



Of Neighbors and Wounds: English and Spirituality

By [Pedro Paulo Oliveira Jr.](#) | April 1, 2015



It's not unusual that the Anglophone media has problems parsing Pope Francis. This problem relates in part to a lack of vocabulary to express spiritual concepts or translate accurately what was said in Spanish or Italian.

Last year I participated in a [book club](#) in which we discussed *Open Mind, Faithful Heart: Reflections on Following Jesus* by Cardinal Bergoglio. Among other issues discussed, I made some remarks about the translation. Although my mother tongue is Portuguese, I know Spanish quite well, and certain comments by others in the group made me aware of some of the unique challenges that English poses for dealing with spiritual themes, especially Catholic ones.

Multiple concepts condensed under a single word usually means there's a limitation to expressing each individual concept, and people end up collapsing all those concepts as if they are the same. In the United States, the most popular sports are baseball, football, and basketball, and the English spoken there includes a wide variety of expressions derived from those sports that confer special meaning to some words: You tackle a question, a trick question is a curveball while easy ones are called softballs, you talk about ballpark figures, slam dunks, etc. Those expressions refer to concepts that are difficult to translate into other languages.

In a similar way, Christian spirituality depends on concepts that were developed over the course of centuries by way of Latin and other romance languages, and throughout our book club I tried to express what is lost when some of those concepts are applied in English.

My first encounter with preaching in English happened in Cambridge, MA; and it sounded particularly odd compared to language I would expect to hear at Harvard University less than a quarter-mile away. In the shadows of one of the world's most distinguished universities I listened to a preacher whose grasp of language rivaled that of a high-school student. At other times I've felt the same in Australia, New Zealand, and England, and then something clicked. The problem was not the preacher, or the person talking about spiritual subjects; the problem is that I expect a certain rich spiritual vocabulary that is simply not available in English.

Don't get me wrong, I admire the growth of the Church and the faith in the United States. And English is the most versatile language, and the most well adapted for a great number of subjects from medicine to physics. But my experience is that of a foreigner; and it relates to the particularities of a certain language to capture—or not—a spiritual tradition that is quite universal.

A cornerstone of Christian doctrine is the commandment to love one another. The parable of the Good Samaritan and the *mandatum novum do vobis* summarize the nature of *caritas*. Jesus begins the Good Samaritan's parable answering a question: *Et quis est meus proximus?*, translated in the USCCB version as: "And who is my neighbor?"

Neighbor is used as a translation of the Latin word *proximus*, which is *prójimo* in Spanish and *próximo* in Portuguese. In all romance languages there is another word for neighbor (Spanish: *vecino*, Portuguese: *vizinho*, French: *voisin*) used only to describe the person who lives close to us.

Thus *proximus* is a word employed to describe not only physical but rather spiritual neighborhood. I'm neither the *vizinho* of the reader nor his friend, as we don't have a close relationship, but I could say that the bond created by reading this article makes me his *proximus*, at least more *proximus* than someone who's never heard about me. This is not to say that the use of "neighbor" as a translation for *proximus* is a naïve choice; it's just that by collapsing the spiritual neighborhood with the physical one the language loses punch.

Another word that presents challenges in English is *tibieza*. Both Portuguese and Spanish speakers use this word to describe a spiritual disease when one becomes what's described in Revelation 3:16: "So, because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth." In either language there is another word to express the concept that "lukewarm" expresses: *morno* in Portuguese and *templado* in Spanish. Although at times *tibio* is used in Spanish

as a synonym for *templado*, as a substantive it has only one meaning. *Tibieza* is a disease of the soul whereby people have a spiritual laziness, an arduous time doing prayers. A *tibia* person will do almost anything to avoid taking time for God. He doesn't hate God, but he might prefer a root canal over a weekend of spiritual exercises in silence.

"Wound" is also a problematic word in Anglophone spiritual literature. In the aforementioned book by Pope Francis, he talks a number of times about praying out of "woundedness" (in the English translation). In the romance languages specific words are almost exclusive to the wounds our Lord Jesus Christ suffered. In Portuguese it's *chagas* and in Spanish *llagas*. I would never say in my native language: *eu tenho uma chaga na mão* ("I have a wound in my hand") because it would sound very strange. We have another word for this sort of wound: *ferida*, or in Spanish *herida*. Both *ferida* and *chaga* would be translated in English by "wound" although the latter is reserved originally for a spiritual concept.

The word *llagas* derives from the Latin word *plaga*, the origin of the Italian word *piaga*, which was the center of a small media frenzy surrounding a mistranslation of Benedict XVI's *Sacramentum Caritatis* as it was mistaken for "plague." The Latin word *plaga* is used, for instance, in the hymn *Adoro te devote: Plagas, sicut Thomas, non intueor*, usually translated in English, less poetically, as:

"Thy dread wounds, like Thomas, though I cannot see."

A few rather simple practices are available to Anglophone preachers and laymen, alike, that would improve the communicability of Christian spiritual concepts and benefit the Church as a whole. Naturally, if one has the ability to work at least a little with a foreign language, especially one of Latin roots, it can drastically and almost immediately affect one's appreciation for otherwise hidden concepts, including those given in Scripture. As English is especially flexible, coining and using new terms—in response to original concepts or adding to them—is a natural advantage that could be more widely employed. (It shouldn't be only social media conventions that drive our functional vocabulary.) One also shouldn't be afraid to use foreign words in a familiar context, as they can reinforce specific meanings simply by exposing the listener—and the speaker—to an unfamiliar term.