



# Catechesis For the Masses

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

## Part 9: Latin Mass: Is the Church Going Backwards?

In Part 8 of this series, we looked briefly at the history of the use of Latin in the Catholic Church. While the use of Latin in most places today is rare if not non-existent, the universal use of Latin throughout most of the Church's history demonstrates that Latin still has a significance to us today - particularly in the way the truth of the faith is articulated while maintaining consistent meaning. Accordingly, Latin in the Church today is more than nostalgic or sentimental as its use holds a real place within the Church's patrimony, meant to be handed down through the centuries.

Building on this observation that the use of Latin is part of the Church's life and patrimony, might we consider its importance to worship itself. Once more, throughout most of the Church's history, Latin was the standard language for worship for such reasons as its use in Rome itself and its universality in the consistency of its meaning. In our history of worship, many of the ancient prayer texts were originally written in Latin, including such prayers as the particular orations said by the priest at Mass along with those texts meant for the choir that were composed and sung by way of the Church's own musical patrimony of Gregorian Chant. Here too, the universality of the language is important, as these prayers and chants have remained the standard source for prayers and settings in the vernacular - in order that the original meaning of both the prayer texts and the truths of faith contained within them may remain consistent to the Latin articulations. Yet, among the real questions are such inquiries as: *what good is Latin if no one other than priests and Latin scholars can understand these pray-*

*ers? Furthermore, since Vatican II said we don't need to use Latin anymore, isn't the use of Latin an undermining or even a denial of Vatican II?*

The answer to the first question begins in what we have already covered: patrimony. Consider this illustration that may assist us in recognizing why Latin remains important to the Church in every age: family traditions. Every one of us has a story in our family. This story is ever living and changing as we pass from one generation to the next. While change in family traditions is real, such change usually is sensitive to what preceded it and no family tradition that has been in place for many generations is easily disregarded for something new or different. Indeed tensions do arise in the carrying on of some traditions (such as when young adult family members marry into other families with different traditions, requiring them to respect one another's traditions, which frequently leads to newer expressions of old traditions or ways of respecting and accepting the traditions of another as duly given). However, each and every family practice and tradition that has long-term meaning is never shoved to the side on a whim without extreme consequences.

Truly the same can be said for the Church and her way of worship. Given that our worship is *sacramental*, wherein the Lord Jesus Himself wills to offer us a share in His own life through the sacramental signs of which we partake, the *substance of the rites* for each and every sacrament (what they are, how they are given, what they contain, etc.) is always to be upheld - even though the *expression* of the rite (what it looks like externally) may be subject to change over time. Any changes in the rites themselves are never to be without

prayer and discernment - so that the true meaning and purpose of the sacrament is rightly upheld and even able to be more easily recognized and received. Likewise, changes in the rites ought to always be carried out with full awareness of what preceded it - seeking to uphold and retain all that is good, adjusting only that which can be improved upon or brought to greater significance when such is necessary.

Those who gathered at the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s recognized both the necessity for reform of the worship (that all the faithful might more fully participate) and the need to carry out such reform respectful of that which was already in place - including the universal use of Latin. Accordingly, the “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy” calls for simplification of rites and use of the vernacular in fitting places within the liturgy (such as for the readings and in any directives given), along with the retaining of the use of Latin to the very extent that paragraph 54 of this document says, “Nevertheless steps should be taken so that the faithful may also be able to say or to sing together in Latin those parts of the Ordinary of the Mass which pertain to them.” Acknowledging first the truth of these words (amongst the confusion of many who think “Vatican II got rid of Latin”), what I emphasize here is the reality that Latin remains part of our patrimony and tradition, and it ought not be disregarded. Likewise, as the Council Fathers at Vatican II were willing to endorse the handing on of Latin for those parts of the Mass that we say/sing consistently at almost every, if not every Mass (such as the Lord’s Prayer, the Holy, Holy, Holy, the Lamb of God, etc.), it is clear that they thought that all of the faithful can be effectively taught how to say and sing some prayers and Latin while also being taught what these prayers mean - that our family tradition may both be rightly lived and understood.



*Among the key initiatives of the Second Vatican Council (1962 - 65) was the reform of the liturgy. On December 4, 1963, the council promulgated the “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,” Sacrosanctum concilium, within which principles and particular directives toward reform of the liturgy were laid out - including both the use of the vernacular and the upholding of the use of Latin, including the training of the faithful to be able to say or sing at least some parts of the Mass in Latin.*

As Latin has been the standard for over 1500 years in the life of the Church, might we more directly confront the second question on the notion of “going backwards.” As the Church is guided by the Holy Spirit (the Advocate that Jesus promised to His disciples which would lead them to all truth [c.f. John 16:13]), so we are called to trust that the Holy Spirit still guides the Church today. Integrity dictates that we honestly assess those changes in the liturgy which took place in a period of about 7-10 years, beginning in 1963. Many who lived through this time period recall how changes came swiftly and at times unpredictably. While it is a “going backwards” to deny Vatican II and its call for reform, it is equally undeniable that the restoring of some use of Latin in our worship is both in keeping with our Church’s living tradition and is essential for continued reform - in prayerful keeping of trust that the Holy Spirit guides the Church. To that end, denying a place of Latin today (only 50 years removed from Vatican II) is to deny a significant element of most of the history of the Church’s prayer. Thus, might we all be challenged (whether we are lovers of Latin or not) to recognize that our patrimony and family tradition in the Church is to be rooted in history and open to new growth.