cross Easton Parish, has been the Director of Andre House in Phoenix, AZ, and worked in Campus Ministry and Hispanic Outreach at King's College.



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Office of Development
P.O. Box 765, Notre Dame, Indiana 46556-0765
www.holycrossusa.org
development@holycrossusa.org



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God's Language is Love

Rev. Eric Schimmel, C.S.C.

“After all, when you come right down to it, how many people speak the same language even when they speak the same language?” *Russell Hoban*

I think it is safe to say that miscommunication plays a central role in many comedies. One of my favorites is the classic Abbott and Costello routine, “Who’s on First?” As humorous as miscommunication can be onscreen, our own experiences tell us that it can also create frustration, anger, and conflict. Though miscommunication is frequent when people speak different languages, we know that people speaking the same language often fail to communicate. That is why, when I was in the seminary and found this quote, I wrote it down and taped it next to my desk.

Looking back at my time in Holy Cross since starting the seminary about 25 years ago, I see that a useful lens for ministry is that of communication, and especially translation. My first experience consciously thinking about the importance of translation came as a seminarian as I was blessed to work in our District of East Africa.

Immersed in a new culture, with people speaking languages I did not understand, took me out of my comfort zone. My time living in Nairobi for a semester, and then for a year in Jinja, Uganda, became very formative. I never really learned Swahili

to a level where I felt comfortable and confident. Therefore, I was very grateful when the opportunity came to me to focus my ministry at Lake View Senior Secondary School in Uganda where I taught Chemistry and Physics - all in English. Although I found myself using my native tongue, and was teaching students who knew English very well, I discovered that a primary job of a teacher is to translate concepts in ways that the students could grasp and understand.

Since ordination, I have been blessed to work in several ministries, including parishes, at a college campus, and an outreach ministry for people experiencing dire poverty and homelessness at André House in Arizona. My experiences have taught me that, as a Holy Cross priest called to educate the mind and the heart, a primary pastoral calling is to translate.

The most literal experience of translation came when I was at King’s College in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., working in the McGowan Hispanic Outreach program. This program has several ministries, including outreach to children in grades 1-4, a middle school program, and a high school program. It also offers English as a Second Language classes to adults in the area. We would meet four nights a week for an hour and a half. We divided the students into different classes based

on their proficiency levels. The majority of the time I taught the very basic level. I used lots of acting and pantomiming and images to convey content. One September, when a student asked me what the word “suntan” meant, I took off my sandals to show the tan line on my foot. It worked instantly.



The students, who came from all over the world with different native languages, learned at different paces. Learning English while living in the United States was an important goal. For me, I had a concurrent goal in my heart that I learned in my previous ministry serving people on the streets of Phoenix: help my students know and feel that there is a God who loves them and that there is a place where they can feel loved and accepted even as they struggle.

Often, my students would make tons of mistakes while trying to communicate in their new language. Each time I hoped to assure them that it was okay. I even

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shared my story of trying to learn Spanish and making embarrassing mistakes. For example, one day my Spanish tutor asked me to explain Confession, in Spanish. I spoke very seriously and slowly about the Sacrament, while at the same time struggling to remember conjugations and proper word order, etc. I said that when a person wants to receive forgiveness, they can confess their “pescados” to the priest. My tutor laughed a fully belly laugh. Pescados are fish. Pecados are sins. Who knew just one letter “s” could make such a big difference?

Each of us fails in one way or another. Nobody is perfect. We come before a God who loves us all, and as the Sacrament of Reconciliation celebrates, we believe in a God who wants to forgive all of our fishy smelling sins.