

In Defense
of Latin
in the Mass

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of Latin
in the Mass

THE CASE FOR THE CHURCH'S
TIMELESS LITURGICAL LANGUAGE

BY

POPE BENEDICT XIV

TRANSLATED BY

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FOREWORD BY

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TAN Books
Gastonia, North Carolina

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Translated by Fr. Robert Nixon, OSB

Cover design by David Ferris—www.davidferrisdesign.com

Cover image: Ceremony held in the Cappella Paolina, Vatican by Francesco Piranesi, after Louis Jean Desprez, 1787. The Met Museum. Public Domain.

ISBN: 978-1-5051-2803-1

Kindle ISBN: 978-1-5051-2804-8

ePUB ISBN: 978-1-5051-2805-5

Published in the United States by

TAN Books

PO Box 269

Gastonia, NC 28053

www.TANBooks.com

Printed in India

*For all flesh is as grass; and all the glory thereof
as the flower of grass.*

*The grass is withered, and the flower thereof
is fallen away.*

But the word of the Lord endureth for ever.

—1 Peter 1:24–25

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Foreword

THE ROMAN CHURCH has taken great care to preserve Latin in her liturgy throughout the ages. Pope Benedict XIV's defense of Latin in the liturgy is not an anomaly but a link in a golden chain of such statements. Notable among them are the Ecumenical Council of Trent in 1562 and Pope Pius VI in 1794,¹ when condemning the Jansenist Council of Pistoia. Latin's importance in the liturgy continued to be reiterated well into the twentieth century, notably by Pope Pius XII² and Pope John XXIII.³

Benedict XIV, however, goes into much greater detail than these others. John XXIII, for example, was more preoccupied by using Latin in seminary studies, pausing only briefly to note that bishops should "be on their guard" against those criticizing "the use of Latin in the teaching of the higher sacred studies or in the Liturgy." Pius XII, similarly, had merely dismissed vernacularization as an "innovation." On the eve of the final assault on the use of the Latin Church's ancient liturgical language, its defense was not well-articulated.

Benedict XIV's argument reverently starts from the words of the Council of Trent, which states, baldly, "it

¹ In his bull *Auctorem Fidei*.

² In his encyclical *Mediator Dei* (1947), no. 59; cf. no. 108.

³ In the apostolic constitution *Veterum Sapientia* (1962).

has not seemed expedient to the Fathers, that [the liturgy] should be every where celebrated in the vulgar tongue.”⁴

Why has it not seemed expedient to the Fathers of the Council of Trent to have the Mass translated? Benedict XIV cites the overwhelming variety of vernacular languages: “Vernacular languages are not proper to nations and peoples alone, but differ significantly from city to city and village to village.” The true pastoral care here should be noted: the attempt to provide a genuinely vernacular liturgy to Europeans in the sixteenth or eighteenth century would have been as impossible as the attempt to do so today in a country with a large number of dialects, such as Nigeria. In both cases, hundreds of vernaculars compete for attention, far exceeding the Church’s resources in terms of translators or linguistically qualified priests. It is inevitable, indeed, that when the Missal is translated into African and other less well-known languages, it can end up being made not from the official Latin text but from another vernacular Missal, such as an English one: a translation of a translation. Even using this expedient, only a tiny minority of African languages are reached, leaving vast numbers of African Catholics to experience the Mass in the former colonial language.

Did the Protestant reformers, who condemned the Church for failing to provide the liturgy in the

⁴ Council of Trent, Session 22, Chapter V, 1562. Pope Benedict XIV does emphasize, however, that preaching should be done in the vernacular to explain the rites to the faithful.

language of the people, not care that their own liturgical books were incomprehensible to many of the less well-educated people for whom they were provided? It seems not. The English of Cranmer and the King James Bible, in a London/Kentish dialect larded with archaisms, must have been almost as incomprehensible for sixteenth-century speakers of Yorkshire dialect as it was for speakers of the Celtic languages then widely used in Cumbria, Wales, and Cornwall, not to mention Ireland and Scotland. As for the High German used by Luther, the language of the court, it was and has continued to be incomprehensible to many Germans.

The fact is that the Protestant reformers were engaged in an elite project, asserting the prerogatives of local elites against the international prestige and authority of the papacy.

It is often said that the Latin of the early Church was simply the language of the common people. This statement is inaccurate. The Vulgate Bible and liturgical Latin established a specialized sacred register with a distinct vocabulary replete with archaisms, new coinages, and idioms carried over from Hebrew and Greek. Furthermore, as Pope Benedict XIV points out, the Church made no attempt to translate the liturgy into the minority languages of the Western Roman Empire. He cites Saint Augustine on the widespread use in North Africa of Punic, once spoken by the Carthaginians. Indeed, there is evidence of persisting minority languages from many parts of the Western Empire, just

as there is of non-Greek speaking communities in the East. Later, Saint Patrick introduced the Latin Mass to Ireland while Saint Boniface brought it to Germany. Latin eventually became incomprehensible to people even within the old borders of the Roman Empire, and the Council of Tours responded in the ninth century (Pope Benedict reminds us) by commanding priests to preach in the vernacular.

Practical considerations, such as the multiplicity of vernacular languages, were not the only ones at the root of the reluctance of the Latin Church to translate the liturgy, even (as Pope Benedict emphasizes) in the context of major new mission territories such as those of the Slavs and the Chinese, despite acknowledging that in principle vernacular liturgies are possible. The deeper reason is only hinted at by Pope Benedict when, considering the possibility that parish priests be tasked with translating the Missal into local dialects, he remarks that “such a procedure would be totally absurd and wholly unworthy of the dignity of the Mass.”

Yes, it is about the dignity of the Mass.

It is not just a matter of the accuracy and stability of the texts but of their “dignity” in a wider sense. The Missal has a greater dignity and elicits greater reverence in the worshipper if it is celebrated in a language which is itself holy, set aside for sacred uses.

This point is elucidated in the other work included in this volume, the text of the Franciscan Hierotheus Confluentinus, who points out the value of Latin for

the “reverence and dignity” of the Mass. If it were in the vernacular, by contrast, he points out that worshippers would “regard this venerable Sacrament with less awe.”

This debate over whether to use the vernacular or Latin in the liturgy is not trivial. It is of the deepest importance. It is not simply related to the Mass but has a connection intimately with our devotion to and worship of the Blessed Sacrament, the source and summit of our faith. It is interesting to see how the debate on the use of Latin has evolved over time, especially among the Petrine Office. It is an irony that the same man who most clearly wrote this point into the papal magisterium was also personally responsible for the almost complete disappearance of Latin as a liturgical language: Pope Paul VI. He remarked, in a general audience address, “The introduction of the vernacular will certainly be a great sacrifice for those who know the beauty, the power and the expressive sacrality of Latin. We are parting with the speech of the Christian centuries; we are becoming like profane intruders in the literary preserve of sacred utterance.”⁵

Tragically, Pope Paul VI failed to see that a greater degree of word-by-word comprehension could not compensate for a decline of devotion, despite having made precisely this very argument in an earlier document. Specifically, his 1966 apostolic letter *Sacrificium Laudis*, which was addressed to religious superiors: “It

⁵ November 26, 1969.

is to be feared that the choral office would turn into a mere bland recitation, suffering from poverty and begetting weariness, as you yourselves would perhaps be the first to experience. One can also wonder whether men would come in such numbers to your churches in quest of the sacred prayer, if its ancient and native tongue, joined to a chant full of grave beauty, resounded no more within your walls.”⁶

It is for us, half a century later, to deliver faithfully to future generations a liturgical tradition which gives the Church’s inexpressibly sacred rites a language fitting to them, a language that, by its “concise, varied and harmonious style, full of majesty and dignity,”⁷ vividly conveys to us the liturgy’s beauty and grandeur.

Let us be edified, dear reader, by the words of our forefather in the faith, Pope Benedict XIV, and be enriched by the Roman Church’s sacred language in furthering our reverence for the liturgy.

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⁶ Translation by Fr. Thomas Crean, OP.

⁷ Pope Pius XI, apostolic letter *Officiorum Omnium* (1922).

Translator's Note

POPE BENEDICT XIV (1675–1758), while unfamiliar to most contemporary Catholics, is a figure of immense importance in the post-Tridentine Church. Born to a noble family in Bologna, and baptized as Prospero Lorenzo Lambertini, he soon distinguished himself for his piety, humility, diplomacy, and scholarship. As a cardinal and pope, he was instrumental in implementing the reforms of Trent and reinvigorating Thomistic theology. As an author and scholar, he was, and still remains, far more prolific than any other pontiff in history, with his *Opera Omnia* filling many weighty tomes and being published in numerous editions.

Until now, his works have remained untranslated and inaccessible to Anglophone readers. The present short treatise is taken from his *De Sacrosancto Missae Sacrificio Libri tres* (Three Books on the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass). This highly influential and popular work was published in at least ten separate editions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In these pages, Benedict XIV offers a convincing defense for the use of Latin as the normative liturgical language in the Mass of the Roman Catholic Church. Moreover, Benedict XIV was fully aware of the various dissenting opinions on this topic, which had arisen primarily as a result

of the Protestant schism. Interestingly, the objections to the use of Latin in the liturgy in the eighteenth century differ very little from those which continue to be voiced in our own times. His responses are offered with unwavering charity and reasonableness, and are supported by his own vast erudition, keen insight, and detailed knowledge of the tradition and Church history.

In this booklet, the translator has added footnotes and short commentaries in order to clarify the arguments presented and to provide context which might not be obvious for the modern reader. Included also as an appendix is the essay on the use of Latin in the Mass by Hierotheus Confluentinus, the provincial of the Capuchin Franciscans in Germany (1682–1766). This magisterial discourse offers a clear summary of the reasons for the use of Latin in the liturgy and cogent responses to the most common objections to it. An introductory discussion of the question of the lawfulness of the continued use of Latin in the liturgy and the canonical status of the Missal of Pius V is also included.

In studying this work, it is important to note that the arguments and responses offered by the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XIV, are still valid since they emerge either from theological truth, history, or reason, all of which—like the sacred liturgy itself—are impervious to arbitrary and capricious alteration and to the changing fashions and passing trends of the times.

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The Question of the Lawfulness of the Continued Use of Latin in the Liturgy, and the Canonical Status of the Missal of Saint Pius V

THE QUESTION OF the lawfulness of the continued use of Latin in the liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church may, at first glance, appear to be an uncomplicated one. A simplistic approach would be to say, “The pope is the supreme ruler of the Church. Therefore, whatever the current pope says on the matter answers the question. Rome has spoken—the question is answered!”

However, such an approach is not entirely satisfactory, nor accurate. For the pope himself exercises his power only in, and by virtue of, his communion with the other bishops of the Church (Canon 333§2). This communion, if it is to be complete, is necessarily both *synchronic*, embracing the college of bishops at any given time, and *diachronic*, embracing the college of bishops throughout all of history. This later aspect, diachronic communion, includes communion with his predecessors in the Petrine office, or, in other words, continuity with the rulings and determinations of previous popes.

For this reason, the pope himself is bound by the authentic and long-established traditions of the Church.

Any new decrees or decisions of the Church are necessarily interpreted through the lens of existing traditions, and also circumscribed by and contained within such traditions. A “hermeneutic of continuity” is thus always implicit, and, as Canon 25 states, “*Consuetudo est optima legum interpret*” (Custom is the best interpreter of the law).

Moreover, within the juridical model of the Roman Church, long-established practices and traditions are understood to have the status of law. Thus a new *motu proprio*, decree, or bull does not have the power to invalidate a long-established practice. This is expressed clearly and unequivocally in Canon 28: “*Lex non revocat consuetudines centenarias aut immemorabiles*” (The law does not revoke practices which are centuries old, or existing from times immemorial). It could be argued that the use of Latin in the liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church is perhaps the primary and most exemplary case of those venerable customs or practices which are “centenarias aut immemorabiles,” and therefore not able to be revoked by a simple legislative act.

It is pertinent to note that the Roman Catholic Church is essentially identical with, and identifies itself canonically as, the *Ecclesia Latina* (the Latin Church) (Canon 1). It is therefore clear that to prohibit the use of Latin in the Roman Catholic (or Latin) Church would be, in a sense, to deny its very nature

and identity. Indeed, the Second Vatican Council recognized this as a manifest fact, declaring that “linguae latinae usus, salvo particulari iure, in Ritibus latinis servetur” (the use of the Latin language, notwithstanding [any] particular right, is to be retained in the Latin rite). One might say that it is self-evident that the Church of the Latin rite (i.e., the Roman Catholic Church) should use Latin as its principal and normative liturgical language since this is constitutive of its identity. If it ceases to use Latin in this manner, it ceases *ipso facto* to be the “Latin Church.” Of course, this does not exclude the use of the vernacular—but such use, however extensive it may be, always remains a permitted exception rather than a norm.

The issue of the canonical status of the Missal authorized by Pope Saint Pius V following the deliberations of the Council of Trent is one which is of some importance in the life of the contemporary Church. In the bull *Quo primum* issued on July 14, 1570, Saint Pius V declares unequivocally:

In order that this Missal may be used in singing or reciting the Mass in any churches whatsoever without any scruple of conscience of fear or punishment, sentence or incursion of censure, we grant and concede, by our apostolic authority and according to the present tenor, that it may henceforth be followed in every respect, and may freely and lawfully be used—*indeed perpetually*. . . . *We simi-*

larly decree and declare that no one should be forced or coerced to alter this Missal, by any person whatsoever; and that this present decree cannot ever be revoked or modified, but shall forever remain valid and always stand in its full force.

Can such permission and authorization to use the Tridentine Missal, once granted in a manner which is so expressly and emphatically perpetual and irrevocable, ever be validly or meaningfully rescinded? Was Saint Pius V perhaps somehow speaking prophetically when he wrote the above lines?

This question calls for much deep and serious reflection in our present, troubled times. May the Spirit of Truth guide us.

**IN DEFENSE OF LATIN IN
THE MASS**

(taken from *De Sacrosancto Missae
Sacrificio Libri tres*)

by Pope Benedict XIV

1

A refutation of the view that the Mass being celebrated in Latin prevents the faithful from understanding its meaning

Translator's Commentary

Pope Benedict XIV here notes that the use of Latin is the norm and consistent practice of the Western Church, which is essentially synonymous with the Latin Rite of the Catholic Church, or the Roman Catholic Church. He notes that the objection to Latin on the grounds that it prevents the faithful from understanding the meaning of the liturgy is specious. On the contrary, he points out that the Council of Trent has specifically directed all priests to provide instruction and explanations in the course of the liturgy so that the faithful may be fully aware of the sacred actions' meaning. If this directive of Trent is adhered to by priests, the objection of the difficulty in understanding is unfounded.



AS FAR AS language is concerned, in the Western Church, the Mass is celebrated in Latin. It is a most presumptu-

ous and impudent calumny, often uttered by those who object to the Latin Mass, that this practice results in the people not understanding or appreciating the liturgy.

The fact that this contention is false is clearly demonstrated by the Council of Trent. For in Session XXII, *On the Sacrifice of the Mass*, chapter VIII, the fathers of the council mandated that:

Although the Mass contains within itself great instruction for the people, it does not appear to the council fathers that it is fitting for it to be celebrated in the vernacular. On the contrary, the ancient rites of the Church—as approved and practiced by the Holy Roman Church, which is the mother and teacher of all others—are to be retained. But, lest the sheep of Christ should be left hungry, and the children be deprived of bread while there is no one to break open the mysteries of the Faith for them, this holy synod decrees to all pastors and those with the care of souls that they should frequently explain those things which are read in the Mass. They should do this within the celebration of the Mass itself, either themselves or through others. Especially on Sundays and feast days, they should endeavor to expound the mystery of the most holy sacrifice of the Mass.