

Is Latin a sacred language?

This is the ninth [in a series of articles](#) exploring the gift and promise of Vatican II's liturgical reforms.

In previous articles, we have dealt with complex questions related to the sacred liturgy. As the series draws to a close, I want to turn to an especially thorny question. Is Latin within the Roman rite a sacred language? And relatedly, should we be using Latin more often in the liturgical rites?

The significance of the Latin language to the development of Roman Catholicism is impossible to deny. Early Christianity's *lingua franca* was Greek. But Christianity's mission to all the nations led to literature composed in other languages, including Syriac and eventually Latin.

In the second and third centuries, Tertullian was responsible for developing a specifically theological language in the Latin tongue. Latin, as the language of the Roman Empire, caught on. Ambrose of Milan's commentaries on the Eucharistic liturgy for the recently baptized testifies to the richness of Latin liturgical language. By the dawn of the fifth century, the basic linguistic structure of the Roman Canon (what we call Eucharistic Prayer I) had become normative.

Latin's importance to Roman Catholicism grew as the Church expanded throughout Europe. Liturgical books – called sacramentaries – were used in mission territories such as Frankish territories where Latin was not initially the mother tongue. Many of the Latin prayers, as found in the post-conciliar Roman rite, find their roots in the first millennium.

Evolution of language

As a language, Latin allows for a succinctness of thought. The heavy use of the subjunctive in liturgical Latin is part of

the theology of the rite. We do not demand things of God but rather approach the triune God with appropriate reverence. Liturgical language is full of grammatical forms in which we ask God to deign to respond to our needs. Courtly language, captured in the Latin, is part and parcel of the Roman rite.

Further, the music of the Roman rite is connected to the Latin language. The chant tones of the Roman rite depend on the Latin text. Yes, you can translate the text, putting it into English. But it's difficult to do.

By the late medieval period, it was clear that language was developing yet again. The Roman rite was celebrated in Latin, but there is evidence of mixed Latin and vernacular in popular literature. Christmas carols would move back and forth from Latin to Old German or English. Preaching increasingly occurred in the vernacular. And there were Mass primers written in the vernacular, at least for the literate, intended to assist lay men and women to assist at Mass.

The use of the vernacular in sacred liturgy would eventually become a point of contention during the Reformation. The Roman Catholic Church, in fact, was aware that many rites needed to be translated into the vernacular. Consent in marriage, for example, should be in the vernacular so that both parties can understand what they are pledging. But the Council of Trent also affirmed the use of Latin in the rites of the Church, especially the Eucharist. Roman Catholics, one may be surprised to learn, were not alone in this. Martin Luther developed a Eucharistic liturgy in Latin that he expected would be celebrated in university contexts, where Latin was still the *lingua franca*.

A change to the vernacular

The early liturgical movement of the 20th century never thought that the whole liturgy would be translated into the vernacular. People should learn the Latin of the liturgy,

including the chants. But in the mid-20th century, at least some in the liturgical movement, including H.A. Reinhold, argued for the use of the vernacular in the liturgy. It made sense, because it enabled the riches of the Church's prayer to become accessible to a wider audience.

The Second Vatican Council, as is clear from a reading of [*Sacrosanctum Concilium*](#), also did not imagine a universal embracing of the vernacular. It opened the door to bishops asking for a more extensive use of the vernacular. Still, most of the bishops immediately asked for the vernacular. After all, many of the bishops themselves were not fluent in Latin. And they received that permission.

I'm glad for it. Learning the sacred liturgy in English – my own *lingua franca* – has been integral to my spiritual development. I can pray the *Pater Noster* in Latin, French, Greek, Syriac and English. But the language that is part and parcel of my daily life, the one where I find the most meaning, remains English. It's my mother tongue. And praying the liturgy in my mother tongue allows me to commune with God in a way that touches the depth of my being.

An opportunity

But we haven't answered the fundamental question. Was translation an abandonment of a sacred liturgy? I want to answer, no. Strictly speaking, Catholicism has never stated that a single language is the "sacred one." Since the Word became flesh, dwelt in a specific time and space, we dare to claim that every language is acceptable for the proclamation of the Gospel. We have never, it should be said, stated that a single language is the "official" language of the Scriptures. The Bible is dependent on its original languages (Hebrew, Greek and even Aramaic). It has been translated into every known language, but this does not change that it is the inspired word of God.

In this way, the translation of the sacred liturgy is not a rejection of a sacred language. English has a sacred register. Spanish has a sacred register. German has a sacred register. It is possible to pray in each of these languages to the living God.

At the same time, the post-conciliar Church has perhaps forgotten the gift of Latin. Catholicism, as Henri de Lubac noted, is not a mere religion. It's the daring claim that all humanity can find a place in Christ, that all are called to the Supper of the Lamb. We are to join in one single voice in praise of the living God.

Is there not a wisdom, then, to be able to share a common tongue with one another? Latin, after all, is our common language (at least in the Roman rite). We each need to give ourselves over to a language like Latin, to learn what it means to sing to God, *Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus*. When we gather as a Church – especially in the United States, where there are a variety of languages – could we not each give ourselves over to sing a common language that has been shared by the universal Church?

In fact, I wonder if our total rejection of Latin (our study of the language and our learning of the chants of the Church) has done more harm than good. Again, I'm not saying that we need to require Latin. But can't we teach liturgical Latin in at least some of our academic settings? Can't kids learn to sing the chants of the Church including the *Salve Regina* and the various propers of the Mass?

I hope so. With the liturgy in the vernacular, now is the right time to form people in the Latin roots of the Roman rite. Not because Latin is more sacred than any other language, but because Latin is a shared language in the Roman Catholic Church – one where all of us can learn to lift up our hearts to the living God.

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