

Latin? English? What's the fuss?
An article about Language in the Liturgy

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John Henry Cardinal Newman once famously wrote: “To be deep in history is to cease to be Protestant.” I wonder if one could also say that to be deep in liturgical history is to cease to be ideological. I believe one of the reasons for this is that there is great reassurance in our liturgical history, littered as it is with saints and sinners, fidelity and abuses, that the Holy Spirit is in charge and guides the Church.

There has been a great deal of discussion, some calm and reasoned, some less so, regarding the Roman Missal translation project. In this article, I propose to give some history of sacred (liturgical) languages in the Church's worship. In subsequent articles, I intend to discuss the reasons—the advantages and the disadvantages—for the current translation project. My purpose is twofold: first, to provide some catechetical preparation for what is to come; second, to provide some history behind and foundation for this project and, hopefully, to encourage people to step away from ideology in order to hear the real concerns from all sides. It is only when we have truly listened, that we have the right to speak our opinions, let alone to proclaim the Gospel.

THE LANGUAGES OF THE CHURCH'S WORSHIP

1 Cor. 14:16-19: “If you pronounce a blessing with the spirit [in tongues], how shall one who holds the place of the uninstructed say the ‘Amen’ to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying? For you may be giving thanks very well, but the other is not built up. I give thanks to God that I speak in tongues more than any of you, but in the church I would rather speak five words with my mind, so as to instruct others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.”

ARAMAIC

Jesus preached and taught in Aramaic. Consider, for example, his use of the words “Abba” or “Amen, Amen,” or even in Acts 26:14, where the voice of Jesus is said to speak in Hebrew (Aramaic was the Hebrew of the common man). The apostles also spoke and taught in Aramaic (the Gospel of Matthew—or at least parts of it—is often thought to have been originally written in Aramaic).

GREEK

As the apostles, including Sts. Paul and Barnabas, moved beyond the land of Israel (Palestine), they took up their preaching, teaching and worshipping in the international language of the day, which was Greek. Even the Jewish communities in Rome spoke Greek; and the Christian community in Rome used Greek also for its liturgy and Bible (the New Testament, of course, was written in Greek). Perhaps one reason for the Roman liturgy being in Greek was that many of the earliest Christians in Rome were slaves, poor people and foreigners—all of whom spoke Greek rather than Latin—even if some other

language was their mother tongue. One of the earliest “papal” letters, written by St. Clement (+99), was written in Greek. St. Justin, martyr (+130), a Christian philosopher who lived in Rome, wrote in Greek. St. Irenaeus (+202), bishop of Lyons (in modern day France) spoke and wrote in Greek.

THE SHIFT TO LATIN

As more of Rome and the Western Roman Empire became Christian, however, there were more and more Christians who spoke Latin only, and not Greek. By the third and fourth centuries Christians were beginning to experiment with Latin. Tertullian, a lawyer who lived in North Africa between about AD160 to AD220, was among the first Christian theologians to write in Latin. For approximately two centuries the Church had taught and worshipped in Greek. The transition to Latin was a long and difficult struggle. After all, the inspired Word of God was written in Greek, wouldn't it be safer doctrinally to worship in Greek, too? The transition needed to find the right Latin words to grasp the authentic and orthodox meaning of the Church's Greek. Tertullian was a tremendous help in developing a theological and liturgical lexicon in Latin that was both theologically correct and understandable to the average Christian. This was a tremendous early example of inculturation, the process of applying the Gospel to the various cultures throughout the world. The goal is to allow the Gospel to purify the culture of superstition, idolatries or anything contrary to Christ, but also to use the language and custom of the culture, where possible, in proclaiming the Gospel. The ultimate “inculturation,” of course, was the incarnation, when the Word of God, by clothing itself in the language and culture of humanity—particularly Jewish humanity—purified all of humanity.

Over the next three centuries, the Roman Church continued to refine and develop its Latin liturgical lexicon. Popes Innocent (401-417), Leo the Great (440-461), Gelasius (492-496), Vigilius (537-555) and Gregory the Great (590-604) were major contributors to the development of liturgical prayer in Latin.¹ When one reads the sermons and prayers of Pope St. Leo the Great, for example, you can almost hear the Greek language in the background. Latin had become the dominant liturgical language, but Greek was still the intellectual and theological touchstone behind it.

It is interesting to note that the Roman Church always held the principle in mind that language was a beautiful means to be used for the end of bringing people closer to Jesus. At times, in the history of the city of Rome, there would be a sudden influx of Greek speaking refugees from the East (from parts of the Byzantine Empire, often due to persecution or war). Then, there would be a sudden resurgence of Greek in the Roman liturgy. The Roman Christians always seemed concerned to minister in the language of the people, originally Greek, then Latin, and then both Greek and Latin depending on the immigration situation of the city.

THE VARIETY OF LANGUAGES IN THE EAST

¹ Keith Pecklers, Dynamic Equivalence: The Living Language of Christian Worship, Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2003, p. 3.

The Christian Church in the Eastern Empire (modern day Turkey, Greece, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and parts of Egypt) primarily spoke Greek (never Latin), but likewise was solicitous to minister in the vernacular for different peoples. Thus local languages like Syriac, Coptic, and Armenian were immediately used for both the Bible and the liturgy. The Bible was translated into Syriac by the second century, into Coptic in the third, and into Armenian in the fourth. Liturgical translations followed the biblical translations.²

THE TENSIONS BETWEEN LATIN AND THE VERNACULAR

In the eighth century, a group of German clerics believed that the only languages that one should use for worship were those used on the inscription placed on the cross of Christ: Hebrew, Greek and Latin (namely, the phrase “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews,” cf. Jn. 19:19-20). The Council of Frankfurt in 794 condemned these “trilinguists:” “to those who believe that God can only be adored in three languages, *anathema sit*.” Still, there were many Catholics who equated being Catholic with celebrating the liturgy in Latin.³ It is helpful to remember that there was no such thing as separation of church and state in the Roman Empire. The languages of literature, schools, political life, and liturgical life would have been matters of civic and national interest, perhaps not unlike the strong emotions encountered in the United States today regarding immigrants learning to speak English. The Latin-speaking members of the Roman Empire felt strongly about Latin as their language, including their language of worship.

A classic example of the volatility of the question of the vernacular in the liturgy was the missionary effort by sibling Saints Cyril (+869) and Methodius (+885) to the Slavic communities of Eastern Europe (Moravia and Pannonia). Cyril created the Glagolitic alphabet (later known as the Cyrillic alphabet) and the brothers translated the Gospels and some liturgical texts into this newly writable vernacular.⁴ As they began to have success with their evangelization efforts, they decided to take local candidates to Rome for ordination, and to seek papal approbation of their vernacular innovations. Pope Hadrian II (867-872) granted the two brothers full permission for the use of Old Slavonic in the liturgy. Together, they celebrated that vernacular liturgy in Hadrian’s presence, and Hadrian ordained their candidates as priests and deacons, and Methodius as bishop. In 870 Hadrian formally ratified this Slavonic liturgy.⁵

Three years later, however, Pope John VIII (872-882) came under the influence of the “trilinguists” and forbade the liturgical use of Old Slavonic.⁶ In 879, the Pope summoned Methodius to Rome for questioning. Upon hearing Methodius, Pope John suddenly reversed himself, declaring Methodius free of all heresy and publicly defending him and his vernacular liturgy against the “trilinguists.” Pope John wrote, “It is not opposed to

² Pecklers, *Dynamic Equivalence*, p. 3.

³ Pecklers, *Dynamic Equivalence*, p. 4.

⁴ Pecklers, *Dynamic Equivalence*, p. 4.

⁵ Pecklers, *Dynamic Equivalence*, p. 5.

⁶ Pecklers, *Dynamic Equivalence*, pp. 5-6.

the integrity of faith or doctrine that Mass be celebrated in the Slavonic tongue or that the Holy Gospels and the other lessons of the New and Old Testaments well translated in that language be used for the Mass and the Office, for He who made the principal languages, created all the others for His own praise and glory.” (L. Eisenhofer, Handbuch der Katholischen Liturgik I, Freiburg i. B.: Herder, 1932, p. 154) Pope John even placed Cyril and Methodius’ translation of the Gospel on the altar in St. Peter’s and in 880 formally reactivated permission for the use of Old Slavonic in the liturgy.⁷

Fortune turned again, however, following the death of Methodius in 885. Pope Stephen V (885-891), acting under the influence of a forged letter purported to have been written by John VIII, condemned the liturgical use of Old Slavonic and forbade its use.⁸ As a result, much of Christianized Eastern Europe shifted allegiance from Latin Catholic Rome to Greek Byzantine Constantinople, which allowed Old Slavonic. This is one reason why the Russian Church today counts its Mother Church as Constantinople and not Rome. It wasn’t until the seventeenth century, in 1631, that the use of Slavonic in western liturgical rites was officially approved by Pope Urban VIII (1623-1644).⁹ The Greeks in Constantinople, on the other hand by the year 1190 had adopted the principle that those who did not understand Greek were to celebrate the Greek liturgy in their own language, faithfully rendering the texts directly from the Greek official edition.¹⁰

CONCESSIONS AWAY FROM LATIN

Scholars believe that Latin, as a spoken, living language, began to give way to the modern European languages by the tenth and eleventh centuries at the latest. There is evidence of bishops and priests preaching in French (though celebrating the rest of the liturgy in Latin) as early as 1195. Missionary Orders often received permission to preach in the vernacular in order to instruct and deepen the faith among the uneducated.¹¹ Consider the following vernacular permissions granted by the Church long before the Second Vatican Council:

- In the early 1300s, Pope Clement V granted special permission for the use of Mandarin Chinese in the liturgy as a means of evangelizing the Chinese.¹²
- In 1624, Carmelite missionaries in Persia (modern day Iran) were granted permission to celebrate one Mass each day in classic Arabic “for the consolation of peoples recently converted.”¹³
- In 1631, full privileges were granted to missionaries in Georgia for the celebration of the Eucharist in either Georgian or Armenian as an instrument of evangelization.¹⁴

⁷ Pecklers, Dynamic Equivalence, p. 6.

⁸ Pecklers, Dynamic Equivalence, pp. 6-7.

⁹ Pecklers, Dynamic Equivalence, p. 7.

¹⁰ Pecklers, Dynamic Equivalence, pp. 7-8.

¹¹ Pecklers, Dynamic Equivalence, p. 8.

¹² Pecklers, Dynamic Equivalence, p. 9.

¹³ Pecklers, Dynamic Equivalence, p. 11.

¹⁴ Pecklers, Dynamic Equivalence, p. 12.

- Prior to 1773, Jesuit missionaries received permission from the Holy See for use of the Iroquois language in the liturgy celebrated with that Native American community around the area of modern day Montreal.¹⁵

THE COUNCIL OF TRENT

The Council of Trent (1545-1563) spent a good part of one of its sessions discussing a switch to the vernacular at Mass for Europe. There were many proponents and many opponents. For the opponents of a switch, Latin held associations of mystery, universality, and orthodoxy of linguistic formulation¹⁶ (e.g. in the prayers and creeds). There was concern that translations into many vernaculars would run the risk of inaccuracies of doctrine (just like the concerns over going from Greek to Latin in the third and fourth centuries). The proponents of vernacular argued that the patristic church used a vernacular liturgy, and that there was a great catechetical loss with the use of Latin since the vast majority of the faithful could not understand the scriptures or the liturgy. They believed that pastoral necessity (as well as historical precedent) called for a return to a vernacular liturgy. Some of them actually believed that the use of Latin was perpetuating an impoverishment of the faith.¹⁷ All the bishops who had experience of a vernacular liturgy spoke out in favor of it. In the end, however, with the Protestant reformers demanding the vernacular and deriding the Latin, the Council Fathers decided that it was not an opportune time to change to the vernacular, lest it be seen as a concession to the Protestants.

FROM TRENT TO VATICAN II

In the decades and centuries following the Council of Trent, in France, England and later in North America, translations of the Missal and Office were published for use of the laity, though not for use by the priest in the liturgy. Sometimes, these publications were condemned by Church authorities, sometimes they were ignored, and still other times they were promoted. In 1877, Pope Pius IX (1846-1878) who had earlier forbade vernacular translations, reversed his decision and authorized any bishop to provide the translation and use of vernacular missals for use by the laity.¹⁸ The following details the vernacular developments within the Church in the first half of the 20th century:

- In 1906, Pope Pius X (1903-1914) granted permission for certain areas of Yugoslavia to make permanent liturgical use of the classical Paleoslav language.¹⁹
- In 1920, Pope Benedict XV (1914-1922) granted permission for the use of Croatian and Slovenian in Church rites and for sung epistles and gospels in the vernacular at solemn Masses.²⁰

¹⁵ Pecklers, *Dynamic Equivalence*, p. 24.

¹⁶ Pecklers, *Dynamic Equivalence*, pp. 9-10.

¹⁷ Pecklers, *Dynamic Equivalence*, p. 9.

¹⁸ Pecklers, *Dynamic Equivalence*, p. 30.

¹⁹ Pecklers, *Dynamic Equivalence*, p. 31.

²⁰ Pecklers, *Dynamic Equivalence*, p. 31.

- Pope Pius XI (1922-1939) allowed the celebration of Mass in Estonian in response to a plea from the bishops of Estonia that their people were going to the Protestants and Orthodox for intelligible liturgies.²¹
- In 1929, Pope Pius XI granted permission for a vernacular Ritual (the book containing the other sacraments besides the Eucharist) in Bavaria, Germany.²²
- Permission for a vernacular Ritual was granted to Vienna, Austria, in 1935.²³
- In 1941 and 1942, missionaries in various countries in Africa, China, India, Indo-China, Indonesia, Japan, and New Guinea were given permission to translate the Roman Ritual into the local language, retaining Latin only for the essential sacramental formulas.²⁴
- In 1948, a limited use of French was allowed in the celebrations of baptism, marriage and anointing of the sick.²⁵
- In 1949, permission was granted to China for the complete celebration of Mass in Mandarin Chinese, with the exception of the Eucharistic Prayer remaining in Latin.²⁶
- In 1949, the bishops of Cameroon in Africa petitioned to use French in their liturgy, but the Church refused, saying instead that Cameroon should prepare a translation in the mother tongues of the people of Cameroon and to leave a French version to French citizens.²⁷
- In 1950, India received permission to use Hindi for the celebration of the sacraments in regions where Hindi was spoken.²⁸
- In 1954 an English Ritual for Baptism, Marriage, Extreme Unction and Funerals was approved by the Congregation of Rites for use in the dioceses of the United States.²⁹
- In 1960, Pope John XXIII authorized permission for Melchite-rite Catholics in the U.S. to celebrate their whole liturgy in English, with the exception of the Eucharistic Prayer.³⁰

As can be seen, the vernacular has had long and widespread use long before Pope John XXIII called for the Second Vatican Council.

THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

The “Constitution on the Liturgy” (approved by the Council Fathers of the Second Vatican Council on 4 Dec. 1963) in paragraph 36 addresses the use of Latin and the vernacular in the liturgy:

²¹ Pecklers, *Dynamic Equivalence*, pp. 31-32.

²² Pecklers, *Dynamic Equivalence*, p. 32.

²³ Pecklers, *Dynamic Equivalence*, p. 32.

²⁴ Pecklers, *Dynamic Equivalence*, p. 33.

²⁵ Pecklers, *Dynamic Equivalence*, p. 35.

²⁶ Pecklers, *Dynamic Equivalence*, p. 35.

²⁷ Pecklers, *Dynamic Equivalence*, p. 35.

²⁸ Pecklers, *Dynamic Equivalence*, p. 35.

²⁹ Pecklers, *Dynamic Equivalence*, p. 35.

³⁰ Pecklers, *Dynamic Equivalence*, p. 176.

36. 1. Particular law remaining in force, the use of the Latin language is to be preserved in the Latin rites.
2. But since the use of the mother tongue, whether in the Mass, the administration of the sacraments, or other parts of the liturgy, frequently may be of great advantage to the people, the limits of its employment may be extended. This will apply in the first place to the readings and directives, and to some of the prayers and chants, according to the regulations on this matter to be laid down separately in subsequent chapters.
3. These norms being observed, it is for the competent territorial ecclesiastical authority mentioned in Art. 22, 2, to decide whether, and to what extent, the vernacular language is to be used; their decrees are to be approved, that is, confirmed, by the Apostolic See. And, whenever it seems to be called for, this authority is to consult with bishops of neighboring regions which have the same language.
4. Translations from the Latin text into the mother tongue intended for use in the liturgy must be approved by the competent territorial ecclesiastical authority mentioned above.

Both the Council Fathers and the Commission established by Pope Paul VI to help in implementing the liturgical reforms of the Council were concerned that the passage from Latin to the vernacular should be gradual.³¹ The next step was for episcopal conferences around the world to make a formal request to Rome for permission to pursue vernacular translations for liturgical use. The U.S. bishops made their request and received permission to proceed on 15 October, 1965. The date of 27 March, 1966 (Passion Sunday) was set for the whole country to begin increased use of English in the Mass. This initial permission included the prefaces of the Eucharistic Prayer and the prayers said by the priest and responded to by the people (opening prayer, prayer over the gifts, and prayer after communion). On 31 Jan. 1967, Pope Paul VI gave permission for the episcopal conferences to decide whether it would be best in their countries to translate into the vernacular the whole Eucharistic Prayer as well as the rites of ordination. Every episcopal conference throughout the world moved in this direction, and their efforts have been sanctioned by every Pope. While it may be true that the “Constitution on the Liturgy” envisioned Latin remaining an important part of liturgical worship, it is likewise true that the same bishops and Pope who foresaw Latin’s continuance in the liturgy, also endorsed wider and wider use of the vernacular, when they saw its pastoral benefits.

In 1981 the Congregation for Divine Worship in Rome conducted a survey of all the bishops regarding the use of Latin in the liturgy, the desire for more Latin, the use of the vernacular, and its level of acceptance. The response was overwhelming in favor of the pastoral benefit of the vernacular. The views of the bishops were that without the vernacular, “the liturgical reform would have been much less fruitful; that the demand for Latin is almost nonexistent; and that Latin is more and more disappearing from use as a liturgical language of the Church.”³²

I hope this brief history of the use of language in the liturgy has been instructive. The Latin language has played a major role in the Western Church for more than 1,700 years, and as a result it has a highly developed and sophisticated liturgical and theological

³¹ Bugnini, The Reform of the Liturgy 1948-1975, Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990, pp. 99-100.

³² Bugnini, The Reform of the Liturgy, p. 112.

vocabulary. There is a certain “Latin culture” which has shaped Latin rite Catholics for millennia. The Latin language remains a very important means for study and research into the historical, pastoral, liturgical and theological treasures of the Church. It remains today the official language of the Roman Catholic Church, with all official Church documents being promulgated in Latin, before being translated into the various world languages. Often when the liturgy is celebrated with an international audience, at least some of the prayers are offered in Latin (though the Scriptures are almost always proclaimed in the vernacular). And there are still a number of Catholics today who prefer to worship in the Latin language.

Nevertheless, the good fruit that the use of the vernacular has borne is certain, and its continuance in the life of the Church is equally certain. In subsequent articles, I will examine first the history of our current English language translation used in the liturgy, and then explore some of the changes to come in the new English translation.