

Embracing What is Ours

Part One: The Latin Language and the Sacred Liturgy

Introduction

This is the first of a three-part series in *Pastor's Corner* about the beauty, transcendence, and tradition of our Sacred Liturgy. As Catholics, we must know not only *what* we do, but also *why* we do it. Here at Mary Star in the recent months, there have been some changes in the Sacred Liturgy which are not so much “new” as they are a return to the life-giving fonts which have always been ours. As our liturgical practices continue to grow and develop, we will stay true to the continuity of Tradition enumerated by The Second Vatican Council which taught that changes arising in the celebration of the Liturgy must “grow organically from forms already existing”¹. With this in mind, in pursuing what is popularly known as “The Reform of the Reform”, we do so humbly *ad maiorem Dei gloriam* (for the greater glory of God) and *salus animarum* (the salvation of souls).

Language in the Liturgy

Language is of central importance in the Sacred Liturgy. The term “vernacular” refers to the commonly spoken language of the people: Here at Mary Star, we offer Mass in four vernacular languages: English, Spanish, Croatian, and Italian. The Second Vatican Council taught that the vernacular is to be used “in the readings...and some of the prayers”², and so this is what we do. This is beneficial for people to be able to hear and understand these changeable parts of the Mass. The vernacular languages of our parish are “ours” culturally, ethnically, and familiarly. But spiritually and liturgically, the Latin language is also “ours” in a very real sense. Latin has served as the language of harmony and unity in the Roman Church’s liturgy since the 3rd century³, enabling people of any time or place to attend Holy Mass anywhere in the world and experience the feeling of being “home”⁴. Even when the vernacular is used, Latin easily and gracefully lends itself to what is called the “Ordinary of the Mass”, which are those parts of the Mass that never change, such as the dialogue “*Dominus vobiscum—et cum spiritu tuo*” (The Lord be with you—and with your spirit); the *Kyrie*⁵ (Lord, have mercy), *Gloria* (Glory to God in the highest), *Credo* (I believe in one God), *Sanctus* (Holy, Holy, Holy), *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God), *Pater Noster* (Our Father), etc. In the Roman Liturgy, then, there is a place and a need for both the vernacular languages in popular use, and the Latin language of ancient use.

The Unity of Culture, the Transcendence of Tradition

In a time of such ecumenical thrust, when Christian churches of different confessions look toward one another for points of unity rather than division, it is worth noting that throughout the apostolic churches of Christianity, it is generally *not* the “vernacular” which is used in the Sacred Liturgy today. For example, in the Russian Church, it is Old Church Slavonic that is used, not the Russian of everyday use. In the Egyptian (Coptic) Church, it is Coptic that is the official language of the liturgy,

¹ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, # 23.

² VATICAN II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, #36.

³ FORTESCUE, A., *The Mass: A Study of the Roman Liturgy*, Longmans, Green and Co., London 1912, 128.

⁴ cf. JOHN PAUL II, Letter *Dominicae Cena*, #10, where the saintly Pontiff notes that Latin has always been for us “an expression of the unity of the Church” which “through its dignified character elicited a profound sense of the Eucharistic Mystery”.

⁵ The only Greek words spoken or sung in Holy Mass, but which were organically incorporated into Latin liturgical usage from the earliest times.

not the Arabic of everyday use. In the Greek Orthodox Church, it is ancient Greek which is employed, not the Greek of very day use, etc.

When people say, “I don’t understand Latin”, they may mean that they do not *speak* Latin. But through ritual repetition of the unchanging parts of the Mass Ordinary, especially when these parts are already known in the vernacular language, we find that we know much more than we think we do! In such a multicultural society, we see that we *can* learn new languages, and actually *enjoy* them. After all, Jesus promises to us who believe that we “will speak in new tongues” (Mk. 16:17), which we can do *especially* when the language is already “ours”, and He aids us by the Holy Spirit Who has been poured into our hearts (Rm. 5:5).

The Example of the Saints

When we gaze upon the vast “cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1) of the saints of the Roman Church, we see mirrored there who *we are here* at our parish: people from all different lands, times, and tongues, living one faith and loving one God. It is worthy to note that the vast majority of Roman Catholic canonized saints over the centuries, though their cultures and vernacular languages were vastly different, all worshiped in a common language: Latin. When we pray in the Latin tongue, we join our spiritual fathers, mothers, and heroes in a very profound way. One of those saints, Robert Bellarmine, the great Jesuit cardinal and doctor of the Church, said that “the majesty of divine worship requires a language that is more weighty and venerable than those which are in common use”, specifying Latin’s fittingness for the celebration of the liturgy and sacraments of the Church⁶. In a word, in our own call to be saints, we would do well to live and pray as the saints who have gone before us.

The Teaching of the Church

All of the saints were loyal sons and daughters of the Church. Even though many of them did not *speak* Latin, they counted themselves blessed to *pray* in Latin, remembering that the primary organ of prayer is not the “brain”, but the *heart*⁷. Praying and listening with a heart attuned to the wisdom of Mother Church, we, like the saints, open our lives to abundant grace when we say “yes” to Her directives and her pastors. So, what have those directives and pastors taught?

Blessed Pope Paul VI, whom we can thank for our vernacular liturgy, stated, “We want to say something very plainly to those whose shallow minds or unthinking passion for the new lead them to the idea that the Latin language must be totally spurned by the Latin Church. To them we say that it is absolutely clear that Latin must be held in high honor”⁸. Similarly, Pope St. John Paul II reminds us that “The Roman Church has special obligations towards Latin, the splendid language of ancient Rome, and she must manifest them whenever the occasion presents itself”⁹. The primary “occasion” being the Sacred Liturgy, the Church adjures that “The use of Latin language...is to be preserved in the Latin rites”¹⁰, and that the “...use of the vernacular must never become the general practice at the expense of Latin”¹¹. We are particularly guided that “care must be taken to insure that the faithful

⁶ CREAN, T., O.P., *The Mass and the Saints*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2008, 28.

⁷ cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2562.

⁸ PAUL VI, *Address to Latinists*, 1968.

⁹ JOHN PAUL II, *Dominicae Cenaee*, #10.

¹⁰ VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, #36.

¹¹ SACRED CONGREGATION FOR SEMINARIES AND UNIVERSITIES, *Doctrina et Exemplo*, 1965.

may also be able to say or sing together in Latin those parts of the Ordinary of the Mass which pertain to them”¹², and that it is “pastors of souls” who must carry out this teaching responsibility¹³. Thankfully, the Latin parts of the Mass are easily learned by ear, by voice, by mind, and by heart. In addition to being an experience of Heaven on earth, *The Sacred Liturgy itself* is our “classroom”, where we learn by doing, and by praying. By incorporating more Latin into our Sacred Liturgies here at Mary Star, our beautiful and noble patrimony as Latin Rite Catholics is preserved while the prayers particular to each liturgy are accessible to the faithful in their own language, offering a beautiful symphony of mind, heart, and voice¹⁴.

Conclusion

In a multicultural world (and parish!) in which spoken language can be so diverse, it is good and helpful for us to embrace what is ours by developing a new love for Latin, our spiritual “first language”. Confident that the heart at prayer, the lives of the saints, and the Magisterium of the Church have always and everywhere guided us to preserve the use of the Latin language and Gregorian Chant (which we will speak of next week...stay tuned!) in the Holy Mass of the Roman rite for God’s greater glory and the good of our souls, we can take joy when we pray in a tongue ever ancient and ever new¹⁵, becoming *ourselves* a sacrifice of praise (Heb. 13:15) with Jesus in His perfect gift of self in the Sacred Liturgy.

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¹² VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, #54.

¹³ CONGREGATION OF RITES, *Instruction on the Liturgy*, October 16, 1964. It is significant that the Church specifies that this should include the *Pater Noster* (Our Father) and the *Credo* (the Profession of Faith), which sum up our shared lives of prayer and belief, and bring us together in a special way in the midst of the Sacred Liturgy and the communion among us which it engenders. cf. GENERAL INSTRUCTION OF THE ROMAN MISSAL (“GIRM”), #41.

¹⁴ To this it can be added that a fantastic investment would be a good hand Missal (a faithful companion of most Catholics up until just about a generation or two ago) which would offer any Mass of the year for you in Latin and in your own vernacular language, helping you to do what any good “worship aid” does: Pray the Sacred Liturgy with all of your being through the use of *both* the ancient Latin tongue, and your own language, too. Especially to be recommended are the *CTS New Daily Missal*, published by the Catholic Truth Society in 2012, and/or the *Daily Roman Missal* published by Midwest Theological Forum in 2011.

¹⁵ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Confessions*, Book 10, ch. 27.