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LATIN
AS A LITURGICAL LANGUAGE

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From the General Introduction

These papers, commissioned by the International Federation *Una Voce*, are offered to stimulate and inform debate about the 1962 Missal among Catholics ‘attached to the ancient Latin liturgical tradition’, and others interested in the liturgical renewal of the Church. They are not to be taken to imply personal or moral criticism of those today or in the past who have adopted practices or advocated reforms which are subjected to criticism. In composing these papers we adopt the working assumption that our fellow Catholics act in good will, but that nevertheless a vigorous and well-informed debate is absolutely necessary if those who act in good will are to do so in light of a proper understanding of the issues.

The authors of the papers are not named, as the papers are not the product of any one person, and also because we prefer them to be judged on the basis of their content, not their authorship.

The International Federation *Una Voce* humbly submits the opinions contained in these papers to the judgement of the Church.

Latin as a Liturgical Language: Abstract

Latin is the normative language of the liturgy, in the Latin Church, and also of the great majority of the Church’s teaching documents and administration, since very early times. The teaching of Blessed Pope John XXIII in *Veterum Sapientia* emphasises the value of Latin as universal, unchanging, and dignified. The rise of migration in recent decades has given particular value to the universality of Latin. It remains the essential language of the Latin Church’s culture and spirituality. Its use in the liturgy, even where the congregation may have little knowledge of the language, can give rise, as Blessed Pope John Paul II expressed it, to a ‘profound sense of the eucharistic mystery’, since it can assist in communicating the grandeur and importance of the liturgical action. Particularly in the context of a proper liturgical formation, far from being a barrier to participation, therefore, Latin can be an aid to it. Pope Benedict XVI has asked that seminarians be taught to celebrate the liturgy in Latin, noting that the Faithful can be taught many texts and chants.

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FIUV Position Paper 7: Latin as a Liturgical Language

Introduction

1. The relationship between the liturgical tradition of the West and the Latin language is extremely close. The translation of the normative Latin text of the Roman liturgy into a variety of vernacular languages for optional use, as the Ordinary Form does, is quite different from the establishment of, for example, Coptic or Church Slavonic as liturgical languages proper to local churches, as has happened among the Oriental Churches.¹ The language of the liturgy of the Latin Rite remains, properly speaking, Latin, even in the Ordinary Form.²
2. The purpose of this paper is to give an account of the value, not only of Latin in the normative texts of the liturgy, but also in its actual celebration. Many Catholics are today unfamiliar with the idea of a Latin liturgy, and the arguments in favour of it need to be rehearsed. The question of replacing the Latin lections with vernacular translations, which is permitted in Low Mass (*Missa lecta*) by the Instruction *Universae Ecclesiae*,³ demands separate treatment. The more fundamental question is addressed here, of the very notion of a non-vernacular liturgical language, Latin.
3. The Latin liturgy of the West seems to have been composed, rather than translated from another language, at an early though uncertain date.⁴ The use of Latin as a sacred language, with Greek and Hebrew, has been connected with its use on the titulus of the Cross since the time of Hillary.⁵ As noted in Positio 5,⁶ the Roman liturgy made use of a distinctive, Christian, Latin which, while unlike the highly complex Latin of the great pagan writers, was by no means the Latin spoken in the street, which itself would have varied from one part of the Roman Empire to another. Nor were all the inhabitants of the Western Empire fluent in Latin, particularly outside the cities.⁷ The Church's Latin was universal, as opposed to local,

¹ Cf. the Instruction *Varietates legitimae* (1994) 36: 'The process of inculturation does not foresee that creation of new families of rites; inculturation responds to the needs of a particular culture and leads to adaptations which still remain part of the Roman Rite.' The quoted passage ends with a footnote reference to Bl. Pope John Paul II, discourse to the plenary assembly of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Jan 26, 1991, No. 3: A.A.S. 83 (1991), 940 (in part) 'Nor is it intended to mean inculturation as the creation of alternative rites.'

² Cf Code of Canon Law 928: 'The eucharistic celebration is to be carried out in the Latin language or in another language provided that the liturgical texts have been legitimately approved.' ('Eucharistica celebratio peragatur lingua latina aut alia lingua, dummodo textus liturgici legitime approbati fuerint.')

³ *Universae Ecclesiae* 26

⁴ Certainly before the end of the Papacy of Pope Damasus (366-384); cf. St Ambrose *De Sacramentis* 4.5.21ff.

⁵ Hillary of Poitiers (d.366) 'the mystery of God's will and the expectation of the blessed kingdom is preached especially in these three languages. This explains the action of Pilate: he wrote down Lord Jesus Christ King of the Jews in these three languages' (Hil.-Pict., *Tractatus super Psalmos*, prol. 15 (CSEL 22.13)). Cf. John 19:19-20: 'And Pilate wrote a title also, and he put it upon the cross. And the writing was: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS. This title therefore many of the Jews did read: because the place where Jesus was crucified was nigh to the city: and it was written in Hebrew, in Greek, and in Latin.'

⁶ FIUV PP 5: 'The Vulgate and the Ancient Latin Psalters'

⁷ St Augustine 'It is an excellent thing that the Punic Christians call Baptism itself nothing else but salvation, and the Sacrament of Christ's Body nothing else but life.' ('Forgiveness and the Just Deserts of Sins, and the Baptism of Infants', 1.24.34); cf. St Augustine Epistle 84 and 209.3, on the need for Punic-speaking clergy.

but also removed from the most readily comprehensible language of the people. It was with the liturgy in this language that St Patrick evangelised the non-Latin speaking Irish, St Augustine of Canterbury the English, and St Boniface the Germans.

Practical advantages of Latin

4. Reflecting on the tradition of the use of Latin, Blessed Pope John XXIII quoted Pope Pius XI in summarising its practical advantages:

in order that the Church may embrace all nations, and that it may last until the end of time, it requires a language that is universal, immutable, and non-vernacular.⁸

Were the Church simply to employ current, local languages, the vast periods of time and geographical areas which the Church, uniquely among human institutions, must compass, would create confusion. While the Latin of administration and theology has developed over the centuries, it is still the case that Latinists today are generally able to understand the writings of Churchmen from every age of the Church's existence, and from every part of the world, when they wrote in Latin. This universality is no less valuable in the liturgy, since it enables us to share the same liturgy, or the closely related Rites and Usages found in the Latin Rite, across all ages and countries. The Extraordinary Form is thus free from the need for periodic re-translation, and serves to emphasise the unity of the worshipping Church across time and space.

5. In the context, particularly, of mass migration, which has created both individuals and communities not at ease with the official language of their adopted country, as well as the enduring problem of minority languages, the Extraordinary Form enjoys the advantage described by Bl. John XXIII:

Of its very nature Latin is most suitable for promoting every culture among diverse peoples, for it gives no rise to jealousies, it does not favour any one group, but presents itself with equal impartiality, gracious and friendly to all.⁹

It is in this way a natural bulwark against the danger, noted in the Instruction *Varietates legitimæ*, that the multiplicity of languages in worship should lead to

a Christian community becoming inward looking and also the use of inculturation for political ends.¹⁰

⁸ Bl. Pope John XXIII Apostolic Constitution *Veterum Sapientia* 4: 'Etenim Ecclesia, ut quae et nationes omnes complexu suo contineat, et usque ad consummationem saeculorum sit permansura..., sermonem suapte natura requirit universalem, immutabilem, non vulgarem.' Quoting Pius XI, Apostolic Letter *Officiorum omnium* (1922) 452. Cf. Pope Pius XII Encyclical *Mediator Dei* (1947) 60: 'The use of the Latin language, customary in a considerable portion of the Church, is a manifest and beautiful sign of unity, as well as an effective antidote for any corruption of doctrinal truth.' ('Latinae linguae usus, ut apud magnam Ecclesiae partem viget, perspicuum est venustumque unitatis signum, ac remedium efficax adversus quaslibet germanae doctrinae corruptelas.')

⁹ *Veterum Sapientia* 3. 'Suae enim sponte naturae lingua Latina ad provehendum apud populos quoslibet omnem humanitatis cultum est peraccommodata: cum invidiam non commoveat, singulis gentibus se aequabilem praestet, nullius partibus faveat, omnibus postremo sit grata et amica.'

Latin and Christian Culture and Devotion

6. Pope Paul VI went beyond such practical considerations when he wrote, of Latin:

For this language is, within the Latin Church, an abundant well-spring of Christian civilisation and a very rich treasure-trove of devotion.¹¹
7. Latin is a ‘well-spring of Christian civilisation’ because it is the language of (almost all) the liturgical texts of the Latin Church—from the Roman Canon to the texts of Gregorian Chant and the Orations composed over the centuries—and also of the theological, and many other cultural works (such as musical compositions), which influenced and were influenced by them. Thus the Latin liturgy is of incomparable worth in Christian culture, for which no translation, however good, can substitute.¹²
8. It is a ‘very rich treasure-trove of devotion’ for the related reason that it is in great part through meditating upon Latin texts, scriptural and liturgical, and Latin commentaries upon those texts, that the Latin Church has developed her spiritual life over the centuries.¹³ Again, a translation cannot substitute for the very words of the Latin Psalter or Song of Songs which gave rise to the commentaries of St Augustine of Hippo and St Bernard of Clairvaux, and so many others, which have such importance in the theology and spirituality of the Latin Church.

The use of Latin in the Liturgy

9. The question remains of the value for the Faithful, who may have no education in the Latin language, of hearing the liturgy in Latin. That it does have value is consistently implied by the teaching and practice of the Church. Following Bl. Pope John XXIII’s affirmation of

¹⁰ Instruction *Varietates legitimae* (1994) 49. For the context of this quotation, see Cf. *Varietates legitimae* 7: ‘In some countries, however, where several cultures coexist, especially as a result of immigration, it is necessary to take account of the problems which this raises (cf. below No. 49).’ Referring again to this problem, the Instruction goes on (49): ‘In a number of countries there are several cultures which coexist and sometimes influence each other in such a way as to lead gradually to the formation of a new culture, while at times they seek to affirm their proper identity or even oppose each other in order to stress their own existence. It can happen that customs may have little more than folkloric interest. The episcopal conference will examine each case individually with care: They should respect the riches of each culture and those who defend them, but they should not ignore or neglect a minority culture with which they are not familiar. They should weigh the risk of a Christian community becoming inward looking and also the use of inculturation for political ends.’

¹¹ Pope Paul VI Instruction *Sacrificium laudis* (1968): ‘in Ecclesia Latina christiani cultus humani fons uberrimus et locupletissimus pietatis thesaurus’.

¹² This point was stressed by the 1971 petition to Pope Paul VI by intellectual and cultural figures from England and Wales, which led to the ‘English Indult’ of 1971. It read in part: ‘The rite in question, in its magnificent Latin text, has also inspired a host of priceless achievements in the arts—not only mystical works, but works by poets, philosophers, musicians, architects, painters and sculptors in all countries and epochs. Thus, it belongs to universal culture as well as to churchmen and formal Christians.’

¹³ This is so in the context of the traditional Latin of the Roman liturgy, including the Vulgate and the ancient Latin Psalters: see Position Paper 5, ‘The Vulgate’.

Latin in the liturgy,¹⁴ the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, states simply:

Particular law remaining in force, the use of the Latin language is to be preserved in the Latin rites.¹⁵

Pope Benedict XVI wishes seminarians not only to understand Latin for their studies, but to be able to employ it in the liturgy when they are ordained, noting that the Faithful themselves can be taught Latin prayers and chants.¹⁶

10. It should first be observed that, as Pope Benedict XVI indicates, frequent attendance at Latin liturgies enables the Faithful to become familiar with many texts, and in this way to understand them even without recourse there and then to a translation. Even a limited liturgical catechesis ensures that the Faithful have seen translations of familiar texts such as the Gloria, and reflected upon them. Familiarity with a widening repertoire of liturgical texts will enable the Faithful to pick up Latin words and phrases to identify what a text is about, where it comes in the liturgy, and to remind them what they may have learned about it.
11. The importance of liturgical formation is much emphasised in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.¹⁷ The Extraordinary Form benefits from a rich tradition of hand missals and other aids to following, and learning about, the liturgy. The commentaries on the liturgy of the Church's

¹⁴ Bl. Pope John XXIII *Veterum Sapientia* 11, 2: 'In the exercise of their paternal care they [sc. Bishops and Superiors General] shall be on their guard lest anyone under their jurisdiction, eager for revolutionary changes, writes against the use of Latin in the teaching of the higher sacred studies or in the Liturgy, or through prejudice makes light of the Holy See's will in this regard or interprets it falsely.' ('Paterna iidem sollicitudine caveant, ne qui e sua ditione, novarum rerum studiosi, contra linguam Latinam sive in altioribus sacris disciplinis tradendis sive in sacris habendis ritibus usurpandam scribant, neve praeiudicata opinione Apostolicae Sedis voluntatem hac in re extenuent vel perperam interpretentur.')

¹⁵ Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 36, 1: 'Linguae latinae usus, salvo particulari iure, in Ritibus latinis servetur.' Cf. 101. 1: 'In accordance with the centuries-old tradition of the Latin rite, the Latin language is to be retained by clerics in the divine office. But in individual cases the ordinary has the power of granting the use of a vernacular translation to those clerics for whom the use of Latin constitutes a grave obstacle to their praying the office properly.' ('Iuxta saecularem traditionem ritus latini, in Officio divino lingua latina clericis servanda est, ... singulis pro casibus, iis clericis, quibus usus linguae latinae grave impedimentum est quominus Officium debite persolvant.')

¹⁶ Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* (2007) 62: '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.' ('In universum petimus ut futuri sacerdotes, inde a Seminarii tempore, ad Sanctam Missam Latine intellegendam et celebrandam nec non ad Latinos textus usurpandos et cantum Gregorianum adhibendum instituatur; neque neglegatur copia ipsis fidelibus facienda ut notiores in lingua Latina preces ac pariter quarundam liturgiae partium in cantu Gregoriano cantus cognoscant.') Cf. Canon 249: 'The program of priestly formation is to provide that students not only are carefully taught their native language but also understand Latin well' ('Institutionis sacerdotalis Ratione provideatur ut alumni non tantum accurate linguam patriam edoceantur, sed etiam linguam latinam bene calleant') Cf. also the decree on Priestly Training of the Second Vatican Council, *Optatum totius* 13: concerning seminarians, 'Moreover they 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.'

¹⁷ *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 41-46

year produced by Prosper Guéranger, Bl. Ildefonso Schuster, and Pius Parsch, are monuments of tradition worthy of study for their own sakes.¹⁸

12. It is worth noting also that the relatively limited number of liturgical texts in the 1962 Missal is a great advantage to the Faithful assisting at it in Latin. The limited size of the lectionary, the frequent use of a limited number of Commons of the Saints and Votive Masses, the repetition of the Sunday Mass on ferial days, the limited number of Prefaces, and so on, make a thorough familiarity with the Missal a real possibility for ordinary Catholics.

13. Furthermore, the use of Latin can be a direct aid to participation in the liturgy. Blessed Pope John Paul II made this point in the context of the experience of the Faithful in participating in the ancient liturgical tradition, in his Apostolic Letter *Dominicae Cena*e (1980):

Nevertheless, there are also those people who, having been educated on the basis of the old liturgy in Latin, experience the lack of this “one language,” which in all the world was an expression of the unity of the Church and through its dignified character elicited a profound sense of the Eucharistic Mystery.¹⁹

This dignity and universality of Latin noted by Bl. Pope John XXIII²⁰ are, indeed, essential components of the ‘sacrality’ noted of the Extraordinary Form by Pope Benedict XVI.²¹ The necessity of the liturgy using a language set apart at least to some degree from the ordinary spoken language has been emphasised repeatedly in recent decades.²²

14. This is a point taken up in Position Paper 3.²³ The Extraordinary Form has many features which may seem to be barriers to comprehension, including ritual complexity, the hiddenness of some ceremonies, the fact that some texts are read silently, and above all the use of the Latin language.²⁴ These are not, in fact, barriers to participation, if we think of participation

¹⁸ Dom Prosper Guéranger, Abbot of Solesmes: ‘L’Année Liturgique’, in French, published in 15 volumes between 1841 and 1844 (published in English as ‘The Liturgical Year’ in 1949). Bl. Ildefonso Schuster, Archbishop of Milan: ‘Liber Sacramentorum’, in Italian, published in 5 volumes in 1919 (published in English as ‘The Sacramentary’ in 1924). Fr Pius Parsch: ‘Das Jahr des Heiles’, published in 3 Volumes in 1923 (published in English as ‘The Church’s Year of Grace’ in 1953). These works, particularly those of Guéranger and Parsch, were and are widely disseminated. The text of ‘L’Année Liturgique’ is available at least in part online in French (<http://www.abbaye-saint-benoit.ch/gueranger/anneliturgique/index.htm>) and English (<http://www.liturgicalatina.org/lityear/>).

¹⁹ Bl. Pope John Paul II Apostolic Letter (1980) *Dominicae Cena*e 10: ‘Non tamen desunt qui, secundum veteris liturgiae Latinae rationem acriter instituti, defectum huius “unius sermonis” percipiunt, qui in universo orbe terrarum unitatem Ecclesiae significat et indole sua dignitatis plena altum sensum Mysterii eucharistici excitavit.’

²⁰ Bl. Pope John XXIII, again quoting Pius XI, speaks of its ‘concise, rich, varied, majestic and dignified features’ (‘Neque hoc neglegatur oportet, in sermone Latino nobilem inesse conformationem et proprietatem; siquidem loquendi genus pressum, locuples, numerosum, maiestatis plenum et dignitatis (4) habet, quod unice et perspicuitati conducit et gravitati.’) *Veterum Sapientia* 3, quoting Pius XI, Epist. Ap. *Officiorum omnium*, 1 Aug. 1922: A.A.S. 14 (1922), 452-453.

²¹ Pope Benedict XVI Letter to Bishops accompanying the Motu Proprio *Summorum Pontificum* (2007)

²² Instruction *Varietates legitimae* (1994) 39: The language of the liturgy ‘must always express, together with the truths of the faith, the grandeur and holiness of the mysteries which are being celebrated.’ The Instruction *Liturgiam authenticam* (2001) 27 urges the development of ‘a sacred style that will come to be recognised as proper to liturgical language.’

²³ FIUV PP 3: ‘Liturgical Piety and Participation,’ especially 8-10

²⁴ The claim that these features are barriers to participation, made at the Synod of Pistoia, was condemned by Pope Pius VI in *Auctorem Fidei* (1794) 33: ‘The proposition of the synod by which it shows itself eager to

in terms of the impact of the liturgy on the worshipper, in creating a 'profound sense of the Eucharistic mystery'. They are all part of a whole which is effective in communicating, non-verbally as well as verbally, the transcendent significance of the liturgical action. Of all the aspects of the ancient Latin liturgical tradition which contribute to this, the use of Latin seems both the most obvious and the most important.

remove the cause through which, in part, there has been induced a forgetfulness of the principles relating to the order of the liturgy, "by recalling it (the liturgy) to a greater simplicity of rites, by expressing it in the vernacular language, by uttering it in a loud voice"; as if the present order of the liturgy, received and approved by the Church, had emanated in some part from the forgetfulness of the principles by which it should be regulated,—rash, offensive to pious ears, insulting to the Church, favourable to the charges of heretics against it.'