The historical evolution of the liturgical language in the Roman rite

*Latin: vehicle of unity between peoples and cultures*

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The cultural and political unity of the Mediterranean world was a providential factor in the diffusion of the Christian faith. In particular, the diffusion of the Greek language in the urban centers of the Roman Empire favored the proclamation of the Gospel. The Greek spoken in the East and West was not the classic idiom, but rather the simplified Koiné, the common language of the various nations of the eastern part of the Mediterranean world: Greece, Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt.

Koiné Greek was also the language of the urban proletariat of the West that had emigrated from the eastern territory of the Empire. Rome had become a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural city. In it lived there also lived a permanent Hebrew population, that seems to have spoken principally Greek. The language of the first Christian community in Rome was Greek. This is shown by Paul’s Letter to the Romans and by the first Christian literary works that saw the light in Rome, for example the First Letter of Clement, The Pastor of Hermes and the writings of Justin.

In the first two centuries there arose several popes with Greek names and the Christian burial inscriptions were composed in Greek. During this period, Greek was also the common language of the Roman liturgy. The shift to Latin did not begin in Rome, but in North Africa, where the converts to Christianity were in the majority natives of Latin mother language rather than Greek speaking immigrants. Around the middle of the third century this transition was much advanced(...).

This notwithstanding Greek continued to be used in the Roman liturgy, at least at a certain level, until the second half of the 4th century (...).

*The passage from Greek to Latin in the Roman liturgy came gradually and was completed under the pontificate of Damasus I (366-384). From that point the liturgy at Rome was celebrated in Latin, with the exception of a few reminders of the more ancient use, as the Kyrie eleison in the Ordo and the readings in Greek in the papal Masses (...).*

Christine Mohrmann suggests that the baptismal liturgy was translated into Latin from the 2nd century. There can be no certainty on this point, but it is clear that there was a period of transition and that it was long.

Mohrmann introduces the useful distinction between, first, "prayer texts", where the language was above all a means of expression, second, texts, "destined to be read, the Epistle and the Gospel", and, third, "confessional texts", as the Creed. In the prayers texts we find primarily modes of expressing ourselves; in the others primarily forms of communication. Recent research on language and rite, as the work of Catherine Bell, confirm the intuition of Mohrmann that the language has different functions in different parts of the liturgy, that go beyond mere communication or information. These theoretical reflections help us to understand the development of the first Roman liturgy: those parts in which the elements of communication were prevalent, as the reading of Scripture, were translated first, while the Eucharistic prayer continued to be recited in Greek for a much longer period.

"Sociolinguistics" – a relatively new academic discipline – warns us to the fact that the selection of one language in respect on another is never a neutral or transparent question. As a consequence it is important to consider the change from Greek to Latin in the Roman liturgy in its historical, social and cultural context.
The history of antiquity has indicated that the formation of liturgical Latin was part of a wide ranging effort of Christianization of the culture and of the Roman civilization.

In the second half of the 4th century the more influential bishops in Italy, above all Damasus at Rome and Ambrose at Milan, committed to Christianizing the dominant culture of their time. In the city of Rome there was a strong pagan presence and especially the aristocracy continued to adhere to the old customs, even if nominally they had become Christians. Rome was no longer the center of political power, but its culture continued to have roots in the mentality of its elites.

The 4th century is now considered a period of literary rebirth, with a renewed interest in the "classics" of Roman poetry and prose. The emperors of the 4th century cultivated this Latinitas, and there was also a recovery of Latin in the East. With characteristic tenacity, Rome maintained its ancient traditions.

In relation to which, the popes of the late 4th century promoted a project conscious and inclusive of appropriating the symbols of the Roman civilization on part of the Christian faith. Part of this attempt was the appropriation of the public space by means of impressive building projects (...). The formation of the Latin liturgy was part of this all inclusive effort to evangelize the classical culture.

Christine Mohrmann recognizes in this the fortuitous coming together of a rebirth of the language, inspired by the newness of revelation, and of a stylistic traditionalism strongly rooted in the Roman world. Liturgical Latin has the Roman gravitas and avoids the exuberance of the style of prayer of the Eastern Christians, which is found also in the Gallican tradition. This was not an adoption of the "vernacular" language in the liturgy, given that the Latin of the Roman Canon, of the collects and of prefaces of the Mass, were remote from the idiom of the common people. It was a strongly stylized language that an average Christian in Rome of late antiquity would have understood with difficulty, especially considering that the level of education was very low by the standards of today. Moreover the development of the Christian Latinitas would have made the liturgy more accessible to the people of Milan or Rome, but not necessarily to those whose mother tongue was Gothic, Celtic, Iberian or Punic.

It is possible to imagine a western Church with local languages in its liturgy, as in the East, where, joined to the Greek, were also used Syrian, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian and Ethiopian.

In every way the situation in the West was fundamentally different; the unifying force of the papacy was such that Latin became the sole liturgical language. This was an important factor favoring ecclesiastic, cultural and political cohesion.

The Latin liturgy was from the beginning a sacred language separated from the language of the people; and the distance became greater with the development of the national cultures and languages in Europe, not to mention mission territories.

"The first opposition to the Latin language," Christine Mohrmann wrote, "coincided with the end of Medieval Latin as a "second living language", that was replaced by a truly 'dead' language, the Latin of the Humanists. And the opposition of our days to liturgical Latin has something to do with weakening of the study of Latin – and with the tendency toward 'secularism' "("The Ever-Recurring Problem of Language in the Church", in Études sur le latin des chrétiens, IV, Rome, 1977).

The Second Vatican Council wished to resolve the question by extending the use of the vernacular in the liturgy, above all in the readings (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy Sacrosanctum Concilium, art. 36, n. 2).
At the same time, it underlined that "the use of the Latin language … is to be preserved in the Latin rite" (Sacrosanctum Concilium, art. 36, n. 1; cfr also art. 54). The council Father did not imagine that the sacred language of the western Church would be replaced by the vernacular.

The linguistic fragmentation of Catholic worship in the post-conciliar period has been pushed so far that the majority of the faithful today can only with difficulty recite a Pater noster together with one another, as can be noted in the international reunions in Rome or Lourdes.

In an epoch marked by great mobility and globalization, a common liturgical language could serve as a vehicle of unity between peoples and cultures, besides the fact that liturgical Latin is an unique spiritual treasure that has nourished the life of the Church for many centuries. Finally, it is necessary to preserve the sacred character of the liturgical language in the vernacular translation, as the instruction of the Holy See Liturgiam authenticam noted in 2001.

Translation provided by Father Anthony Forte.