# THE CASE FOR LATIN

By R. H. RICHENS

NO HAPPENING is more significant in the history of the Catholic Church in this century than the massive loss of faith by those better instructed in it. The causes are not the concern of this article. What is of relevance is that faith is no longer nor can be, except in some rare enclaves, the air we breathe. For a country cemented into a single community by its communications media, the norm is scepticism or indifference about God, eternal life and moral absolutes. For Catholics, the situation has been complicated by the impact of the Second Vatican Council, simultaneously infusing new life into the Church and causing many to pass beyond its bounds. The act of belief has had to become a positive affirmation rather than the passive acquiescence in a group attitude that was once possible, and the chasm of unbelief now yawns before the feet of even the most devout.

By attending and participating at Mass, the Catholic affirms his christian identity, makes an act of faith in the utterly unseen mysteries of his religion, co-operates with the celebrant and community of the faithful in obeying the behest of Jesus that these things shall be done in perpetuity, and receives the inpouring of grace that is assured to him. How things are done is secondary to the fact that they are done; but since grace builds upon nature, it is reasonable that the sacred action should be done in such a way that the natural faculties of those engaged in making the tremendous affirmations that christianity demands are strengthened and energized.

Everyone is now aware that Mass is celebrated in catholic churches under a wide variety of forms, in various languages, with diverse musical renderings, with great differences in the psychological and sociological variables that characterize a worshipping community, and with a wide diversity of theological nuance.

One such form of celebration, highly distinctive not only in its language but in the whole range of its accompaniments, is the Latin Mass. It has become sufficiently unknown to many Catholics, though not as unfamiliar in this country as in most countries abroad,

to justify some general account of its salient features, and this is what, in brief, this article attempts to do.

The language of the liturgical texts is a Latin of a particular sort, or rather of a group of closely related varieties of Latin. The principal of these is the Latin of the Vulgate Bible, a straightforward, vivid and homogeneous language, reflecting the outstanding literary powers and range of scholarship of St Jerome. Its antecedents have been uncovered, in particular by Professor C. Mohrmann.[1] They include the Old Latin Bible, written in a very special and colourful style, drawing on the vernacular idioms of western Europe and North Africa, and with numerous borrowings or adaptations of greek terms occurring in the Septuagint, occasional hebrew words, and newly elaborated latin abstract words for whose development Tertullian was largely responsible. It might also have had roots in jewish targum Latin, probably used to translate the hebrew biblical lessons before the jewish reaction against non-hebrew languages in the synagogue swept it away. Many of the old latin texts remain in the plainsong settings, where a wise tradition has decreed that once a text is set to plainsong it remains inviolate. Very different from the biblical texts and from each other are the prayer and preface texts; the former terse, condensed and elaborately structured, the latter florid, evocative and exuberant. Both have rhetorical features that relate them to the more literary language of their time. The latin metrical hymns, based on accent instead of vowel length, and ultimately of syrian inspiration, represent a further important latin style, and the post-renaissance hymns represent yet another. Though their styles are divergent when examined closely, their overall impact when associated in the Mass is essentially unitary.

Although it is possible to consider modern liturgical texts apart from the musical settings which may be attached to them, this is not the case in any of the traditional christian liturgies, all of which were chanted as far back as we can go. So, the latin liturgy is essentially a musical liturgy, with its readings and prayers chanted, and its other texts set to plainsong or later to polyphonic music. Again, though the musical styles may range in time from pre-christian, as with the jewish substrate of plainsong,[2] to twentieth century, the

[1] Succinctly summarized in *Liturgical Latin: its origins and character* (London, 1959).

[2] The jewish origin of many plainchant items and the highly significant liturgical interaction between the early Latin and contempoary synagogue liturgies are the theme of E. Werner's book, *The Sacred Bridge* (London, 1959).

music when properly chosen and arranged has a unitary impact, and the marriage between word and sound is intimate indeed.

There is also an important concordance between the latin texts, the accompanying ceremonial action and the ancillary liturgical acts. There is no disparity, as there is when a modern vernacular is used, between the use of Latin and the roman style of hand-washing, the style of liturgical vestments, or the use of incense. They are all of a piece.

Some clarification is unfortunately necessary concerning the various current attitudes favouring Mass in Latin. Confronted both with contemporary disbelief and the changes in the liturgy promulgated after the Council, a small sector of the Church has reacted into fundamentalist traditionalism, one of the tenets of which is strict adherence to the form of Mass-celebration general in the Western Church since the Council of Trent: now, but not previously, designated the 'Tridentine Mass'. The view here, as in all forms of fundamentalism, proceeds from a number of starting points, none of which is rationally defensible. One is the inviolability of the sixteenth-century papal bull *Quo primum*, promulgating the tridentine rite, a tenet betraying a poor understanding of the nature of theological development, of the relationship between theology and liturgy, and of the nature of theological and liturgical legislation. Fundamentalism in a liturgical context is no new occurrence, and is frequently known as the 'Old Believer' syndrome.[3] It has taken some bizarre and unpleasant forms among Catholics in the post-conciliar period: refusing to celebrate Mass in a building 'defiled' by the new Mass rite; visionaries passing on messages that heaven demands Mass in Latin, since 'Latin is the odour of authenticity, the odour to hammer heresies'. No further attention will be directed to this view.

The distinctive tenet of a second view is that the values of the whole latin liturgical tradition are enshrined in a special way in the latin Mass as it was between the Council of Trent and Vatican II. There is much confused thinking among the supporters of this second view, and even greater confusion in the minds of others. Opinion polls, for instance, usually ask those interviewed to opt between Mass in English and the tridentine rite, as if there were no contemporary rite in Latin. Also, now that the tridentine rite is

[3] Admirably described by Miss H. Geogiadis in 'Ecumenism and the "Old Believers" ', in *Chrysostom*, 3 (1973), pp 145-50.

receding into the past as a normative celebration, even its celebrants and ministers have become uncertain or forgetful over details; and the result is an unhappy mixture of the contemporary rite with it.

The third view, as will have emerged, is appreciation of the latin liturgical tradition as a whole, from its origin under the Roman Empire to the latin form of the post-conciliar rite, of which the various vernaculars now in official use are translations. It is the latin form of this rite that supporters of the third view would wish to see widely celebrated. There is indeed no hindrance to its celebration in many regions, where bishops have made some guarded remarks in its favour. Repressive action against Mass in Latin has certainly occurred elsewhere — some american bishops have banned it — largely, it would seem, because it has come to be identified in their eyes with tridentine traditionalism. Corporate support for the third view has been mainly the work of the Association for Latin Liturgy,[4] the last edition of whose Latin Mass Directory showed that some four hundred churches in England have a regular Sunday Mass, some of which at least is in Latin. The Association takes a broader view than current religious authority on the range of the latin liturgical forms that should be permitted; and, while accepting that the current rite should be the norm, would welcome occasional celebrations of the various local rites, Sarum, York and Hereford, or at least the use of some of their more interesting features on appropriate liturgical occasions.

It is now time to enquire as to how the particular features of the latin Mass support and strengthen the faith of those frequenting it. Christianity, however unpalatable this fact might be to some liturgists, is a learned religion. No one who scans, say, the notes to the Jerusalem Bible can be in any doubt about that. The discourses of Jesus, however simple they may be as moral directives, are expressed in the complex rabbinical thought-forms current then and thereafter; and they put a crown, so to speak, on a style of allusive prophetic utterance long traditional in Judaism. A learned language is consequently required to carry its message, and it must be sufficiently powerful as an intellectual instrument to permit the development of doctrine in whatever new secular culture christianity enters. In this respect, one might consider that there is not a great deal to choose between Latin and Greek. It is well known, too, that when Christianity was introduced into so-called barbarian

[4] Cf *Notitiae* (1975), pp 26-28.

cultures, the language of these had to be modified, grecized or latinized, by borrowing words or constructing new words on models provided by these languages, to accommodate the new religious ideas.

It is also desirable that a christian religious language express something of the quality as well as the substance of the languages, Hebrew and Aramaic, in which the christian revelation and its antecedents in Judaism were first expressed. Here Latin may have some edge over Greek since it is, overall, more earthy, reflecting in this respect the concrete rather than abstract nature of hebrew and aramaic religious language. This is particularly evident, for example, in the Roman Canon, where the Eucharistic mystery is expressed in quite concrete imagery. The divine offering is carried to the heavenly altar by the *Angelus Domini*. Analogies are found with the sacrifices of Abel, Abraham and Melchisedech. Much of the Roman Canon is composed in the legal terminology of the courts, not the abstract terminology of the philosophizing theologian. All this represents a type of thinking anterior to the philosophizing on the nature and rôle of the Sacred Persons in the Trinity, which finds its later expression in the epiclesis of the oriental liturgies.[5] In brief, the latin liturgy is older than and closer to the thought-forms in substance and form to the sources of revelation.

Two aspects of liturgical Latin that contribute to its special fitness as a language for communicating the christian revelation are also relevant. The first of these is its free word order. For St Jerome, the word order of the biblical texts was a sacred mystery, and the various anagrammatic and charismatic devices of hebrew poetry are part of the quality of these passages, their form communicating and solemnizing the high nature of the content. Now in contrast to ciceronian and recent translating theory, both the septuagint translators and the old latin translators working on the Septuagint went to great lengths to preserve the word order and consequently the word-patterns of the original Hebrew. It is only necessary to superpose any verse of the psalms in Hebrew, Greek and Latin to see that this is so. But turn then to the biblical translations in most modern european vernaculars, and most particularly, English. These are constrained tightly by word-order rules that may

[5] The high antiquity of the special features of the Roman Canon emerges in several articles by G. G. Willis, notably, 'God's Altar on High', in *The Downside Review*, 90 (1972), pp 245-50; and 'Melchisedech, the priest of the most high God', *ibid.*, 96 (1978) pp 267-80.

not be broken. The newest translations substitute the word order forced upon them by the nature of their language, and though much of the basic sense of the Hebrew may be retained by skilful translation, the quality of the original as expressed in its word patterns is lost.

The second structural linguistic feature of liturgical Latin is constituted by sound patterns, both by distribution of accent and consonantal groupings. The former is particularly characteristic of the leonine collects, which carefully conform with the rules governing the rhetorical *cursus*. The second is particularly evident in the prefaces, contributing to their evocative quality.[6]

The rhythmic qualities of liturgical latin texts, greatly intensified when set to plainchant, have led to a comparison with the mantras of Hinduism, in which the sacred text and chant not only seal off the outer world of spiritual distraction, but energize the soul to spiritual ascent. The danger is that the senses may be too efficiently lulled, and the worshipper sink into the calm of detachment without corresponding positive spiritual awareness. For this reason, some variety of style or a suitable deployment of punctuating formulae during Mass is useful. The subtle variation of an essentially rhythmic soundflow of the latin texts and their musical settings is in contrast to the harshly unrhythmic quality of much contemporary liturgical English, the irritant effect of which is often all the greater when the disturbance is minute.[7]

It is commonplace among contemporary liturgists that modern vernacular texts are not all appropriate for musical rendering.[8] Many would reduce all scripture lessons to speech; some recommend a spoken creed. This is a very different situation from the fully musically orchestrated latin liturgy, where every text meant to be heard has its musical setting. It is considerations of this sort which tell against the not infrequent introduction of english hymns into otherwise latin Masses. The very different quality of both texts and music for the english and the latin parts of such a celebration lower their combined impact.

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[6] Structural linguistic analysis of liturgical Latin is still in its infancy. A beginning has been made by L. G. Jones and M. ó Coingeallaig, 'A poetic dimension in liturgical prose', in *Orientalia Christiana Analecta*, 195 (1973), pp 321-35.

[7] The great importance of rhythm and rote in liturgical celebrations is one of the themes of D. Martin's article, 'Profane habit and sacred usage', in *Theology*, 82 (1979), pp 83-95.

[8] *De formulis melodiis musicis ditandis in editionibus vulgaribus Missalis Romani*, in *Notitiae* (1975), pp 129-32.

The vernacular Mass is the form of celebration that has been adopted by the vast majority of english churches. It needs no description as no Catholic can be unfamiliar with it. Among the virtues acclaimed for it, and one lacking for most people in the latin Mass, is instant comprehension of its religious texts. However, it has been argued that a constant serious defect of contemporary english liturgical texts is that, though they present a passable translation of the root meaning of their originals, the quality of the originals — the technical term 'theme' is used — has been lost.[9] What began as a text whose overtones conveyed the solemnity proper to a religious communication, manifesting by implication the truth that the realities of religion transcend sense-experience, ends up as a flat statement of fact, drained of any religious overtone. Religious statements, since they concern reality beyond perception, need to be expressed in solemn and symbolic language.[10]

The implication of all this is that the instant comprehension in vernacular celebrations is in the long term delusory, since it engenders a false idea as to the nature of religious statements. Going further, the quality of the latin texts, especially when married to harmonious musical settings, is pre-eminently 'high'. It has already been noted that behind each word of ecclesiastical Latin, their greek and hebrew antecedents are dimly discernible. At no time was liturgical Latin the language of ordinary speech. Least of all today, when the texts have accumulated significance through the long history of the Church, can liturgical Latin be interpreted as any other than a solemn and unique instrument for conveying truths that transcend experience.

Further, the importance attached to instant comprehension reveals a certain anti-intellectual bias in much current liturgical thinking. The assumption seems to be that ordinary people cannot or should not be expected to receive their religious formation except via immediately comprehended religious statements. This is strange when one recalls the veiled imagery of the New Testament parables, the recondite nature of the catechetical discourses of the early Church Fathers, or even the fascination of children for special words or private languages. The latin Mass does not, in practice, constitute an obstacle in the way of understanding their faith for those

[9] Cf Dr R. M. Toporeski, in 'The language of worship', in *Communio*, 4 (1977), pp 226-53.
[10] Dr D. Brewer, in his article, 'Liturgy: need and frustration', in *Theology*, 88 (1977), pp 173-77, shows how modern liturgical texts tend towards an empty non-language as far as religious efficacy is concerned.

who frequent it. The fact that some liturgists think, on theoretical grounds, that it should, is hardly relevant. In former days, the widespread use of latin-english missals — a use not confined to an intellectual élite — brought a detailed understanding of the latin text within reach of anyone who so wanted. A similar missal for the new latin rite is certainly needed.

There is the additional problem of liturgical language from the viewpoint of functional variety. It is a matter of observation that people use quite different functional varieties of their own language for different occasions, such as general conversation, playing tennis, making love and so on. Throughout history, religious activity has always developed a highly distinctive functional variety of language, and liturgical Latin, with its highly specialized vocabulary and special linguistic forms, is no exception. What is exceptional in the history of religion, and a matter of some disquiet, is that current liturgical English appears to have been composed in the functional variety proper to ordinary conversation: with the danger that the truths of religion come to be felt as of the same order as, and no more than, the realities of ordinary life. It is worth mentioning, in this context, that Jesus used Hebrew rather than the vernacular Aramaic in the formulation of the 'Our Father' and the institution of the Eucharist.[11] The use of Latin by the english catholic martyrs at the time of their execution, when the immanence of an agonizing death would have banished any affectation in language, illustrates in yet another way the instinctive use of a special religious language, in this case that sanctified by millenial tradition in western Christianity.

A further feature of liturgical Latin is its permanence and virtual freedom from linguistic decay, qualities highly appropriate for words and actions centring around immutable truth. It is easy enough to see what happens to vernacular words employed in liturgical use. Let us take the word 'father', used for the First Person of the Trinity and constantly recurring in the liturgy. It has come about that the weakening of family life, and the relegation of fathers in secular life to fun-figures in cartoon strips, has greatly undermined the effective functioning of this word in a religious context. From such degenerative drift, the source latin word *pater* is exempt. Liturgical Latin

[11] Reasons for concluding that the 'Our Father' was composed in Hebrew have been assembled by J. Carmignac, *Récherches sur le 'Notre Père'* (Paris, 1969). J. Jeremias, in *The eucharistic words of Jesus* (London, 1969), presents the case for supposing that the words of institution of the Eucharist were in Hebrew.

is, so to speak, encapsulated, and unaffected by the process of deterioration to which the vernaculars are subject. Hence, unlike them, it is perennially capable of expressing eternal verities. We all hope that the vernacular liturgies will be improved so that they do effectively sustain faith. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion, however, that the vernaculars are at a real disadvantage compared with a traditional sacred language, in respect of the support they offer at depth to religious belief.[12]

A remarkable feature of the latin Mass is its ritual impersonality. In a vernacular Mass, the personal idiosyncrasies of the presiding celebrant have become of utmost importance. The difference is so great that Professor G. B. Harrison has, with psychological if not theological truth, asserted that the new Mass rite 'is a fundamentally different kind of liturgical communication from the old'. Liturgists now insist on the importance of the celebrant's technique, warning how the liturgy will lose in effect if the celebrant lacks the charisma of communication or the ability to preside. Naturally, since the liturgist's ideal celebration demands an exceptional celebrant, it is rarely come by. So the laity suffer, at times acutely, from lack of the protective impersonality afforded by the latin celebration.

Something of the roman quality of *gravitas* has always attached to the latin Mass, and its lack or diminution in the vernacular Mass is responsible for much of the unease felt by some individuals. Two features of the vernacular especially offend. The first is the dictated responsorial psalm, an infantile exhibition as customarily rendered. It is ironic that the latin gradual offers the only rubrical escape. The second is the diverse spontaneities and impromptus which the rubrics of the new rite condone. In theory, these need not be confined to the new rite in English,[13] but fortunately all save the least sensitive of celebrants realize that the sacrality of the latin celebration goes ill with off-the-cuff remarks in the vernacular. It is a melancholy truth that extempore utterance in Church is not normally from the Holy Spirit, as is plain from the dispiriting history of extempore prayer in the Free Churches. It has been the recurring preoccupation of this article to consider how the liturgy, whether in Latin or English, supports belief. Banal remarks do not.

A most important respect in which the latin liturgy offers what the typical vernacular Mass does not is its protection of the private

[12] The unavoidable deterioration of vernacular liturgy has been analysed by D. Birch, 'Sense and word in liturgical language', in *New Blackfriars*, 59 (1978), pp 176-83.
[13] 'The Mass in English', in the *London Tablet* (1974), pp 901-11.

space of each individual member of the congregation.[14] It is the social anthropologist who now emerges as the defender of human liberty against the innovating liturgist. For personal fulfilment and equilibrium, there must be a balance between openness to communication and the inviolability of the inner citadel. The extreme horizontalism of so much contemporary vernacular liturgy is liable to invade the private space of the individual worshipper, where, before, the distancing effect of a language not in everyday use, and the hieratic ceremonial associated with it, guaranteed the integrity of individual personality. It is a commonplace now that the older liturgy was at fault in its excessive verticality. The pendulum has swung too far, and the vernacular Mass is too often destructive of true liberty of spirit.

The neutrality of Mass, when celebrated in Latin, to the clash of language groups is widely recognized. In England, we have been spared such incidents as the french-flemish brawls in Belgium through having a single vernacular language. The principle that everyone has the right to hear Mass in his own tongue does not work out well in the world at large. In addition, and in some ways in conflict with the notion that every vernacular has the right to be used, we find political pressures with which ecclesiastical authority is liable to associate itself. Thus we find Gallego sanctioned at Mass in Galicia but not Provençal in France,[15] apparently because the one but not the other has governmental recognition. The consequences of abandoning the one form of Mass that is not potentially divisive at the political level are proliferating.

It is, however, the scandal of the particularity of the time and place of the Incarnation and of the ensuing providential history of the Church that gives the latin Mass a status all of its own. The Incarnation occurred in the context of an aramaic culture, using Hebrew as its special religious language, and with many traces in its religious writings of religious ideas going centuries back to the civilizations of Sumer, Assyria and Canaan. The early Church spread first in a jewish context, then soon into the syrian and greek civilizations and thence into the roman. The use of Latin in the liturgy, first in North Africa and with Ireland later playing an important formative role,[16] became universal in the West; and it is

[14] Cf D. Martin, *art. cit.*

[15] Cf 'Sulla circolare per le lingue liturgiche', in *Notitiae* (1976), pp 315-23.

[16] Summarized by J. H. Crehan, in 'The liturgical trade route: east to west', in *Studies* (1976), pp 88-89.

through a Church whose members worshipped together thus over the centuries that we are bound to our origins. And in respect of our capacity to believe, this is of capital importance. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus, which, if we cannot accept, 'our faith is vain', occurred nearly two thousand years ago. The time-gap strains our faith, and anything that can enforce the conviction that what we do now at Mass is what happened then is of paramount importance. It is a rôle of religion to bind its adherents to their own corporate past.[17] This is done by the latin liturgy to a superlative degree. By being aware in depth that he belongs, the believer is upheld in face of the hostility of the world, and of the doubts and hesitations that we carry within us.

One consequence of the centuries-long continuation of the latin liturgy is its extraordinary richness in text, music and association. It is paradoxical that, concurrently with the latin liturgy being set aside in so many churches, liturgical studies have heightened our understanding of the richness of the latin tradition beyond measure. It is paradoxical likewise that the liturgical music of a great many of our churches has been reduced to a bundle of hymns trivial in text and tawdry in setting, at the same time as musicological research has brought to light a musical corpus, so vast in extent and so eminent in quality that it overreaches the entire output of all other categories of western music.

These remarks on the aesthetics of the latin liturgy prompt the consideration that the entire drift of this article has been misorientated. The liturgy has been treated here, as in so many liturgical articles, as it affects the assembled congregation at the natural level. But since Mass is pre-eminently a giving of thanks, should we not rather enquire as to how thanks are most appropriately rendered to God? If thanks are most fully rendered by offering the best we have, then surely, in the West, we find ourselves under an obligation, almost, to celebrate the sacred rites *more Latino. Vere dignum et iustum est, aequum et salutare, nos tibi semper et ubique gratias agere.*

[17] This line of thought has been developed by A. Wilkinson, in 'Requiem for Anglo-Catholicism', in *Theology*, 81 (1978), pp 40-45.