The Place of Latin in the Church

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The Genius of the Roman Liturgy

On the evening of Wednesday 13th September 2006, Solemn Vespers began in the historic 13th century chapel of Merton College Oxford, in much the same way as it would have done at the very first sung Vespers in this beautiful space, designed for the classical Roman liturgy already very well-established in its language and forms when this chapel was first built 400 years before the English Reformation. For the next four days, the Roman liturgy, through Lauds, Solemn High Mass, Vespers and Compline, were celebrated in a place that — apart from one Novus Ordo Mass in English — had not seen the glories of this Liturgy celebrated in Latin since the mid 1500s. For those of us present at the 11th International Colloquium of the International Centre for Liturgical Studies (CIEL) dedicated to “The Genius of the Roman Liturgy: Historical Diversity and Spiritual Reach”, this was not just an incredibly moving experience, though it was certainly this, but an affirmation of the timeless and spiritual heritage of the Latin liturgy.

Interestingly, as Dom Charbel’s article in the last issue of The Priest made it clear, this affirmation of the genius of the Roman Liturgy lies at the heart of what is now called a “New Liturgical Movement”. But when you are present at a Solemn Pontifical Mass celebrated according to the 1962 Missale Romanum in a 13th century chapel designed specifically for this liturgy, the idea of the “new” part of this movement raises many questions, not least of which is the need for us continually to reflect on the place of Latin in the Church today. This short article is a reflection on this topic, not simply as a call for a nostalgic, romanticised, return to a liturgy with which many in the Church are now completely unfamiliar with in its fullest forms (including many Priests and Religious), but as a way of seeking to put back onto the agenda the fact that still at the heart of many Church documents, pre-Vatican II and post-Vatican II, the importance of the place of Latin is still central.

The Church’s policy on Latin, through its Magisterium, is clear, and I outline that in what follows. What seems to have fallen by the wayside for the vast bulk of the Church worldwide is adherence to that policy. For some months now we have been expecting some sort of formal statement from Pope Benedict XVI on the place of the classical Roman Liturgy (over and above #62 of the recent Sacramentum Caritatis discussed below). What form that will take is mere speculation for those outside the inner circles of the Curia, but no matter now and when something appears, I believe it is valuable at this time to consider the overall place of Latin in the Church, not simply to justify an event like the CIEL Colloquium in Oxford last year, but to show that such a “central place” is actually real in today’s Church — and thus, not as a denial of Vatican II, but as a continuing celebration of it and what it had to say about the continuing importance and relevance of Latin in the active life of the Church and the training of its Priests.

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The High Torch of Latin

When Pope John Paul II addressed the participants of Certamen Vaticanum on the 27 November 1978 he told them that at a time:

When in many places the Latin language and human studies are less known, you must joyfully accept the patrimony of this language which the Church holds in high esteem and must, with energy, make it fruitful. The well-known words of Cicero, “It is not so much excellent to know Latin, as it is a shame not to know it”, in a certain sense are directed to you. We exhort you all to lift up the high torch of Latin which is even today a bond of unity among the peoples of all languages.

Certamen Vaticanum was established in 1953 as a competition for the promulgation of Latin prose and poetry. Two decades later, in 1976, Pope Paul VI established the Latinitas Foundation “to promote the study of the Latin language, classical literature and Medieval Latin”, as well as to promote the increased use of Latin, especially in the development of new words and phrases to keep Latin alive to the changes in languages the world over. Latin is still the official language of the Church, and in May 2003, Pope John Paul II established a new Vatican Commission to restore the use of Latin in the Church.

In doing so he echoed the words of Pope Paul VI who speaking several years earlier in 1968 also to Certamen Vaticanum said that “Latin must be continued to be fostered... above all to appreciate the treasures of the Sacred Liturgy.”

Pope Paul VI while vigorously defending the development of the use of the vernacular following Vatican II had earlier issued a motu proprio, Studia Latinitatis (1964) and an encyclical, Summi Dei Verbum (1963), both of which were directed at the proper study of Latin in seminaries. The use of the vernacular, for Pope Paul VI was driven not by a desire to see the end of Latin in the Church, but by his understanding of the pressing pastoral concerns of the late 1960s. As he said in his address to Certamen Vaticanum in 1968, “The bread of the Word of God, as it is given in the Liturgy must be broken by pastors of souls in large and generous handfuls, so as to make it intelligible and accessible to all, enabling the faithful to taste its beauty and participate more easily and actively in its sacred rites.” This did not mean, however, for Pope Paul VI, or indeed his successors, that Latin and its rich heritage within the Church, should be a thing of the past.

Later, in his April 2004 letter to Vox Clara, the Committee on English Liturgical Texts, Pope John Paul II in guiding the members of this committee to their difficult task of translating the 2000 editio tercia of the Missale Romanum,
called for a more “permanent commitment to draw ever more abundantly from the riches of the Liturgy that vital force which spreads from Christ to the members of his body, which is the Church.”

The Formative Value of Latin

Both the decree Optatum Totius and the Constitution Sacrosanctum Concilium promulgated at Vatican II argued strongly for the necessity and study of Latin, and as such, Pope Paul VI continued in his address to the Marian Congress in 1968 by saying, “It is precisely for its educative and formative value that we desire that Latin should continue to hold a place of honour in our midst.” Referring to Latin in the life of the Church as a “spiritual and cultural heritage from which modern civilisation still draws life and which it still needs”, he concluded his talk by saying that “The Church has used and uses Latin as a precious vehicle and instrument for the fusion of souls and for communication between peoples.”

Pope Pius XI also wrote at length on the topic of Latin in his 1 August 1922 Apostolic Epistle, Officiorum Omnium, and in his 20 October 1924 motu proprio, Litterarum Latinarum; and some years later Blessed Pope John XXIII made it clear that, “It is evident that Latin must be kept in honour in the Church”, and similarly, writing in 1962 in Vetus Sapientiae on the value and importance of Latin in the Church, echoing the previous thoughts of Pope Pius XI in 1922, he made it clear that there are three main qualities of the Latin language “which harmonise to a remarkable degree with the Church’s nature. ‘For the Church, precisely because it embraces all nations and is destined to endure until the end of time ... of its very nature requires a language which is universal, immutable, and non-vernarual’.”

Latin and Priestly Formation

Before the 1983 revisions of Canon Law, Canon 1364 mandated the thorough study of Latin by seminarians, and Canon 249 in the 1983 revisions, and still in force today, requires all in Priests formation to have a “careful schooling in the Latin language”, to ensure their ability to fully engage in the understanding of Church doctrine and law. Canon 249 states:

The Charter of Priestly Formation is to provide that the students are not only taught their native language accurately, but are also well versed in Latin, and have a suitable knowledge of other languages which would appear to be necessary or useful for their formation or for the exercise of their pastoral ministry.

In Pope John Paul II’s 15 April 1979 Apostolic Constitution, Sapientia Christiana on ecclesiastical universities and faculties, it is also made clear in the Norms of Application (29 April 1979) Section IV n.3 that, “A suitable knowledge of the Latin language is required for the Faculties of the sacred sciences, so that the students can understand and use the sources and documents of the Church.”

Pope John Paul II’s Pastores Dabo Vobis, on the formation of Priests in the circumstances of the present day, strongly reaffirmed the teaching of Vatican II’s documents and that formation should proceed as established in the 28 October 1965 decree Optatum Totius and in the 1967 Synod (#61). Pope Paul VI’s Optatum Totius states very clearly in article 13 that seminarians “are to acquire a knowledge of Latin which will enable them to understand and make use of the sources of so many sciences and of the documents of the Church. The study of the liturgical language proper to each rite should be considered necessary; a suitable knowledge of the languages of the Bible and of Tradition should be greatly encouraged.”

Note also that article #101.1 of Sacrosanctum Concilium also makes it clear that ‘In accordance with the centuries-old tradition of the Latin rite, the Latin language is to be retained by clerics in the divine office’, with the proviso that a vernacular version is acceptable for those ‘for whom the use of Latin constitutes a grave obstacle to their praying the office properly’. There is some evidence that the rigorous study of Latin is returning, particularly in Schools of Canon Law, but it is still generally optional in most seminaries around the world, hence positioning clerics to have little choice but to recite the Divine Office in their vernacular.

Latin Rites

When Pope Benedict XVI launched the new Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, on 28 June 2005, he urged Catholics around the world to memorise the most common Catholic prayers in Latin. By doing so, he threw into sharp relief the position established in the Second Vatican Council document, Sacrosanctum Concilium (1963) that “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.” (#54) and that “the use of the Latin language is to be preserved in the Latin rites” (#36.1).

Article 268 in the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments’ Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy (2001) also makes it clear that:

On occasions when pilgrims come together from different countries, it is important that the Creed and the Our Father be sung in Latin using simpler melodies. Such celebrations offer a truer image of the Church and of the Eucharist, and afford the faithful an opportunity for mutual encounter and reciprocal enrichment.

Both Canon Law and the existing Constitutions of the Church on this issue are rarely, if ever, applied, however, and few Catholics (including Priests and Religious) around the world today would be familiar with most (or indeed any) of the basic prayers in Latin, and even fewer with the very much larger corpus of Latin prayers, hymns, collects, Psalms, readings and poetry which constitute the spiritual and literary legacy of the history of Catholic prayer life.

When Pope Benedict XVI called for Catholics to learn some basic prayers in Latin, as well as in one’s own language to “help Christian faithful of different languages pray together, especially when they gather for special circumstances”, he also said that he hoped the 200 page Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, (a synthesis of the much larger 1992 Catechism of the Catholic Church), “would give Catholics and non-Catholics easy access to the basic and essential tenets of the Catholic faith.” Those tenets are not just in the words of the Catechism — they continue to live and breathe through the history of Latin prayer.

As Pope Benedict said to those gathered for the launch of the Compendium, picking up on his comments when he submitted
the Latin edition of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* to Pope John Paul in 1997, "Latin, has for centuries been the vehicle and instrument of Christian culture, and guarantees not only continuity with our roots, but remains as relevant as ever for strengthening the bonds of the unity of the faith in the communion of the Church."

**Unity and universality through Latin**

If we think that we will "understand" the liturgy simply because it is in the language we use on a daily basis, we will never grasp the real truth of the liturgy – and this is simply that, irrespective of the language, we can never fully understand it: the liturgy, rather, "understands" us. This truth is quite different, and far more searching, realisation, because the liturgy is the mystery of Christ, and no matter how fluent we may be in the languages of the world, no amount of linguistic skill – Latin or otherwise – will ever enable us to understand, let alone, explain, the liturgy. The argument for the place of Latin in the Church is not to return to an earlier time – like the beauties of the 13th Century Merton College Chapel – for nostalgic reasons, or indeed, for theological ones, the use of Latin is better to put into practice the teaching of the Magisterium.

Part of that teaching is *Sacramentum Caritatis* published by Pope Benedict XVI on 13 March 2007, where he re-affirms the policy of the Church as follows when talking about the celebration of large scale liturgies in section 62:

> None of the above observations should cast doubt upon the importance of such large-scale liturgies. I am thinking here particularly of celebrations at international gatherings, which nowadays are held with greater frequency. The most should be made of these occasions. In order to express more clearly the unity and universality of the Church, I wish to endorse the proposal made by the Synod of Bishops (in harmony with the directives of the Second Vatican Council) that – with the exception of the readings, the homily and the prayer of the faithful – such liturgies could be celebrated in Latin. Similarly, the better-known prayers of the Church’s tradition should be recited in Latin and, if possible, selections of Gregorian chant should be sung.

> 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.

This is an important statement, and it will be interesting to see just to what extent the Holy Father’s wishes as part of the Church’s continuing teaching on the place of Latin in the liturgy, priestly formation and the active prayer life of the faithful, will be implemented, given that so much of it has been ignored in the past.

[Editor: Certainly, the recent papal liturgy in the Holy Spirit Cathedral, Istanbul, did not develop it! For that liturgy was a hodge-podge of different languages, and with a large "concert" element and use of the shortest consecration prayer, Eucharistic Prayer II.]

**Notes:**

My thanks to Father Glen Tattersall FSSP for detailed feedback on an earlier version of this work.

For more details of the actual conference see http://www.ciel2006.org, and on CIEL see http://www.CIEL-UK.org. See also Shawn Tribe’s article outlining the contents of the conference at http://thenewliturgiemaestro.blogspot.com/.

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