LANGUAGE IN THE ROMAN RITE LITURGY

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Adoremus, Society for the Renewal of the Sacred Liturgy

LANGUAGE IN THE ROMAN RITE LITURGY: LATIN AND VERNACULAR

Keynote Address at Gateway Liturgical Conference, St Louis, Missouri

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1. Excelling Dignity of Liturgical Prayer

The Church which was founded by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ strives to bring together men and women from every race, language, people and nation (cf Rev 5:9), so that "every tongue should acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:11). On Pentecost day there were men and women "from every nation under heaven" (cf Acts 2:5) listening as the Apostles recounted the wonderful works of God.

This Church, this new people of God, this Mystical Body of Christ, prays. Her public prayer is the voice of Christ and his Bride the Church, Head and members. The liturgy is an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ. In it, full public worship is performed by the whole Church, that is, by Christ who associates with him his members. "From this it follows that every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the priest and of his Body the Church, is a sacred action surpassing all others. No other action of the Church can match its claim to efficacy, nor equal its degree of it" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*

(*https://adoremus.org/SacrosanctumConcilium.html*), 7). From the sacred spring of the liturgy, all of us who thirst for the graces of the redemption draw living water (cf Jn 4:10).

Consciousness that Jesus Christ is the high priest in every liturgical act should instill in us great reverence. As Saint Augustine says, "He prays for us, he prays in us, and he is prayed to by us. He prays for us as our priest; he prays in us as our head; and he is prayed to by us as our God. Let us therefore recognize our voices in him and his voices in us" (*Enarratio in Psalmum*, 85: CCL 39, 1176).

2. Different Rites in the Church

In the sacred liturgy the Church celebrates the mysteries of Christ by means of signs, symbols, gestures, movements, material elements and words. In this reflection we are focusing on words used in divine worship in the Roman or Latin Rite. The core elements of the sacred liturgy, the seven sacraments, come from our Lord Jesus Christ himself. As the Church spread and grew among various peoples and cultures, various ways of celebrating the mysteries of Christ also developed. Four parent rites can be identified as the Antiochene, Alexandrine, Roman and Gallican. They gave rise to nine major rites in the Catholic Church today: in the Latin Church the Roman Rite is predominant and then among the Eastern Churches we find the Byzantine, Armenian, Chaldean, Coptic, Ethiopian, Malabar, Maronite and Syrian Rites. Each "Rite" is an historic blending of liturgy, theology, spirituality and Canon Law. The fundamental characteristics of each undoubtedly go back to the earliest centuries, the essentials to the apostolic age if not to Our Lord Himself.

The Roman Rite, which is the subject of our reflection, is in modern times, as we have said, the predominant liturgical expression of the ecclesial culture we call the Latin Rite. You will know that in and around the

3/16

Ambrose, the great Bishop of Milan: the "Ambrosian Rite". In certain locations and on special occasions the liturgy is celebrated in Spain according to the ancient Hispanic or Mozarabic Rite. These two venerable exceptions do not concern us here.

The Church in Rome used Greek from the beginning. Only gradually was Latin introduced until the fourth century when the Church in Rome was definitely latinized (cf A.G. Martimort: *The Dialogue between God and his people*, in A.G. Martimort ed.: *The Church at Prayer*, Collegeville, 1992, I, p. 161-165).

The Roman Rite has spread in most of what was known as Western Europe and the continents evangelized largely by European missionaries in Asia, Africa, America and Oceania. Today, with an easier movement of peoples, there are Catholics of the other rites (roughly identified as the Oriental Churches) in all these continents.

Most rites have an original language which also gives each rite its historical identity. The Roman Rite has Latin as its official language. The typical editions of its liturgical books are to this day issued in Latin.

It is a remarkable phenomenon that many religions of the world, or major branches of them, hold on to a language as dear to them. We cannot think of the Jewish religion without Hebrew. Islam holds Arabic as sacred to the Qur'an. Classical Hinduism considers Sanskrit its official language. Buddhism has its sacred texts in Pali.

It would be superficial to dismiss this tendency as esoteric, or strange, or outmoded, old or medieval. That would be to ignore a fine element of human psychology. In religious matters, people tend to hold on to what they received from the beginning, how their earliest predecessors articulated their religion and prayed. Words and formulae used by earlier generations are dear to those who today inherit from them. While a religion is of course not identified with a language, how it understands itself can have an affective link with a particular linguistic expression in its classical period of growth.

3. Advantages of Latin in the Roman Liturgy

As was mentioned above, by the fourth century, Latin had replaced Greek as the official language of the Church of Rome. Prominent among the Latin Fathers of Church who wrote extensively and beautifully in Latin were St Ambrose (339-397), Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430), Saint Leo the Great (+ 461) and Pope Gregory the Great (540-604). Pope Gregory, in particular, brought Latin to a great height in the sacred liturgy, in his sermons and in general Church use.

The Roman Rite Church showed extraordinary missionary dynamism. This explains why a greater part of the world has been evangelized by heralds of the Latin Rite. Many European languages which we regard as modem today have roots in Latin, some more than others. Examples are Italian, Spanish, Romanian, Portuguese and French. But even English and German do borrow from Latin.

The Popes and the Roman Church have found Latin very suitable for many reasons. It fits a Church which is universal, a Church in which all peoples, languages and cultures should feel at home and no one is regarded as a stranger. Moreover, the Latin language has a certain stability which daily spoken languages where words change often in shades of meaning cannot have. An example is the translation of the Latin "propagare". The Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples when it was founded in 1627 was called "Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide". But at the time of the Second Vatican Council many modern languages use the word "propaganda" in the sense in which we say "political propaganda". Therefore there is a preference in the Church today to avoid the expression "de propaganda Fide", in favor of "the Evangelization of Peoples". Latin has the characteristic of words and expressions retaining their meaning generation after generation. This is an advantage when it comes to the articulation of our Catholic faith and the preparation of papal and other Church documents. Even the modern universities appreciate this point and have some of their solemn titles in Latin.

Blessed Pope John XXIII- in his Apostolic Constitution, *Veterum Sapientia (https://adoremus.org/VeterumSapientia.html)*, issued on February 22, 1962, gives these two reasons and adds a third. The Latin language has a nobility and dignity which are not negligible (cf *Veterum Sapientia (https://adoremus.org/VeterumSapientia.html)*, 5, 6, 7). We can add that

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LANGUAGE IN THE ROMAN RITE LITURGY - Adoremus Bulletin Latin is concise, precise and poetically measured.

Is it not admirable that people, especially well trained clerics, can meet in international gatherings and be able to communicate at least in Latin? More importantly, is it a small matter that one million young people could meet in the World Youth Day Convention in Rome in 2000, in Toronto in 2002 and in Cologne in 2005, and be able to sing parts of the Mass, and especially the Credo, in Latin? Theologians can study the original writings of the early Latin Fathers and of the Scholastics without tears because these were written in Latin.

It is true that there is a tendency, both in the Church and in the world at large, to give more attention today to modern languages, like English, French and Spanish, which can help one secure a job quicker in the modern employment market or in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in their country. But the exhortation of Pope Benedict XVI to the students of the Faculty of Christian and Classical Letters of the Pontifical Salesian University of Rome, at the end of the Wednesday General Audience of February 22, 2006, retains its validity and relevance. And he pronounced it in Latin! Here is my free English translation: "Quite rightly our predecessors have urged the study of the great Latin language so that one may learn better the saving doctrine that is found in ecclesiastical and humanistic disciplines. In the same way we urge you to cultivate this activity so that as many as possible may have access to this treasure and appreciate its importance" (In *L'Osservatore Romano*, 45 (23 Feb. 2006, p. 5).

4. Gregorian Chant

"Liturgical action is given a more noble form when sacred rites are solemnized in song" (Sacrosanctum Concilium (https://adoremus.org/SacrosanctumConcilium.html), 113). There is an ancient saying: bis orat qui bene cantat, that is, "the person who sings well prays twice". This is so because the intensity that prayer acquires from being sung, increases its ardor and multiplies its efficacy (cf Paul VI: Address to Italian Schola Cantorum on 25 Sept, 1977, in Notitiae 136 (Nov 1977) p. 475).

Good music helps to promote prayer, to raise the minds of people to God and to give people a taste of the goodness of God.

In the Latin Rite what has come to be known as the Gregorian Chant has been traditional. A distinctive liturgical chant existed indeed in Rome before Saint Gregory the Great (+ 604). But it was this great Pontiff who gave it the greatest prominence. After Saint Gregory this tradition of chant continued to develop and be enriched until the upheavals that brought an end to the Middle Ages. The monasteries, especially those of the Benedictine Order, have done much to preserve this heritage.

Gregorian Chant is marked by a moving meditative cadence. It touches the depths of the soul. It shows joy, sorrow, repentance, petition, hope, praise or thanksgiving, as the particular feast, part of the Mass or other prayer may indicate. It makes the Psalms come alive. It has a universal appeal which makes it suitable for all cultures and peoples. It is appreciated in Rome, Solesmes, Lagos, Toronto and Caracas. Cathedrals, monasteries, seminaries, sanctuaries, pilgrimage centers and traditional parishes resound with it.

Saint Pope Pius X extolled the Gregorian chant in 1904 (Tra le Sollecitudini (https://adoremus.org/TraLeSollecitudini.html), 3). The Second Vatican Council praised it in 1963: "The Church acknowledges Gregorian chant as proper to the Roman liturgy: therefore, other things being equal, it should be given pride of place in liturgical services" (Sacrosanctum Concilium (https://adoremus.org/SacrosanctumConcilium.html), 116). The Servant of God, Pope John Paul II, repeated this praise in 2003 (cf Chirograph for Centenary of Tra Le Sollecitudini (https://adoremus.org/Chirograph-SacredMusic.html); 4-7; in Cong. for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments: Spiritus et Sponsa (https://adoremus.org/Spiritus-et-Sponsa.html), 2003, p. 130). Pope Benedict XVI encouraged the International Association of Pueri Cantores when they met in Rome at the end of 2005. They give a privileged place to the Gregorian chant. In Rome and throughout the world the Church is blessed with many fine choirs, both professional and amateur, that render the chant beautifully, and communicate their enthusiasm for it.

It is not true that the lay faithful do not want to sing the Gregorian chant. What they are asking for are priests and monks and nuns who will share this treasure with them. The CDs produced by the Benedictine monks of sell among young people. Monasteries are visited by people who want to sing Lauds and especially Vespers. In an ordination ceremony of eleven priests which I celebrated in Nigeria last July, about 150 priests sang the First Eucharistic Prayer in Latin. It was beautiful. The people, although no Latin scholars, loved it. It should be just normal that parish churches where there are four or five Masses on Sunday should have one of these Masses sung in Latin.

5. Did Vatican II discourage Latin?

Some people think, or have the perception, that the Second Vatican Council discouraged the use of Latin in the liturgy. This is not the case.

Just before he opened the Council, Blessed Pope John Paul XXIII in 1962 issued an Apostolic Constitution, to insist on the use of Latin in the Church. The Second Vatican Council, although it admitted some introduction of the vernacular, insisted on the place of Latin: "Particular law remaining in force, the use of the Latin language is to be preserved in the Latin rites" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*

(*https://adoremus.org/SacrosanctumConcilium.html*), 36). The Council also required that seminarians "should acquire a command of Latin which will enable them to understand and use the source material of so many sciences and the documents of the Church as well" (*Optatam Totius*, 13). The Code of Canon Law published in 1983 enacts that "the eucharistic celebration: is to be carried out either in the Latin language or in another language, provided the liturgical texts have been lawfully approved" (Canon 928).

Those, therefore, who want to give the impression that the Church has put Latin away from her liturgy are mistaken. A manifestation of people's acceptance of Latin liturgy well celebrated was had at world level in April, 2005, when millions followed the burial rites of Pope John Paul II and then, two weeks later, the inauguration Mass of Pope Benedict XVI over the television.

It is remarkable that young people welcome the Mass celebrated sometimes in Latin. Problems are not lacking. So, too, there are misunderstandings and wrong approaches on the part of some priests on the use of Latin. But to get the matter in better locus, it is necessary mist to examine the use of the vernacular in the liturgy of the Roman Rite today.

6. The Vernacular: Introduction. Extension. Conditions.

The introduction of local languages into the sacred liturgy of the Latin Rite is a development that did not occur all of a sudden. After the partial experience gained over the preceding years in certain countries, already on December 5 and 6, 1962, after long and sometimes impassioned debates, the Second Vatican Fathers adopted the principle that the use of the mother tongue, whether in the Mass or other parts of the liturgy, frequently may be of advantage to the people. In the following year the Council voted to apply this principle to the Mass, the ritual and the Liturgy of the Hours (cf *Sacrosanctum Concilium*

(*https://adoremus.org/SacrosanctumConcilium.html*), 36, 54, 63a, 76, 78, 101).

Extensions of the use of the vernacular followed. But, as if the Council Fathers foresaw the likelihood that Latin might lose more and more ground, they insisted again and again that Latin be maintained.

As already quoted, article 36 of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy began by enacting that "particular law remaining in force, the use of the Latin language is to be preserved in the Latin rite". Article 54 required that steps be taken "enabling the faithful to say or sing together in Latin those parts of the Ordinary of the Mass belonging to them". In the celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours "in accordance with the centuries old tradition of the Latin rite, clerics are to retain the Latin language" (SC, 101).

But even while establishing limits, the Council Fathers anticipated the possibility of a wider use of the vernacular. Article 54 indeed adds: "Wherever a more extended use of the mother tongue within the Mass appears desirable, the regulation laid down in Article 40 of this Constitution is to be observed". Article 40 goes into directives on the role of Bishops' Conferences and of the Apostolic See in such a delicate matter. The vernacular had been introduced. The rest is history. The developments were so fast that many clerics, religious and lay faithful today are not aware that the Second Vatican Council did not simply introduce the vernacular for all parts of the liturgy.

Requests and widenings of the use of the vernacular were not long in coming. At the urgent request of some Bishops' Conferences, Pope Paul VI first allowed the Preface of the Mass to be said in the vernacular (cf Letter of the Cardinal Secretary of State, 27 April 1965), then the entire Canon and the prayers of ordination in 1967. Finally on June 14,1971, the Congregation for Divine Worship sent notice that Episcopal Conferences could allow the use of the vernacular in all the texts of the Mass, and each Ordinary could give the same permission for the choral or private celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours (on the whole development, see A. G. Martimort: *The Dialoque between God and his People*, in A. G. Martimort: *The Church at Prayer*, I, p. 166).

The reasons for the introduction of the mother tongue are not far to seek. It promotes better understanding of what the Church is praying, since "Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful be led to that full, conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy... (and which) is their right by reason of their Baptism" (*SC*, 14).

At the same time, it is not difficult to envisage how demanding and delicate the work of translation must be. Even more difficult is the question of adaptation and inculturation especially when we think of the sacredness of the sacramental rites, the centuries-old tradition of the Latin Rite, and the close link between faith and worship encapsuled in the old formula: *lex orandi lex credendi*.

We turn now to the thorny question of translations into the vernacular in the liturgy.

7. On Translations into the Vernacular

The translation of liturgical texts from the Latin original to the various vernaculars is a very important consideration in the prayer life of the Church. It is a question, not of private prayer, but of the public prayer offered by holy Mother Church, with Christ as the head. The Latin texts have been prepared with great care as to sound doctrine, exact wording "free from all ideological influence and otherwise endowed with those qualities by which the sacred mysteries of salvation and the indefectible language to prayer, and worthy worship is offered to God the Most High" (*Liturgiam Authenticam*

(*https://adoremus.org/liturgiamauthenticam.html*), 3). The words used in the sacred liturgy manifest the faith of the Church and are guided by it. The Church, therefore, needs great care in directing, preparing and approving translations, so that not even one unsuitable word will be smuggled into the liturgy by an individual who may have a personal agenda, or who may simply not be aware of the seriousness of the rites.

Translations should, therefore, be faithful to the original Latin text. They should not be free compositions. As *Liturgiam Authenticam (https://adoremus.org/liturgiamauthenticam.html)*, the major Holy See document that gives directives on translations, insists: "The translation of the liturgical texts of the Roman Liturgy is not so much a work of creative innovation as it is of rendering the original texts faithfully and accurately into the vernacular language" (n.20).

The genius of the Latin Rite should be respected. The triple repetition is one of its characteristics. Examples are "*mea culpa*, *mea culpa*, *mea maxima culpa*"; "*Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison. Kyrie eleison*". "*Agnus Dei qui tollis*...", three times. A close study of the "Gloria in *Excelsis Deo*" also shows "triplets". Translations should neither kill nor flatten out such a characteristic.

The Latin liturgy expresses not only facts but also our feelings, our sentiments, for example, in front of God's transcendence, majesty, mercy and boundless love (cf *Liturgiam Authenticam*

(https://adoremus.org/liturgiamauthenticam.html), 25). Expressions like "Te igitur, clementissime Pater", "Supplices te rogamus", "Propitius esto", "veneremur cernui", "Omnipotens et misericors Dominus", "nos servi tui", should not be deflated and democratized by some translating iconoclast. Some of these Latin expressions are difficult to translate. The best experts in liturgy, classics, patrology, theology, spirituality, music and literature are needed so that translations beautiful on the lips of holy Mother Church can be worked out. Translations should reflect that reverence, gratitude and adoration before God's transcendent majesty and man's hunger for God which are very clear in the Latin texts. Pope Benedict XVI in his Message to the meeting of the "Vox Clara" English Committee on 9 November 2005. speaks of translations which "will succeed in transmitting the treasures of the faith and the liturgical tradition in the specific context of a devout and reverent Eucharistic celebration" (in *Notitiae*, 471-472 (Nov-Dec 2005) p. 557).

Many liturgical texts are steeped in biblical expressions, signs and symbols. They resonate with prayer patterns that date back to the Psalms. The translator cannot afford to ignore this.

A language spoken by millions of people today will undoubtedly have many shades and variations. There is a difference between English used in the Constitution of a country, that spoken by the President of a Republic, the conversational language of dock workers or students and the conversation between parents and children. The manner of expression cannot be expected to be the same in all these situations, although all are using English. What form should liturgical translations adopt? No doubt liturgical vernacular should be intelligible and easy to proclaim and to understand. At the same time it should be dignified, sober, stable and not subject to frequent change. It should not hesitate to use some words not generally in use in every-day conversation, or words that are associated with Catholic faith and worship. Therefore it should say chalice and not just cup, paten and not plate, ciborium and not vessel, priest and not presider, sacred host and not consecrated bread, vestments and not dress. Therefore Liturgiam Authenticam (https://adoremus.org/liturgiamauthenticam.html) says: "While the translation must transmit the perennial treasury of orations by means of language understandable in the cultural context for which it is intended, ... it should cause no surprise that such language differs somewhat from ordinary speech" (n.47).

Intelligibility should not be pushed to mean that every word must be understood by everybody at once. Just look carefully at the Credo. It is a "symbol", a solemn summary statement, on our faith. The Church has had to call some General Councils for an exact articulation of some articles of our faith. Not every Catholic at Mass will immediately understand in full such normal Catholic liturgical formulae as Incarnation, Creation, Passion, Resurrection, Consubstantial with the Father, Proceeding from the Father and the Son, Transubstantiation, Real Presence, Transcendent and omnipotent God. This is not a question of English, or French, or Italian, or Hindi, or Kiswahili. Translators should not become iconoclasts who destroy and damage as they go along. Everything cannot be explained during the liturgy. The liturgy does not exhaust the entire life activity of the Church (cf *Sacrosanctum Concilium*

(*https://adoremus.org/SacrosanctumConcilium.html*), 9). There is also need for theology, catechetics and preaching. And even when a good catechesis has been delivered, a mystery of our faith remains a mystery.

Indeed, we can say that the most important thing in divine worship is not that we understand every word or concept. No. The most important consideration is that we stand in reverence and awe before God, that we adore, praise and thank him. The sacred, the things of God, are best approached with sandals off.

In prayer, language is primarily for contact with God. No doubt, language is also for intelligible communication between us humans. But contact with God has priority. In the mystic, such contact with God approaches and sometimes reaches the ineffable, the mystical silence where language ceases.

There is therefore no surprise if liturgical language differs somewhat from our every-day language. Liturgical language strives to express Christian prayer where the mysteries of Christ are celebrated.

As if putting together these various elements needed in order to produce good liturgical translations, let us quote from the address of Pope John Paul II to American Bishops from California, Nevada and Hawaii during their 1993 *ad limina* visit to Rome. He was asking them in translations to guard the full doctrinal integrity and beauty of the original texts: "One of your responsibilities in this regard is to make available exact and appropriate translations of the official liturgical books so that, following the required review and confirmation by the Holy See, they may be an instrument and guarantee of a genuine sharing in the mystery of Christ and the Church: *lex orandi, lex credendi*. The arduous task of translation must guard *the full doctrinal integrity* and, according to the genius of each language, the beauty of the original texts. When so many people are thirsting for the Living God — whose majesty and mercy are at the heart of liturgical prayer — the Church must respond with *a language of praise and worship which fosters respect and aratitude for God's areatness_compassion and power*

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When the faithful gather to celebrate the work of our Redemption, the language of their prayer — free from doctrinal ambiguity and ideological influence — should foster the dignity and beauty of the celebration itself, while faithfully expressing the Church's faith and unity" (in *Insegnamenti* di Giovanni Paolo II, XVI, 2 (1993) p. 1399-1400).

From the above considerations, it follows that the Church needs to exercise careful authority over liturgical translations. The responsibility for the translation of texts rest on the Bishops' Conference which submits them to the Holy See for the necessary recognitio (cf SC 36; CLC Canon 838; *Lit. Authenticam (https://adoremus.org/liturgiamauthenticam.html)*, 80).

It follows that no individual, even a priest or deacon, has authority to change the approved wording in the sacred liturgy. This is also common sense. But sometimes we notice that common sense is not very common. So *Redemptionis Sacramentum*

(https://adoremus.org/RedemptionisSacramentum.html) had to say expressly: "The reprobated practice by which priests, deacons or the faithful here and there alter or vary at will the texts of the Sacred Liturgy that they are charged to pronounce, must cease. For in doing thus, they render the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy unstable, and not infrequently distort the authentic meaning of the Liturgy" (*Red. Sacramentum* (https://adoremus.org/RedemptionisSacramentum.html), 59; cf also *General Instruction on Roman Missal*, n. 24).

8. What is expected of us?

As we seek to conclude these reflections, we can ask ourselves what is expected of us.

We should do our best to appreciate the language which the Church uses in her liturgy and to join our hearts and voices to them, according as each liturgical rite may indicate. All of us cannot be Latin speakers, but the lay faithful can at least learn the simpler responses in Latin. Priests should give more attention to Latin so that they celebrate Mass in Latin occasionally. In big churches where there are many Masses celebrated on a Sunday or Feast day, why can one of those Masses not be in Latin? In rural parishes a Latin Mass should be possible, say once a month. In international assemblies, discharge carefully their role of preparing and forming priests also in the use of Latin (cf October 2005 Synod of Bishops, *Prop.* 36).

All those responsible for vernacular translations should strive to provide the very best, following the guidance of relevant Church documents, especially *Liturgiam Authenticam*

(*https://adoremus.org/liturgiamauthenticam.html*). Experience shows that it is not superfluous to remark that priests, deacons and all others who proclaim liturgical texts, should read them out with clarity and due reverence.

Language is not everything. But it is one of most important elements that need attention for good and faith-filled liturgical celebrations.

It is an honor for us to be allowed to become part of the voice of the Church in her public prayer. May the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Word made flesh whose mysteries we celebrate in the sacred liturgy, obtain for all of us the grace to do our part to join in singing the praises of the Lord both in Latin and in the vernacular.

Francis Cardinal Arinze November 11, 2006

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