

INSTRUCTION #5 – The Use of Latin

Today, I want to talk to you about the language of the Extraordinary Form – Latin. When I first received the request to offer this form of the Mass, the thought that jumped to my mind was “Oh no, Latin. I barely remember any of it from my school days.” But then, I looked at an English – Latin Hand Missal, not unlike the ones you have today. I was very impressed by the prayers of the Traditional Latin Mass. Over the last weeks, we have reviewed the beginning and ending prayers, Psalm 42 and the Last Gospel, and I hope you found them to be as rich in meaning as I did. But I still could not avoid asking myself “Why must I say these in Latin?”

I can easily think of reasons to use the vernacular. First, I know it. Second, you know it. Third,... Third,... Hmm, I seem to have run out of reasons. And if I look more closely at the two I just mentioned, they really are the same reason – familiarity.... So, instead of trying to sell the vernacular, let's examine why the use of Latin has benefits that are not true of the vernacular. And perhaps we may come to appreciate why Latin is still the official language of the Church.

The first reason for using Latin revolves around a silly poem that some of the older folks here may remember from their school days: “Latin is a language, as dead as it can be. First it killed the Romans, and now it's killing me!” The significance of being a “dead” language centers upon the fact that meaning is fixed. The words mean the same thing from one century to the next. They do not take on new meanings, not even new connotations. Consider that the word 'gay' meant merry or carefree. It was obviously connected to the word 'gaiety'. Today, that is not the meaning that first comes to mind. Consider the works of Shakespeare. Today we need footnotes on nearly every page to fully comprehend the English that he used. My point is that, in a living language, meaning is always in a state of flux, sometimes dramatic flux in a few short years.

You may be asking – “But Father, how does this apply to the Mass?” Well, what happened on the First Sunday of Advent in 2011? The missalettes we use for the Mass of Paul VI all had to be replaced – because of a new English translation. The Latin source of the translation had not changed. In 2011 it was the same text as in 1969 when Pope Paul first issued it. But I'm sure you remember that our English translation changed significantly and in many places. Even worse, it took 40 years to get a better translation that all the bishops of the English-speaking countries could agree upon. Now, multiply this problem of an ever-changing vernacular by however many languages are used for the Mass of Paul VI. The very nature of the vernacular ensures that the current translation in any of these languages is not likely to be the last.

There is another benefit to the “dead” language of Latin. All the encyclicals, all the laws, all the official documents of the Church are in Latin. Our faith, what we believe, does not change. Those truths we hold dear should be expressed and written in unchanging stone, like the tablets Moses brought down from Sinai. And, in effect, they are – when they are written in Latin.

Yet another benefit accrues from Latin. We say in the Creed that we believe “in one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church.” The sessions of Vatican Council II from 1963 to 1965 were all conducted entirely in Latin – the speeches, arguments, and texts were all in Latin. Latin enabled bishops from Borneo to communicate with bishops from Boston. We had one, holy,

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and Catholic language – Latin. Pope Pius XII, who died five years before Vatican Council II said:

“The use of the Latin language, customary in a considerable portion of the Church, is a manifest and beautiful sign of unity, as well as an effective antidote for any corruption of doctrinal truth.”ⁱ

The “unity” that he refers to here, did not only apply to the priests and bishops. Wherever you travel in the world, this Mass was and still is the same. From Boston to Borneo to Beijing to Bavaria, the Traditional Latin Mass is the same. Except for Boston, it would be very difficult to find a Mass of Paul VI in English in these other places. Consider our own archdiocese or any diocese of significant size. We have parishes where the Mass is celebrated in Spanish (St. Cecilia), in Polish (St. Agatha), in Vietnamese (Resurrection), and so forth. Now, rather than unified by the language of the Mass, we have become segregated by the language of the location.

I want to reaffirm something from our first talk. While Vatican Council II did permit the vernacular, it never banned Latin. Rather the Council fathers decreed – “care must be taken to ensure that the faithful may also be able to say or sing together in Latin those parts of the Ordinary of the Mass which pertain to them.”ⁱⁱ When you say the responses highlighted in gray in the St. Barnabas Hand Missal, you are doing exactly that.

Finally, I want to make you aware of the thinking of Pope, and now Saint, John XXIII, who succeeded Pius XII and convened Vatican Council II in October of 1962. He died only seven months later. The Council did most of its work under Pope Paul VI and concluded in December of 1965. The last Apostolic Constitution written by Pope John was in February of 1962, just seven months before the Council opened. It is entitled *Veterum Sapientia*ⁱⁱⁱ or The Wisdom of the Ancients. In it, this Saint says the following:

1. We have therefore decided to issue the timely directives contained in this document, so as to ensure that the ancient and uninterrupted use of Latin be maintained and, where necessary, restored.
2. Bishops and superiors-general of religious orders shall take pains to ensure that in their seminaries and in their schools where adolescents are trained for the priesthood, all shall studiously observe the Apostolic See's decision in this matter and obey these Our prescriptions most carefully.
3. In the exercise of their paternal care they shall be on their guard lest anyone under their jurisdiction, eager for revolutionary changes, writes against the use of Latin in the teaching of the higher sacred studies or in the Liturgy, or through prejudice makes light of the Holy See's will in this regard or interprets it falsely.

Clearly, the elimination of Latin from the Mass was not the intent of the Pope, and now saint, who called for the Council. And we know that the Council itself said that Latin was to be “preserved in the Latin rites.”^{iv} As I have come to appreciate why the Traditional Latin Mass is in Latin, I hope that you too have a better understanding of why it must be so.

- i Encyclical *Mediator Dei*, November 20, 1947
- ii *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, December 4, 1963
- iii http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/la/apost_constitutions/1962/documents/hf_j-xxiii_apc_19620222_veterum-sapientia.html
- iv *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, December 4, 1963