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LATIN IN THE NEW LITURGY



R. H. Richens

Foreword by Bishop W. Gordon Wheeler

“The Vicar of Christ once more expresses the hope that Gregorian chant will be preserved and performed in monasteries, religious houses and seminaries as a select form of prayer in song and as an element of supreme cultural and pedagogical value. Referring then to the numerous requests from several quarters that the Latin Gregorian chant of the Gloria, the Credo, the Sanctus, the Pater noster, the Agnus Dei etc. should be kept for all countries, he renews the recommendation that a suitable way should be studied to enable this widespread desire to become a reality and to keep those ancient melodies as voices of the universal Church, so that they will continue to be sung also as an expression and manifestation of the unity that pervades the whole ecclesial community.”

*Pope Paul VI to the National Congress of Sacred Music,
26th September 1973.*

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Chairman of the *Association for Latin Liturgy*

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BISHOP W. GORDON WHEELER

⊕ faith pamphlets

Nihil obstat: Natalis Burditt, Censor deputatus
Imprimatur: + Carolus Grant, Episcopus Northantoniensis
Northantoniae, 24-III-1976

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FOREWORD

Whilst much has been written on the Mass in the vernacular, very little has been said about the Mass in the definitive Latin of the new rite.

As a result, it has frequently happened that many hearing the new rite in Latin have thought they were present at a "Tridentine" Mass!

The Church lays down that the use of Latin is to be preserved and it is only right that we should do our best to see that the Church's mind should be followed. It is all a question, pastorally, of finding the right balance between vernacular and Latin celebrations.

This little essay should help many to see the value of the Church's command as expressed in the decree *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.

+Wm. Gordon Wheeler.
Bishop of Leeds.
Chairman, National Liturgical
Commission of England and
Wales, 1970-75.

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The Author, Dr R.H. Richens is Chairman of the *Association for Latin Liturgy* which was founded in 1969 to promote and extend the use of Latin and Latin church music in the reformed Roman liturgy. It has the approval of the Hierarchy of England and Wales and of the Roman Congregation for the Sacraments and Divine Worship. In 1975 the Papal blessing was conferred on its work.

Publications of the Association for Latin Liturgy

1. Bilingual *Ordo Missae*, including all four eucharistic prayers and a selection of prefaces, with a specially prepared line-by-line translation approved by the National Liturgical Commission as an aid to understanding the Latin text. (Price 50p).

2. Congregational *Latin Sung Mass Leaflet*, comprising Missa de Angelis, Credo III, and all responses for the new order of Mass. (Price 5p, or 3p for orders of 50 or more copies).

Postage and packing is extra in each case.

These publications, together with further information concerning the *Association for Latin Liturgy* can be obtained from the Chairman, 11, Barton Close, Cambridge, CB3 9LQ.

LATIN IN THE NEW LITURGY

R.H. RICHENS

Religion and language

Jesus, when praying to God the Father, when performing the religious rites of the Jews, and when instructing His disciples in the new dispensation, spoke in one of two languages. When He taught the Lord's Prayer, during His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemani, and in His cry from the cross, Jesus used Aramaic, the vernacular of the Jews. When, however, He read the scriptures in the synagogues, He spoke in Hebrew, their ritual language, long since extinct as a living tongue, although kept up, as the Dead Sea Scrolls have revealed, by a few religious communities. And recent studies, summarized by Professor Jeremias, indicate that we have now to reckon seriously with the possibility that it was in Hebrew that the words of institution were pronounced at the Last Supper.

Throughout its history, the Christian Church has done likewise. The homily, the liturgical instruction in the sacred mysteries, has always been in the current speech of the time. But in its formal services the Church has often preferred, not common speech, but the sacred language of its providential history, in particular Hebrew, Greek and, in the West, Latin.

There is nothing strange in this. Amongst the oldest of written records are the clay tablets inscribed with the religious texts of the Babylonians. They are in two languages, much as the bilingual Latin and English missals in recent use. The sacred text was in Sumerian, extinct in the time of the Babylonian ascendancy, but it was accompanied by an explanatory text in the contemporary language of the Babylonians, Akkadian. Outside the Christian tradition, we find Sanskrit as the ritual language of Hinduism, classical Arabic of Islam, and so on.

The Jews in Palestine in the lifetime of Jesus worshipped mainly in Hebrew, though scriptural readings might be repeated in Aramaic. In many Jewish communities outside Palestine, the scriptures were also read in Greek. This Greek was not the Greek of ordinary life, though akin to it. It was the Septuagint translation described by Professor Mohrmann as "more or less exotic, colourful and

stylized", and had a number of characteristics that were to form a model for later biblical translators. In contrast to the method of translation general in the Graeco-Roman world, as well as today, a general rendering of the sense was not the aim, but instead a word-for-word translation retaining as far as possible the original word order and word patterns, so that the original Hebrew of the sacred text shines through, so to speak, its Greek covering.

Greek was the principal language of the early Christian community. In the East, other languages, such as Syriac, became ritual languages and have remained in eastern rites till now.

In the West, the principal language of Christian worship was Greek at first, but Latin, the third language on the cross, came into use alongside it very early, particularly in North Africa. Again, it is not the language of ordinary speech, though close to it. The first Latin Old Testament was translated from the Greek Septuagint and the Latin New Testament from the Greek New Testament. Like the translators of the Septuagint, the Latin translators set out to achieve a word-for-word translation, reproducing as far as possible again the exact word order and word patterns of the original texts.

The last major stage in the evolution of the Latin Bible was the revision of St. Jerome, who revised the translation of the New Testament and translated much of the Old Testament afresh, direct from the Hebrew.

It is likely that St. Jerome's biblical studies had liturgical use in view. In contrast to the eastern rites and to much liturgical practice in the West since the Second Vatican Council, where vernacular hymns often replace biblical texts, the Roman rite, now in Latin, made a most extensive use of the exact text of the sacred scriptures, and this scriptural character is still an outstanding feature of the Latin form of the Roman rite today. In addition to the use of sacred scripture, prayers and other items were composed for the mass and other liturgical offices, and these, as we shall see, are in a quite different Latin style.

The value of a sacred language

We have seen that the notion of a special sacred language is a commonplace in all religions. Though Latin is in less frequent use today than formerly in the Catholic Church, it has not been replaced by common speech. In English speaking countries, *kumbayah* has now become one of our ritual refrains, and the English of Negro Spirituals has liturgical use both here and in France. This is not surprising since a special language or at least special words characterize

all activities. Every profession and every sport has its own terms. Every family has its own special expressions. Children may develop highly intricate languages known only to themselves. What is more natural than that there should be a special language for worshipping God, not the preserve of small groups, nor of national communities, nor of particular eras?

The importance of such a language is that it is immediately recognized as dedicated to one single and exalted purpose, the worship of God. By virtue of its unique role and associations, it directs the heart and mind at once towards the divine mysteries. It assists human nature in what is most difficult for it, to penetrate beyond what it can perceive with its five senses to the invisible realities of the life of the spirit. It helps to preserve what is so much at risk today, the sense of the sacred, and it supports the necessary recognition that the Christian mysteries are immeasurably deeper than the words that express them.

In accepting that a sacral language contributes to a sense of the sacred, one is not implying that it is the only or even the main liturgical element so doing. Clearly, the architectural setting, dignified ceremonial, proper enunciation by celebrant and ministers and musical adequacy are also highly relevant. Sacred language is mentioned in this context as one out of a number of factors which can promote a sense of the sacred.

Looked at from a complementary point of view, a special religious language minimizes distraction from the trivial associations of common speech and their pull towards here and now.

In addition, a sacred language, such as Latin, helps us, to use the words of the great Anglican liturgist Gregory Dix, to overstep the limits of time and place and participate in the "universal Christian mind". Religion should be at least as universal as science, and, for scientific communication, the boundaries of national language are increasingly surmounted. There is a current uneasiness that the Catholic Church is no longer always outwardly manifesting her interior unity. This is remedied when the Church is seen both to worship in common speech and in its own sacred language, Latin in the Patriarchate of the West.

Overleaping time is even more important. Faith is no easy matter in the contemporary world. By sharing in the same rites and in the same language with those who have gone before us in the Faith, we assist our own identification with the Christian community of earlier days. The Latin psalms, so closely patterned on the Hebrew originals, help us to identify with the Israelites who en-

countered God on Sinai and with the disciples who accompanied Jesus. The *Deo gratias* of the Christians who suffered martyrdom for the faith under the Roman Empire is our *Deo gratias*. Both in appearance and reality, the liturgy in Latin re-presents the rites of our martyrs during the penal times.

Also, now that Latin is technically a dead language, its meaning is relatively fixed and little affected by the changes in significance that common speech undergoes in as short a period as a single decade. At a time when much of the externals of Catholic worship are undergoing rapid change, it is fitting that there should be some outward manifestations that mirror the unchanging inner essentials.

The styles of liturgical Latin

The Latin of the mass and other liturgical services is not of one uniform style. The oldest of all is the Old Latin Bible, current in North Africa and western Europe in the time of the Roman Empire. It is a rather rough language, highly coloured with exotic renderings of the Hebrew and Greek which directly or indirectly it translates. It is the Latin of the oldest chants, the graduals and tracts between the scripture lessons, and some of the entrance chants.

Next we have the Vulgate Bible, which we owe to St. Jerome. While adhering strictly to what had long since come to be regarded as the special biblical style, he smoothed the roughness of such of the original Latin version as he retained and corrected the translation, in addition to his own fresh translations. This is the Latin of most of the Bible utilized in the liturgy, notably the scripture readings and the later proper chants.

A very different Latin, which has been likened to engraved jewellery, was used for the prayers. These were composed in the strict tradition of late Latin prose with careful attention to the rhythm of the cadences. These prayers defy adequate translation, though something of their feeling is conveyed in the collect translations of the Book of Common Prayer. Of comparable date and language, but very different in mood, are the older prefaces. While the prayers are terse and restrained, the prefaces are lyrical and exuberant.

The first Latin metrical hymns were based ultimately on Syrian models. There was a feeling at the time and for long afterwards that this form detracted from the exclusively scriptural emphasis of the Roman rite, and the hymn, as such, although admitted to the liturgy of the hours, never found its way into the Latin mass.

During the Dark Ages, much of the liturgical development of the

Roman rite took place outside Rome in what is now France, Germany and Spain. The Latin texts from this period tend to be more diffuse than earlier, but they are often warmer in sentiment.

The most striking contribution of the Middle Ages was the Latin sequence, sung at the end of the alleluia on certain major feasts. It was written in a variety of metrical forms, and the later examples use all the devices of accentual verse. The so-called golden sequence for Pentecost is believed to have been written by Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury, more generally known for his part in securing the signing of the Magna Carta by King John.

After the Council of Trent, the liturgy passed through a relatively static period, but the Second Vatican Council ushered in a new period of liturgical composition. This is characterized by an interweaving of many strands, in particular ancient Latin texts like the substrate of the second eucharistic prayer, Jewish prayer forms in Latin dress, Latin translations of oriental rites, and newly composed texts with themes like the paschal mystery upon which the Council laid special emphasis.

It might be asked if so great a diversity of style can be justified. The answer is that each style has its own proper place. Take the analogy of a Windsor chair. This is of wood throughout, but the legs are of beech, the bow of ash and the seat of elm, yet all are harmoniously fitted together to compose a single whole.

Music

Ideally, each mass should be sung. This reflects the practice of Christian antiquity, and it is notable that all the ancient Christian rites, eastern and western, are sung. The same goes for Jewish worship in the synagogue.

The musical settings of the Latin text of the Roman rite are, by common consent of all musical critics, and confirmed by any issue of the *Radio Times*, one of the supreme creative achievements of mankind. They constitute the largest body of high-quality music in existence. The beginnings of this music precede Christianity. The earliest plainsong, for instance some of the psalm tones, and even elaborate chants like the Lenten tracts, are of Jewish inspiration. Just as the texts of the Roman rite are, in general, more ancient than those of the Christian East, so its music. It is now believed that convert Jewish cantors were largely responsible for the transfer of the Jewish musical tradition to the Roman rite, and there is no doubt that the plainsong settings of the proper chants had been fully elaborated by the time of Pope Gregory the Great.

Though plainchant has suffered many vicissitudes, including its re-styling by the Franks and the corruption of the tradition in the post-Tridentine period, it remains a supreme expression of worship and fully deserving the special place the Second Vatican Council accorded to it.

Musical settings of the liturgy, however, did not stop here. The Latin liturgy is the birth place of all our modern music. The art of combining voices, pioneered by the English composer Dunstable, is one of the outstanding permanent legacies of the Middle Ages. By the sixteenth century, musical settings for the Latin liturgy had been composed that still rank amongst the major musical works of the world. Palestrina and Victoria, whose Latin Church music is their major contribution, would be included in any list of the greatest musical composers. English writers were also notable, and one of these, William Byrd, could arguably be regarded as the greatest writer of liturgical music of all time and the greatest English composer in any form. His five-part mass was sung in St. Peter's, Rome, at the canonization of the Forty Martyrs of England and Wales.

Musical settings of the Latin texts of the Roman rite continued to be produced in the centuries that followed in the styles appropriate to each. In the last century, when composers tended to forsake religious music, Liszt and Bruckner produced Latin Church music of the highest quality. The present century has not been behind the others, and the music of Poulenc in France and Berkeley in England compares with the best that has gone before.

Latin texts have provided inspiration not only to Catholic composers, but also to distinguished composers outside the Church, such as J.S. Bach, Vaughan Williams and Stravinsky.

Can Latin church music be adapted to English words? It can, but only at a price that a steadily increasing number of men and women of musical discernment would prefer not to pay. The rhythms of Latin and English are very dissimilar, particularly noticeable in plainchant. There is, of course, an urgent need to develop a worthy tradition of English Catholic music. There is, at the same time, an equally urgent need to retain our Latin church music where it was intended to be sung, in church, at mass and other liturgical functions.

What the Church has decreed

Finally, what has the Church itself had to say about the place of Latin in her services? There is no need to go back further than the pontificate of Pope John XXIII who, it is well known, was ardent

in his encouragement of Latin in the liturgy, most vividly expressed in his letter *Jucunda laudatio*.

The Second Vatican Council had, as one of its most conspicuous results, the introduction of the vernacular into the liturgy. Contrary to what many suppose, it did not instruct that this should be done, but sanctioned the vernacular alongside Latin. It has been the business of later decrees, both from Rome and from national hierarchies, to decide how and to what extent the liturgy in each country should be in Latin or in the local language. The Council fathers voted for an updating of the liturgy so that, while retaining its continuity with what had gone before, it should promote greater participation of the people.

The pronouncements of the Council on the liturgy are contained in its first solemn document, the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, issued in 1963. In this document it is stated that "the use of Latin is to be preserved in the Latin rites" (art.36), that "steps are to be taken to ensure that the faithful are able to say and sing together, also in Latin, those parts of the Ordinary of the mass that pertain to them" (art.54), that "the treasury of sacred music is to be preserved and fostered with great care" (art. 114), and that "the Church acknowledges Gregorian chant as specially suited to the Roman liturgy; therefore, other things being equal, it should be given pride of place in liturgical functions. But other kinds of sacred music, especially polyphony, are by no means excluded from liturgical celebrations so long as they accord with the spirit of the liturgical action" (art, 116).

The bishops of England and Wales have put forward their views on Latin on several occasions. In 1966 they stated "that every encouragement should be given to reciting or saying of the Ordinary of the mass in Latin, on those occasions when it is possible, fitting and convenient. Definite steps must be taken to see that knowledge of the Latin mass is not lost". Later, in 1969, after the new order of mass had been introduced, they said that "the use of Latin in celebrating the new mass rite will be encouraged as it has been in the old; Latin expresses the nature of the Church as international and timeless."

On the approach of the Holy Year, Pope Paul twice reminded Catholics of the desirability of retaining familiarity with the Latin chants, first in his so-called decalogue for renewal and then by his distribution to each Catholic bishop of the Latin chant collection entitled *Jubilate Deo*.

Why, then, is there any controversy over the use of Latin in

Church? The reasons are complicated, but in the main it seems to be because a confrontation has been supposed between, on the one hand, progressive Catholics, renewing their life in accordance with the Council's behest, and devoted to the new rite of mass in the vernacular, and, on the other, traditional, inward-looking Catholics, desperately trying to live as though the Council had never taken place, and searching out mass in Latin in the form in use before the Council (now commonly called the Tridentine mass). This opposition is imaginary. Many of those most appreciative of mass in Latin are young, fully responsive to the current renewal of the Church, and aware of the various ways in which the liturgical reforms have been to the advantage of the Latin mass. In the sphere of ecumenism, we have only to note to what extent the Church of England uses Latin church music to know that this is a help, not a bar, to mutual understanding.

Yet how can a congregation today participate in a Latin mass to the extent that the Council clearly requires? There are some practical difficulties, mainly because publishers, preoccupied with vernacular texts, have failed so far to provide adequate aids, bilingual Sunday mass books, Latin-English mass leaflets and the like. Time and demand will solve these. All liturgical worship uses religious symbols, often of considerable complexity, to designate its mysteries and the worshippers require initiation. This is as true for Catholic worship in English as it is in Latin. The faithful require initiation, first sacramentally, through baptism, and thereafter by continued instruction, in which the homily has a major part.

Mass in English is now the norm in this country and the benefits resulting are too obvious to require underlining. Alongside this, however, the new Latin liturgy, the restored Roman rite in its most manifestly Catholic form, transcending the centuries, covering the world, and presenting the divine mysteries with special solemnity, has an integral place in the Church today in sanctifying its members and as a beacon to those in search of faith.

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