

## GLIMPSE

### What's in a Word?

Fr. Larry Gillick, S.J.

I phoned recently an office here on campus and asked for a certain person. I was told that he was in the middle of a conference. I asked when did the conference begin and was told that the receptionist didn't know. I mused a while and replied that if she did not know when the conference began, how could she know when the middle was. She laughed of course and I meant her to do so.

We use the expression "There are stairs coming up." In reality, the stairs may be actually descending or "going down". We say many things we do not really mean literally. I had a student come to my office when I was a Student Adviser at our high school. He had completed an over-due assignment and the teacher upon reception of the paper said, "Very good, you're fat." This meant the student was all set, just fine, and up to date. Because of his self image, he felt judged and upset at the teacher's remark.

I asked the student the difference between figurative and literal language. He, of course, had the definitions reversed. He would have literally climbed the wall of my office if I told him I was going to literally blow my top at his misunderstanding. While I was writing this last sentence, a friend of mine called saying that she'd like to have a word with me and she talked for twenty minutes. That was a long word.

Catholics and other Christians say things such as marriage or religious vows. We pronounce baptismal promises and creedal statements. Are these literal or figurative pledges? I love listening to the vows of two persons of faith declaring in public that they will love each other in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health and for always. Now the likelihood is that these promises are going to be violated, perhaps even before the wedding cake is cut.

So are we all hypocrites, because we say things and not perfectly fulfill them? I was told once that the reason this man didn't go to St. Leo's Church any more was that there were nothing but hypocrites there. I responded that there was always room for one more. He did not find the humor in my statement. Neither could he find the holiness in how we vow or make promises to try and then pray and try to respond to the grace that moved us to make fragile attempts toward perfection. Our only perfection is that we are perfectly imperfect. Pope Francis has stated that the Eucharist is not merely a prize won by the

perfect. The perfect embrace of Jesus is as close as we are going to get to that which is our hearts desire. It is said that the good is not the enemy of the perfect. Jesus is not the Infinite Approver/disapprover. Jesus, in a sense, is God's perfectly-kept vow of God to accompany us in good time and bad, sickness and health, in our trying-times and in the times when we want to stop trying. This embrace is neither literal nor figurative, it is as personal as we allow it to be.

It's only a glimpse, can you stomach it?