

# THOUGHTS FROM THE RHINELAND

## TROUBLED TONGUES

*Jordan Schmidt, O.P.*

**D**awn broke on the jagged karst mountains of Liu Pan Shui city, illuminating the rising mist from the Ming Bai reservoir. The silhouettes of the campus buildings flanked the oversized Chinese flag to the right and left—what an odd skyline that was. This was the last time I was to look upon it; in a few hours I would be evacuated, shipped back to the United States. The SARS epidemic had forced the shutdown of the Peace Corps in China.

In those quiet morning hours I became pensive. Naturally, I thought of the friends I had made and the many wonderful experiences that I had. But I also began to think of those things that never made it into the brochure: the long stretches of isolation, the complete lack of community, the lack of spiritual support, the waiban officer who followed me to the non-denominational church where I tried to make some friends, and the subtle reminders about the prohibition on proselytizing.

At that moment it dawned on me that I had been wrong. I thought I could subsist on my own. I thought that I didn't need support from my fellow Americans, from my fellow Christians, from anyone. I was completely wrong. The result? I suffered. My own fault, I admit. But I suffered nonetheless. That was okay, though. I was going home to do what I had promised God I would two years earlier. I was going to join the seminary.

**A**t the outset of my formation, I experienced intense spiritual refreshment, which brought on a kind of euphoria. I was thankful for the life of prayer. I was thankful for the sacraments. I was thank-

ful for the community. The rapid and dramatic change of going from a communist country hostile to the faith to the intense life of formation at the seminary made me aware that we are radically communal beings. That is, we live our lives in spiritual and physical dependence on one another, and we need relationships with others to thrive. This realization developed into a desire for an even more profound and intense communal life, particularly in the liturgy, which was to lead me to the Dominicans three years later.

If I had to characterize my spiritual experience over the past ten years, then, I suppose I would say that it has been the continuous awareness of the providential hand of God directing my life and drawing me closer to him *through other people*. It strikes me as a mysterious and awesome thing that God has elected to use human beings to enact his saving plan.

Every Christian receives a new birth and is brought to maturity in his faith through his relationships with other people. We are given the faith through other believers, at birth or later in life. After our initiation into the Church, God continues to bestow his grace upon us through our relationships to other believers, whether they be priests, religious, family, friends, or other acquaintances in the Church. These relationships form a scaffolding around our relationship with God; they are not the most important thing, nor can they replace our relationship with God. However, God has elected to use them to build and shape our relationship with him.

This is truly good news, but there is another side to this coin. Perhaps it is my pessimistic northern-European heritage coming through, but lately I've been struck by how precarious, how delicate this scaffolding is. The great gift and the joy that community is can become a great weapon and burden when it is twisted and undermined by sin.

This is not typically a dramatic betrayal of Biblical proportions as in the cases of Cain, Absalom, or Judas. Rather, it happens most often, as St. James teaches us, on a small scale and with the tongue, which cannot be tamed by any human being and has an uncannily destructive power despite its small size. James points to what is



FRANTIŠEK BÍLEK - MOSES

perhaps the most ironic quality of human speech: we use the same tongue to bless God and to curse and revile other human beings whom God has made in his own likeness.

Each of us has the potential to be a conduit for God's grace in another person's life, through preaching, through prayerful support, or simply by our example. At the same time, though, each of us has the potential to cause great pain in the life of another through our words and actions. The psalmist voices this rather beautifully:

*For it is not an enemy that reviled me—  
that I could bear –  
Not a foe who viewed me with contempt,  
from that I could hide.  
But it was you, my other self,  
my comrade and friend,  
You, whose company I enjoyed,  
at whose side I walked in the house of God.*

These words, though perhaps originally penned to describe the intrigue of a political traitor and religious apostate in exilic Israel, apply equally well to the ambivalence that we often feel toward our own friends and fellow believers when they betray us with their tongue. The psalm reflects the particular pain and frustration that arises when we are assaulted by the words of those whom we trust, especially those with whom we worship and profess a common faith. The most difficult part is that we as Christians cannot wholeheartedly follow the psalmist in his response:

*Let death take them;  
Let them go down alive to Sheol,  
For evil is in their homes and bellies.*

Christ exhorts us to forgive those who hurt us and to bear sufferings and wounds patiently. This is not to say that wanton detraction ought to be tolerated with impunity, but it is to say that—lest we misinterpret what God is teaching us through the psalmist here—we are not free to write off others within our community even if they seriously offend us.

That we are not to share literally in the psalmist's response is a good thing, as most of us are perhaps more readily identifiable with the friend who betrays than the psalmist who is betrayed. We would certainly do well to examine ourselves as to whether we have reviled our friends in word or in deed, and to seek reconciliation.

Here I am reminded of the words that each brother utters before making profession to our Order. When asked by the one receiving vows, "What do you seek?", the brother responds, "God's mercy and yours." This refers to the mercy that each member of the community shows to every other member, which is only possible because it is rooted in the mercy of God himself.

It is precisely this mercy that is necessary to repair the damage that we regularly do to our scaffolding of relationships. It is this mercy that is strong enough to forgive the slights, the jokes that misfired, the arguments about the thousand and one banal things that seemed so important at the time, and the petty gossip that can be so

destructive of a community of believers. But it is also this mercy that is the principle of regeneration and healing that enables even those relationships that have been more burdensome than joyous to show us the way to God. And that is perhaps the most beautiful thing that I've seen in the past ten years.

*Jordan Schmidt entered the Order of Preachers in 2006. God willing, he will be ordained to the priesthood in May 2012.*