



Catechesis For the Masses

Basic Teachings on Liturgy and Participation in the Mass in Both Forms.

Part 8: The Latin Language: Our Mother Tongue in the Church

Consider for a moment an item that you own which has sentimental value - that you would never want to lose simply because of its meaning to you. Now consider something that you possess that was handed down to you that you want to do everything possible to respect and hand on to your own loved ones. Are these two items the same? Is it possible to hold something in sentimentality that is not handed down, or to have something that we have received from others that is far more important than mere sentiment?

I use this comparison between items that are sentimental and those items that are handed down to us which we desire to continue in handing down in order to help us consider more fully why the Church preserves her use of Latin. While there may be some who believe that such happenings as Masses in Latin have no more place but for those who are sentimental, I want to say that such a perspective does not rightly characterize why Latin remains important in the Church. For Latin is far more than ornamentation to worship or something meant to instill sentiment. At its deepest level, Latin is significant to our faith life and history such that its place is more properly understood as patrimony, meant to be employed and handed down through all generations. Accordingly, might we consider briefly the history of the use of Latin in the Church and why it remains so important.

While the use of Latin in the Church has been the standard for many centuries, it is right to note that such use of Latin did not come immediately. In the early Church, it is clear that Greek was predominantly used in the announcement of Jesus Christ and His

saving works by the mere fact of the original writings that formed the New Testament were in Greek. While Latin was present in the first century in the Holy Land (due to the conquest of the Romans and their established empire), the common presence of Latin in the Church would not come until later. It is equally notable that it was not from Rome itself that Latin came into common use in the Church - but from places in northern Africa, dating to the third century. By the fourth century, the use of Latin in the articulating of the Church's faith became accepted as proper, with special note being given to the example from this time of the canonized books of Sacred Scripture being brought together in Latin in the edition known as the "Vulgate." Hence, by this time of the fourth century, the use of Latin became firmly established in the Church, down to our own day.

It goes without saying that for Latin to have become the "mother tongue" of the Church must have been in accord with some perceived advantages that Latin contained which were not to be found in other languages. It is certainly true that early motivation for the use of Latin had more to do with the common use of this language by the people - and therefore it was seen as advantageous for use in worship. As the Church's worship became more "Latinized," if you would, so too the theology and teaching of the faith was formulated in Latin. In this same time frame, the use of Latin in the world began to decrease as the Roman Empire weakened. These steps, therefore, are among the primary reasons why Latin has endured to this day: that as the formulations of doctrine were given in Latin, many of the particular words used in

Latin to express these truths became codified and were no longer subject to changes in meaning. In other words, the meaning of particular terms in the Latin language that were used to describe doctrines, the mysteries of the faith, and the prayers of the Church were of singular definition in Latin, such that no other use of these same terms existed outside of how they were defined in the life and teaching of the Church. Coupling this development with the decline of the Roman Empire and the reduction of the use of Latin by people throughout the regions of the falling empire, the Latin language truly became of the language of the Church, with the meanings of many of her words no longer being subject to change or alternate meanings. In effect, that Latin was a dying language during the Middle Ages has left for us words and terms used during these centuries to articulate the faith and to form her worship which have retained their same meaning through the subsequent times down to our own age.

So as to make the case clearer for Latin as the mother tongue of the Church on the basis of unchanging words as a true strength, think of this comparison of a word with a changed meaning (though it is a potentially emotionally charged word): that word is “gay.” This word that once meant “happy” or “carefree” has in less than fifty year’s time been changed to be used so as mean those who identify themselves according to what they might call a “lifestyle” or even a “way of relating sexually,” to those of the same sex. Acknowledging again that this example is one that can lead to strong emotional responses, it is definitely illustrative of real change in how words are used and how meanings of particular words do change as cultures change. In contrast, that Latin is now understood as a “dead” language means that there is no possibility for changes in the meaning of words due to cultural shift or common usage within the culture. Instead, the words that speak of particular truths are the same today as they were in the fourth



Images such as this one of “The Lord’s Prayer” in Latin are part of the Church’s patrimony from such sources as the monasteries during the Middle Ages. The art here is attributable to the reality that liturgical books were produced by hand and included such art and beauty as an enhancement of the words meant for sacred worship.

century - and therefore these words help to guarantee that the unchanging truth of faith is rightly upheld, through our fidelity to these words and terms. In this way, Latin is both timeless in that the words of faith remain true in all times, and universal as all peoples of faith, no matter where they live, can be offered the truth of faith in its proper meaning. Such timelessness and universality therefore makes Latin more than a language of sentiment, giving it a rightful place in our patrimony that should be handed down for all generations.

The next insert will speak more particularly to Latin in worship, asking the question of whether the use of Latin in today’s Church is a regression and undoing of Vatican II. In preparation for that question, you are encouraged to reflect upon the reality that Latin is a good, meant to be handed down and should always have a place, even when using vernacular.