

32. THE LANGUAGE USED IN THE CELEBRATION OF THE HOLY MASS

1. All the requisites for the celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice have been selected with especial care, and nothing has been adopted but what has been found best suited unto this end. This applies also to the language in which the Holy Sacrifice is celebrated; for the liturgical language should correspond to its liturgical object. The Mass considered in itself could assuredly be celebrated in any language, but by the Providence of God the Latin language has become, and still continues to be of all languages the most widely diffused for divine worship.¹ The very ancient practice of the Church of celebrating Mass in the West, not in the living language of the country, but in a dead language, that is, in Latin, for the most part a language unintelligible to the people, has since the twelfth century to the present epoch been frequently made the subject of attack.² Such attacks originated principally in an heretical, schismatical, proudly national spirit hostile to the Church, or in a superficial and false enlightenment, in a shallow and arid rationalism entirely destitute of the perception and understanding of the essence and object of the Catholic liturgy, especially of the profoundly mystical sacrifice. In the attempt to suppress the Latin language of the liturgy and to replace it by the vernacular, there was a more or less premeditated scheme to undermine Catholic unity, to loosen the bond of union with Rome, to weaken the Catholic spirit, to destroy the humility and simplicity of faith. Therefore, the Apostolic See at all times most persistently and inflexibly resisted such innovations; for it is an invariable principle of the Church never to alter the ancient liturgical language, but inviolably to adhere to it, even though it be no longer the living language spoken or understood by the people. The Church likewise, when introducing the Roman liturgy among newly converted nations, has for many centuries permitted the Latin language only.³ She excommunicates all those who presume to declare the vernacular to be the necessary or the only permissible language for the liturgy;⁴ she stigmatizes as impertinent effrontery for any

¹ Whether the Apostles celebrated the Holy Sacrifice in the language of each individual nation or only in the Aramean (Syro-Chaldaic), Greek and Latin languages cannot be determined with certainty. In any case, from the first four centuries no liturgy can be shown composed in any other than the three languages of the inscription of the Cross. In the West, for example, in Italy, in Germany, in Spain, in France, in England, Latin was at all times the liturgical language. Toward the end of the ninth century Pope John VIII. (872882) permitted the Moravian Slavs, converted by Sts. Cyril and Methodius, to celebrate the liturgy in their (Slavonic or Glagolitic) native language, and that probably in order to prevent their apostasy to the Greek Schism. In the East also the Church later on permitted some schismatics and heretics, who had returned to the unity of the Church (for instance, the Copts, Armenians, Ethiopians), to retain their native language in the liturgy. At present there are twelve languages used in the Catholic liturgy; namely, 1. Latin, 2. Greek, 3. Syriac, 4. Chaldaic, 5. Arabian, 6. Ethiopian, 7. Glagolitic, 8. Ruthenian, 9. Bulgarian, 10. Armenian, 11. Coptic, 12. Romanian. With the exception of Romanian, all these languages used in the liturgy have for a considerable time no longer been the living languages of the people, but only dead languages. The united Roumanians alone make use of the living mother-tongue in the liturgy; this is not expressly permitted by Rome, but is merely tolerated. (Cf. Bartak, Versuch, die liturgische Sprache der Kirche vom dogmatischen, historischen und pastorellen Standpunkte zu beleuchten. Königgratz, 1875.)

² Opponents of the Latin language of worship were, as a rule, heretics, schismatics and rationalistic Catholics; for example, the Albigensians, the so-called Reformers, the Jansenists, the Gallicans, the Josephites, the so-called German and the Old Catholics.

³ Concludendum, constantem firmamque disciplinam esse, ne Missae idioma mutetur, etsi mutet lingua vernacula: sed eo sermone Missa celebretur, quo celebrata est ab initio, etiamsi ea lingua exoleverit apud vulgus, ejusque peritiam viri docti dumtaxat habeant. Est autem Apostolicae Sedis in recenti populorum conversione ad fidem pro variis circumstantiis vel permittere vernaculae linguae usum in divinis officiis celebrandis, sed vere affirmari potest, S. Sedem propensiorum esse in illam partem, ut ex recens conversis ad fidem, habiliore qui sint ingenio, seligantur et latinis potius literis erudiantur, quam ut facultas concedatur, adhibendi in Missae celebratione vulgarem linguam. (Benedict. XIV. De Missa sacrific., 1. 2, c. 2, n. 14.)

⁴ Trident, sess. 22, can. 9.

one to censure or combat the retention of the Latin language for divine worship.⁵ This is just; for, as St. Augustine remarks, “to question what the united Church practices as a rule is the most daring madness.”⁶ In all such general decrees and usages appertaining to divine worship, the Church is directed and preserved from injurious blunders by the Holy Spirit.⁷ Instead of censuring the Church on account of her practice, that has endured more than a thousand years, of conducting her liturgical worship in a dead language, we should rather acknowledge and admire her supernatural wisdom; she counts her experiences by centuries: ours we can enumerate only by days.

The Church is moved by interests most sacred to maintain and to introduce wherever she is spread in the world and receives new nations into her pale, the Latin as the common language of her liturgy. This conduct on her part does not rest on a discipline of secrecy. The Church does not wish to conceal her mysteries from the faithful. It is rather her very ardent desire that her children should understand all the wealth and beauty of her divine worship; hence she obliges and admonishes her priests to unfold⁸ to the people the meaning of the celebration of the mystical Sacrifice by clearly and devoutly explaining from time to time the holy Sacrifice of the Mass with all its ceremonies and prayers in the school-room and in the church, in the catechetical instructions and in sermons.⁹ After the fathers of the Council of Trent had subjected the objection raised to the Latin tongue in Church service to thorough examination, they unanimously declared that, although the Mass embodied a vast amount of religious instruction, they still deemed it inexpedient that the Holy Sacrifice should be everywhere (*passim*) celebrated in the vernacular; that, on the contrary, everywhere the rite (custom) authorized by the Holy Roman Church should be maintained. But in order that the sheep of Christ may not hunger and the children may not ask for bread without there being some one to break it unto them, the Council commands pastors of souls, that during the celebration of Mass they frequently explain some part of what has been read in the Mass, and that especially on Sundays and holidays they give instruction of some mystery of this most Holy Sacrifice.¹⁰ The Church acts thus, because she is persuaded that an unchangeable and universal language for divine worship prevents, on the one hand, much harm and danger, and, on the other hand, offers numerous advantages for her liturgical object, as well as for her activity and efficiency in general. These advantages are so great, that the profit the people might in a certain respect and in some cases derive from understanding the language used in the divine service, bears

⁵ Bulla “Auctorem fidei” 1794. prop. 33. 66.

⁶ Quod universa frequentat Ecclesia, quin ita faciendum sit, disputare, insolentissimae insaniae est. (S. Aug. Epist. 54 ad Januar.)

⁷ In things relating to divine worship St. Thomas makes use of the prescription and custom of the Church as a conclusive argument, to refute various objections. Contra est, quod ea quae per Ecclesiam statuuntur, ab ipso Christo ordinantur. In contrarium est Ecclesiae consuetude, *quae errare non potest*, utpote a Spiritu sancto instructa. (3, q. 83, a. 3 et 5.)

⁸ Quisque vestrum expositionem Symboli et Orationis dominicae juxta orthodoxorum Patrum traditionis penes se habeat casque atque Orationes Missarum et Epistolas, Evangelia et Canonem bene *intelligat*, ex quibus *praedicando* populum sibi commissum sedulo instruat et maxime non bene credentem. (Pontif. Roman. Ordo ad Synodum.)

⁹ Vehementer cupimus, ut animarum moderatores commissos sibi greges saepe ac diligenter doceant divini hujus sacrificii dignitatem ac praestantiam uberrimosque fructus, qui in pie ac devote sacris adstantes deriventur. (Coll. L, ac. III, 496.)

¹⁰ Trident, sess. 22, cap. 8.

no comparison thereunto, and is far surpassed thereby; besides said profit may be secured in some better and more sure way and thus be easily compensated.¹¹

2. Latin is the language almost universally employed in the divine service all over the Catholic world; other cult languages are comparatively but little disseminated. Only the most weighty reasons will be given here for the use of the Latin language in the liturgy of the holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

a) The Latin language is consecrated by the mystic inscription attached to the Cross, as well as sanctified by the usage of nearly two thousand years, and hence it is most closely interwoven with the primitive Roman Catholic liturgy of the holy Sacrifice. The inscription on the Cross: “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews,” was written in Hebrew, Greek and Latin (John 19, 19, 20). These were the three principal languages of that epoch, and by divine dispensation they were, so to say, destined and consecrated on the Cross for the liturgical use of the Church. Through the inscription on the Cross they proclaimed to the whole world the dignity, power and glory of the Redeemer, the royalty and dominion of grace which He acquired by His bloody death; at the altar these languages continue to live throughout all ages, and serve to announce and to celebrate until the end of time the death of Christ for our redemption, whereby the reign of grace is ever more widely extended and firmly established, the kingdom of peace progresses ever more towards its happy consummation. In the first centuries these three languages were employed predominantly, if not exclusively, in the liturgical service.

Of these three languages the Latin at an early date gained the precedence; for, being the language of the Roman world, it became throughout the West with the spread of Christianity also the language of the liturgy. Divine Providence selected Rome as the centre of the Catholic Church; from Rome the messengers of the faith were sent forth in all directions to spread the light of the Gospel. Along with the grace of Christianity, together with the Catholic faith and its divine worship the western nations also received Latin as the Church-language; for in that tongue the Holy Mysteries were always celebrated, though the nations recently converted spoke a different language and did not understand Latin. Thus the language of the Mother Roman Church became the common language of worship of all her daughters, the Catholic Christian Churches established from Rome in the West. In the beginning Latin was understood and spoken in many localities by the people, but it continued to be the liturgical language even after it had been superseded by other tongues in civil life, and had ceased to be the language of the people and of the country. For centuries the Latin language has ceased to be spoken in the daily life and intercourse of the world, but it will continue to live immortal by ecclesiastical usage and in the sanctuary of divine worship unto the consummation of ages. The most sacred reminiscences, the history and the acts of the Catholic Church are intimately connected with it. From the beginning of Christianity the sublime mystery of the Mass was celebrated, the sacramental means of grace were administered, God was glorified, men were sanctified and led to salvation in this language. It is without doubt elevating and inspiring to offer sacrifice and pray in the very language and in the very words, whose forcible yet sweet tones once resounded in the mouths of the primitive Christians and our forefathers in the dark depths of the Catacombs, in the golden areas of the ancient basilicas, and in the sumptuous cathedrals of the Middle Age. In the Latin language of divine worship innumerable saints, bishops and priests of all times have offered sacrifice, prayed and sung; in it the most magnificent liturgical formulas are composed prayers of incomparable beauty and “marvelous hymns, which echo throughout the vaults of Catholic churches, now resounding in great exaltation or sung in soft strains of sweet joy, now weeping

¹¹ *Ilia utilitas et incerta est et multis periculis exposita et alio securiori et sufficiente modo suppleri potest.* (Suarez, disp. 83, sect. I, n. 21.)

in sorrow, at another time lamenting in sympathetic grief for Christ.” Should not this ancient Latin language of divine service, so venerable and hallowed in its origin and use, be extremely dear and precious to us, so that we would not for any price give it up or be deprived of it at the celebration of Holy Mass?

b) The Latin language is better suited than the languages of different countries to the celebration of divine worship, not only because it is very perfect, but furthermore because, as a so-called dead language, it has the incomparable merit of being at the same time unchangeable and mysterious. The genus of the Latin language possesses great perfection: it is distinguished for its dignity and gravity, clearness and precision, for its richness and euphony. It is, therefore, often difficult to render the complete sense, and still more difficult, and sometimes utterly impossible, to bring out in a translation the beauty, the strength, the dignity, the unction, the depth and the wealth of thought of the original Latin. To convince one’s self of this, one should compare, for example, the various translations of the Mass prayers and sequences with the Latin text. In addition to all this, Latin is the language *Urbis et Orbis* (the language of the world), the official Church language, the language of communication between the Pope and the Bishops, the language of the Councils and of theological science. Because of such advantages it is eminently fitted to be used the world over as the language of the Catholic Church in the celebration of her divine worship.

Latin survives no longer in the converse of the common people, but in the sanctuary of the Church. As a so-called dead¹² language, it is unchangeable, while the languages of the people undergo constant improvement and remodeling, and are ever liable to go on progressing and altering. What would become of liturgical books, if, with time and the changes of the vernacular, they were subjected to perpetual change and reconstruction? By such necessary, incessant remodeling and alteration of the liturgical formulas of prayer, the original text and context would lose not only much of their incomparable force and beauty, but often notwithstanding strict surveillance on the part of the Church would be disfigured and spoiled by circumlocutions, interpolations, omissions, incorrectness, errors and misrepresentations. Hence it would be impossible to preserve and maintain uniformity of divine worship at different times among even one and the same people, much less throughout the world. All these inconveniences are obviated by the use of an unchangeable language for divine worship. In the unchangeableness of the Latin for divine worship the Roman Missal appears as an intangible and inviolable sanctuary, deserving of admiration and profound respect. Since the Latin language has been withdrawn from daily life, from the ordinary intercourse of mankind, since it is not heard on the street or in the market-place, it possesses in the eyes of the faithful a holy, venerable, mystic character. Under this as-

¹² The Oriental churches also reject the principle, that the vernacular language of a country or people should be used in the celebration of Holy Mass. This is proved by the most decisive facts. The united and the schismatical Greeks celebrate the Holy Sacrifice in the ancient Greek, which the people do not understand. The Abyssinians and Armenians celebrate Holy Mass respectively in the ancient Ethiopian and the ancient Armenian, understood only by the learned. The same holds good with regard to the Syrians and Egyptians, who celebrate Holy Mass in the ancient Syrian, and also with regard to the Melchites and Georgians (Caucasian province) who at Holy Mass make use of the ancient Greek. The same is observed by the Russians, although Greek is not the language of the people, who speak only a Slavonian dialect. Here we may also refer to the practice of the Church in the Old Law. Up to the time of Christ and the Apostles, the ancient Hebrew was the language of the Patriarchs, the cult language, although no longer understood by the Jewish nation, who after the Babylonian Captivity made use of the Syro-Chaldaic idiom. It was this divine worship in the ancient Hebrew that our Lord and His disciples attended, thus actually approving a language for divine worship that was not the language of the people. Neither the Lord nor His Apostles designated or censured this as an abuse. The use of a particular cult language, differing from the ordinary current and spoken language, was, therefore, practiced for a long time in the Church of the Old Testament, and was unequivocally approved of by the conduct of our Saviour and of His Apostles. (Cf. Augsburg. Pastoralblatt, Jahrg. 1877, S. 166.)

pect also it is eminently suited for the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, which in itself comprises many mysteries. The celebration of this mystic Sacrifice fittingly calls for a language elevated, majestic, dignified and consecrated; religious sentiment demands this, and the Latin tongue answers this requirement. Just as the silent saying of the Canon, so also the use of a sanctified cult language, different from that of profane intercourse, points to the unfathomable and unspeakable depth of the mystery of the altar, and protects it against contempt and desecration. The majesty of the divine worship depends, indeed, chiefly on the devout, dignified and reverential demeanor of the celebrant; but the liturgical language contributes also its share thereunto, and a foreign language is suitable, in a measure, to veil the defects and repulsive routine of many a priest, and to prevent them from appearing so glaring. Thus the Latin language elevated above the time and place of every day life, is a mystic veil for the Adorable mysteries of the Holy Sacrifice, which here below we acknowledge only in the clear obscurity of faith, but whose clear vision shall be our portion in heaven as a recompense for our humble faith.

The use of the Latin language in nowise prevents the faithful from participating in the fruits of the Sacrifice, notwithstanding assertions to the contrary. The demand that the Mass should everywhere be celebrated in the vernacular, is based for the most part on ignorance, or on an entire misconception of the real nature and object of the Eucharistic Sacrifice. The liturgy of the Holy Sacrifice contains “much that is instructive” (*magnam eruditionem* — Trident.), but instruction is by no means its principal object. The altar is not a pulpit, the Holy Mass is not primarily a doctrinal lecture or an instruction to the people. The Sacrifice is essentially a liturgical action performed by the priest for propitiating and glorifying God, as well as for the salvation of the faithful. In this sacrifice the Christian people should take a lively part, full of profit to themselves, and they should in spiritual union with the celebrating priest — *plus medullis cordis quam labiis vocis* — more with the heart than with the lips join in prayer and sacrifice. And this is not possible for them to do without some understanding of the liturgical celebration; for “although devotion consists principally in an abundance of devout sentiments and, consequently, belongs more to the heart than to the understanding, there is, however, no perfect devotion without the enlightenment of the understanding. But in order to acquire the requisite knowledge to join in devout union with the priest celebrating the Mass, various means are at the disposal of Catholics; the celebration of the Church service in the vernacular is not at all requisite therefore, and would oftentimes prove of little or no avail. By means of oral teaching, with the aid of books of instruction and devotion, every Christian may obtain a sufficient knowledge of the liturgy of the Holy Sacrifice, of the prayers which the priest recites at the altar. For this purpose the mere recital of formulas of prayer in the vernacular by the celebrant would not suffice: for in many cases, for example, in large churches, at High Mass, or when several priests celebrate at the same time, it would be impossible, or at least disedifying, to pray so loud at the altar that all present could distinctly hear and understand the words of the officiating priest. Even if they did understand the words which the priest sings or recites at the altar, but little would be attained for the real understanding of the sense; for the formulas of the Mass, taken principally from Holy Scripture, are often mystical and difficult to comprehend; the mere rendering of them into the vernacular would not always disclose the hidden meaning, and the translation might often be the occasion of misconceptions, of misunderstandings, it might arouse the desire for disputation and dangerous hypercriticism.

When man subjects science and any perfection whatever totally to God, his devotion is thereby increased;¹³ therefore, a clear, profound, comprehensive knowledge of the Holy Sacrifice and its prayers is without doubt very useful and greatly to be recommended. The prayers of the Church are to be preferred to all private prayers; they are the sweetest manna, the most solid nourishment of the soul. Therefore, it is very desirable that the faithful should assiduously strive to increase more and more their knowledge of the precious treasure of the liturgical prayers, to the end that they may join their voices in prayer the more intimately and perfectly with the voice of the Church at the altar. The mere understanding of the prayers which the priest utters or sings does not assuredly suffice to enable us to share abundantly in the advantages and the fruits of the Sacrifice of the Mass. The most perfect disposition for this is a lively faith, fervent love, sincere compunction, profound reverence and devotion, humility of heart, a longing for mercy and help. Such devout sentiments may exist independently of the knowledge of the particular Mass prayers, and are produced by the worthy, holy and mysterious Sacrifice, which, having a varied symbolical character, possesses, therefore, a peculiar, significant and eloquent language of its own. This language can be perfectly understood only by him who, by previous instruction, has learned the purpose and meaning of the ceremonies of the Church. Latin is, therefore, no hindrance to the Catholic Christian, preventing him from deriving from the source of the liturgy of the Holy Sacrifice life, light and warmth, in order to nourish his piety and devotion. It serves rather to awaken a holy awe and reverence in his heart in the presence of the obscure mysteries of the Divine Sacrifice.

c) As a universal language of worship, Latin is an admirable means not only of presenting, but also of preserving and promoting the unity and harmony of the Church in divine worship, in divine faith, and in conduct.

a) The unity of the liturgy for all time and place can be perfectly maintained only inasmuch as it is always and everywhere celebrated in the same language. By the introduction of the various national languages, the uniformity and harmony of Catholic worship would be imperiled and, in a measure, rendered impossible. How beautiful and sublime is that uniform celebration of the Holy Sacrifice in the Catholic Church from the rising to the setting of the sun! Thus every priest is enabled to celebrate Mass, over the whole world, no matter what country he visits. And “how consoling is it not for a devout Catholic, whilst dwelling in a foreign land in the midst of strangers, hearing no sounds but those of an unknown tongue, to be able at least when assisting at the celebration of divine service, to hear again the words of a language which, as the accents of a second mother-tongue he has listened to from childhood in his native country? He feels then as though he were in a spiritual home, in a universal fatherland of the faith, and for the moment he forgets that he is dwelling in a strange place.”¹⁴ Thus travel on our altars “the same prayers in the same language all around the globe. When the sun rises and the morning flush shows itself on the mountain tops, we awaken, and the celebration of Mass begins with these same prayers and continues until noon. Then other countries have their morning, and take up the same Sacrifice with the same prayers. And when in the evening the sun sinks beneath the horizon, it rises in another part of the globe, and the same Sacrifice is there repeated with its identical prayers.”¹⁵

¹³ S. Thorn. 2, 2, qu. 82, a. 3 ad 3.

¹⁴ Martin, *Das christliche Leben*, S. 286.

¹⁵ Eberhard, *Kanzelvorträge I*, 372.

b) The unity of the liturgical language and of the divine worship in the Church is, therefore, a very efficient means for preserving the integrity of faith.¹⁶ The liturgy is, indeed, the main channel by which dogmatic tradition is transmitted;¹⁷ dogma is the root of all ecclesiastical life, of discipline and of worship. Worship is developed out of the doctrine of faith; in the liturgical prayers, in the rites and ceremonies of the Church the truths of Catholic faith find their expression, and can be established and proved therefrom.¹⁸ But the more fixed, unchangeable and inviolable the liturgical formula of prayer is, the better it is adapted to preserve intact and to transmit unimpaired the original deposit of faith. Therefore, all the primitive liturgies proclaim and prove that our faith is in perfect harmony with that of the first ages of the Church.

c) Unity of liturgical language and the consequent uniformity of divine worship form, finally, a strong bond for uniting indissolubly the churches dispersed all over the world, among themselves and with their common centre the Roman Church, the chief and Mother-Church of them all. The bond of a universal language of worship, which embraces the head and the members of the Church, supports and promotes everywhere the unity and the common life and operation of the Church. History confirms this; for it proves that a difference of liturgies, that is, the introduction of national languages into the liturgy, frequently gave or threatened to give rise to heresy and schism. We need only recall to mind the eastern nations, which, for the most part, have a ritual of their own and in the liturgy make use of a language different from the Latin.

While, therefore, the use of the various national languages for divine service is peculiar to the sects and to national churches, the use of the Latin as the common language for divine worship harmonizes perfectly with the essence, the object and the workings of the Catholic Church. In her bosom we behold how the Holy Spirit has “gathered all the nations from out of the babel of tongues into the unity of faith.” Being formed of “all nations and tribes and peoples and tongues,” she constitutes but one family of God, one kingdom of Christ, a kingdom not of this world, but exalted above every nation of the earth. Therefore, it is proper that the Church, when celebrating divine worship, when offering the divine Sacrifice, should make use not of the language of some one single country or nation, but of a language that is universal, consecrated and sanctified. Thus at the altar it is a figure of the heavenly Jerusalem, where all the angels and saints in unison (*una voce*) sing their “Holy, holy, holy” and Alleluia.

Source

<http://www.archive.org/details/holysacrificeofm00gihrial>

¹⁶ Cum *legem credendi statuatur lex supplicandi*, proindeque libri liturgici non minus doctrinae fontes sint quam pietatis, summopere optandum est, ut, quemadmodum per fidei unitatem miro splendore lucet Ecclesia, ita per ritus et precum uniformitatem omnium oculis effulgeat. Ideoque eandem ac Ecclesia Romana, omnium Ecclesiarum magistra materque, fidem habentes, eandem disciplinam et eundem officii divini modum habeamus. (Concil. prov. Aquens. a. 1850, tit. XI, cap. 2. Collect. Lacens. IV, p. 1004.)

¹⁷ Cfr. Zaccaria, Bibliotheca ritualis I, diss. 2. De usu librorum liturgicorum in rebus theologicis. Lapini, La Liturgia, p. 2, lezion. 15 18.

¹⁸ Hence the theological axiom: *Legem credendi lex statuit supplicandi*, regarding which De la Hogue (Tract, de Eccles. c. 5, q. 1) writes: Merito quidem urgetur ad permulta dogmata confirmanda. Sic ex exorcismis supra baptizandos, confirmatur peccati originalis dogma; ex doxologia, qua terminantur omnes psalmi, doctrina mysterii Trinitatis; ex ritu externo adorationis Eucharistiae exhibitio realis Christi praesentia; ex omnibus orationibus necessitas gratiae ad bonum operandum; ex precibus, quae ab antiquioribus saeculis pro defunctis funduntur, dogma purgatorii. In his et similibus causis, ubi ex mente Ecclesiae et publico omnium fidelium sensu, tam notoria est arctissima, quae inter universalem praxim Ecclesiae et dogma reperitur connexio, non minus vere quam energice dicitur: *Lex orandi, lex credendi*.