

A couple of years ago I took a course in Spanish at a language school in Antigua, Guatemala. If you can imagine this, the school provided each student with our own teacher. We sat down two to a desk, toe to toe. Nothing to see but a teacher, nothing to hear but Spanish. One morning my teacher Eduardo brought in for our discussion a bundle of papers filled with special words. He said, "These are expressions you will not find in a book, but you will hear them on the streets of Antigua." For three days we studied colloquial expressions, curse words, even gestures people use in conversation. I traded him. I told him some of ours. Sometimes we had to say, "Now, be very careful with this expression. Don't say it in polite company; use it only with your friends."

Dirty words are sacred words. Let me explain that: They have power. They confront people as other words cannot do. Many are words of religion; historically, religious words have always carried power. But more and more our curse words have to do with bodily functions--sexuality and the elimination of wastes. Our bodies have become our new gods; words which describe what we do have more power in the language than words which describe what God does.

Many people slip into the habit of cursing more than they want. It's a hard habit to break. And with New Year's upon us, many will make resolutions to improve, but some resolutions are just hard to keep.

Bad language bothers a lot of people who come to church because of the second commandment, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain." Now what the second commandment deals with is not so much "bad language" as real downright cursing, namely a prayer that God will do evil toward someone. "May God cause your crops to wither." "May God cause your phone to die when you call 911." That sort of thing. When most people use bad language, they use words we don't use in polite company, but they're not wishing eternal damnation on a broken toaster.

Still, it's worth asking what language do we want to use, and what are the words within us. In a moment of shock what is the word within that comes out? The story is told of Mahatma Gandhi that the word he used for prayer was "Rahma," a Hindu word for God. This was his mantra--he prayed it over and over as a meditation, as a Catholic might pray the Hail Marys of a rosary, or the Jesus prayer. The story is that when the assassin shot Gandhi, Gandhi said, "Rahma." That was his word, the word that expressed the core of his being. It wasn't bad language, it was his prayer. This might be true of us. In a moment of shock, we reach inside and pull out the most sacred word we know because it expresses in this moment the constant meditation of our hearts.

It's in today's Gospel when Mary's child receives the name Jesus. It's the first time the holy name of Jesus was spoken. In fact we used to call this day Holy Name Sunday. It's a name that can be our mantra, a name that carries power. We may use it in blessing, or abuse it in a curse. But it will always have its power; it will always be a name that strikes to the heart. To invoke the name of Jesus is to bless God and one another.