

## **THE USE OF THE LATIN LANGUAGE IN THE LITURGY – Part 1**

The Latin language has been in use in the Roman Liturgy for over 16 centuries. It became the official liturgical language of the Catholic Church in the 4th century and has remained the official language of the Catholic Church to the present day.

The Code of Canon Law c.928 and Sacrosanctum Concilium, n.36, affirm both the use of Latin in the Church's liturgical rites, and the primacy of the Latin language within her rites. These documents carry with them a certain gravitas and weight of authority and are therefore to be given no little consideration in our discussion about the use of Latin in the liturgy. Additionally, these documents clearly communicate the Church's preference as regards the use of the Latin language within the sacred liturgy as well as her desire to preserve the use of the Latin language within the Latin rites.

As a priest and perhaps more so as a pastor, I have been given a share in the bishop's ministry of shepherding the flock of Jesus Christ in this particular territory of the Diocese of Erie. Part of my task as shepherd is to act as a watchman. A watchman is entrusted with a sacred duty of safeguarding and protecting that which is entrusted to his care or stewardship. This stewardship is twofold and entails protecting the flock of Christ and preserving the sacred deposit of the faith.

As Christians we profess an incarnational faith; a faith that never ceases to proclaim Christ Crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and an absurdity to the Gentiles. Christianity holds that the Divine Logos or Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us. This is what I mean to communicate when stating that the Christian faith is an incarnational faith. The Christian faith is not just a collection of thoughts and ideas. The Christian faith is alive and has flesh and bones. It is a concrete, tangible reality that can be seen, touched, and heard. The Christian faith is an objective reality and therefore is distinct, recognizable, identifiable, and distinguishable.

As a watchman entrusted with safeguarding and protecting the sacred deposit of faith, that is to say, to preserve the faith in its entirety and in its integrity, I find it critical and essential to safeguard and protect all that gives concrete and tangible expression to that faith, namely, the Church's sacred traditions, her holy patrimony, and her rich heritage.

The Latin language is part of that patrimony and rich heritage and should therefore be safeguarded as a precious inheritance of the western liturgical tradition as St. John Paul the Great once wrote: "The Roman Church has special obligations towards Latin, the splendid language of ancient Rome, and she must manifest them whenever the occasion present itself" (*Dominicae cenae*, n.10).

Additionally, Pope Benedict XVI wrote: "Speaking more generally, I ask that future priests, from their time in the seminary, receive the preparation needed to understand and to celebrate Mass in Latin, and also to use Latin texts and execute Gregorian chant; nor should we forget that the faithful can be taught to recite the more common prayers in Latin, and also to sing parts of the liturgy to Gregorian chant" (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, n.62).

### **The Use of Latin in the Mass**

However, whenever a priest introduces Latin into the mass, some in the congregation begin to squirm, giving evidence of their lack of comfort and familiarity with the use of the Latin language.

The thought of the Latin Rite Roman Catholic Church NOT incorporating Latin into its rites seems somewhat strange and odd to me. It would be like traveling to France and expecting no one to speak French or going to Germany and not expecting to hear a lick of German. It would be like going to a baseball game at Wrigley Field and not expecting to hear a recording of Harry Caray singing *Take Me Out to the Ballgame*.

There are various rites in the Catholic Church and with these various rites comes a diversity of languages. Many of these languages have been preserved and passed on for centuries.

Latin is no exception in this regard and as an ancient language it is both mother and grandmother to a wide variety of languages in use throughout the world today.

Did you know that 80% of the entries in the English dictionary are borrowed, mainly from Latin? Over 60% of all English words have Greek or Latin roots. In the vocabulary of the sciences and technology, the figure rises to over 90%.

I'd like to propose that our lack of comfort and familiarity with the Latin language may be nothing more than a lack of fluency and appreciation of the English language.

### **Latin Mass Settings**

It will be my intention to show how a good command of the English language can help us to become more familiar with the use of Latin in the liturgy. We don't have to be Latin scholars in order to incorporate Latin into our music and prayers. Latin doesn't have to seem so foreign and daunting but can be welcomed and embraced with the familiarity of an old but valued family heirloom.