

*Did the bishops at Vatican Council II  
intend the Mass  
to be entirely in the vernacular or not?*

## **The plight of Latin**

*By Kieron Wood*

# The plight of Latin

■ An item in the Irish Catholic newspaper of January 17, 1991 tells of an American priest celebrating the 75th anniversary of his ordination.

The article says that Fr. Joseph Baptist Greiner had "received permission to say the Mass in Latin for private services after his retirement in 1956, since his years of active ministry were *prior to Vatican II changes calling for Masses to be celebrated in local languages.*"

The fact that a Catholic newspaper can print such unadulterated poppycock is an indication of the extent of the ignorance about the position of Latin in the Catholic Church.

The Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy says: "Particular law remaining in force, *the use of the Latin language is to be preserved in the Latin rites.*" The document goes on to say that, because the use of the mother tongue "may frequently be of great advantage to the people, the limits of its employment may be extended." Note that the document does not oblige Bishops to impose a vernacular liturgy on Catholics; it simply gives permission for a limited use of the mother tongue.

The document adds that, "in Masses celebrated with the people, a suitable place *may* be allotted to their mother tongue. Nevertheless steps *should* be taken so that the faithful may also be able to say or sing together in Latin those parts of the Mass which pertain to them."

That pastoral teaching harmonizes

with the doctrinal teaching of the Council of Trent which stated: "If anyone says . . . that the Mass ought to be celebrated in the vernacular only . . . : let him be anathema."

In the period after Vatican II, liturgists were well aware that the Council had not given carte blanche for the use of the vernacular. Fr. Frederick McManus, in his 1967 book *Sacramental Liturgy*, admitted that the Council's limited concession of the vernacular did not apply to Masses celebrated without a congregation.

Fr. McManus further criticized the restrictions of the liturgy document because, he said, "the broadest concession of the vernacular by episcopal authority leaves such prayers as the collect and the postcommunion, which the people should certainly understand, in Latin."

But even today, those who accept the entirety of the Council's views on liturgical language are portrayed as extremists. In a new book, *Roman Catholic Beliefs in England*, published by Cambridge University Press in March 1991, author Michael Hornsby-Smith describes those who seek to retain the Latin Mass as being "of a Lefebvre-type persuasion" and accuses them of rejecting the conciliar reforms.

Did the Bishops at the Council intend the Mass to be entirely in the vernacular or not? The primate of England and Wales, Cardinal John Heenan, on his return from one of the sessions of the Council, told a packed congregation in

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Westminster Cathedral: "There are those who believe that the Council will result in great changes in the liturgy. There are even those who believe that the Council will result in the Mass being said in the vernacular. I want to tell you that this will only happen over the bodies of 2400 Bishops!"

So what happened? Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in his 1986 book *The Ratzinger Report* says: "This is another of those cases which are all too frequent in recent years, where there is a contradiction between, on the one hand, what the Council actually says . . . and on the other hand, the concrete response of particular clerical circles."

#### No steps taken to preserve Latin

In view of the situation of Latin in the Church today, one might be forgiven for imagining that some more recent, more authoritative document banning Latin had superseded the Council constitution,

The present Pope—a zealous supporter of the Council—made his own views known in his 1980 letter on the mystery and worship of the Eucharist. He said: "The Roman Church has special obligations towards Latin, the splendid language of ancient Rome, and she *must* manifest them whenever the occasion presents itself."

Has the Catholic Church fulfilled those obligations? In 1966, the Bishops of England and Wales said "every encouragement should be given to reciting or saying of the ordinary of the Mass of Latin . . . Definite steps must be taken to see that knowledge of the Latin Mass is not lost." Yet no concrete steps were taken to ensure the preservation of Latin in the life of the Church.

In the United States, although the Latin Liturgy Association has the nominal support of 22 "episcopal advisors," the Episcopal Conference has not even given Latin the token support accorded by the English and Welsh Bishops.

According to the latest statistics from the Latin Liturgy Association, 150 churches in the United States offer a weekly Sunday Latin Mass (59 Tridentine and 46 novus ordo), 26 churches offer a fortnightly Latin Mass (17 Tridentine and 9 novus ordo) and a Latin Mass is offered monthly in 72 churches (51 Tridentine and 21 novus ordo). That is a total of 203 churches out of 18,595 Catholic churches in the United States—a little over one percent!

In Ireland, the situation is, if anything, worse. In the Archdiocese of Dublin, which includes about one quarter of the country's Catholics, there are two Latin/English Masses and one Tridentine Mass each Sunday.

Irish seminarian Chris Hayden, writing about seminary formation in the January 1991 edition of the Ferns diocesan bulletin, says: "Latin has fallen on hard times, and the second generation of Latin illiterates is almost grown up. This doesn't seem to be regretted by too many people, and we certainly never hear anything about it."

The jibe about illiteracy was corroborated by events at the World Synod of Bishops in Rome last October when 59 of the Bishops' interventions were delivered in English, compared to only 51 in Latin—the first time there had ever been more English interventions than Latin. When any Bishop addressed the synod in Latin, most of the other Bishops reached for their headphones for a translation. None of the three Cardinal Presidents

spoke extempore in Latin and Cardinal Achille Silvestrini lamented the loss of the Church's official language. Even the Pope joked that "the sin of the synod is that you don't speak Latin."

In a recent edition of the BBC Radio 4 program, *Sunday*, a Carmelite priest who is the principal translator of official Papal documents said that nowadays few Bishops in their 40s or under had a good working knowledge of Latin. Within 20 years, he said, if the Vatican continued to use Latin for its directives, none of the Bishops would understand them!

#### Latin unifies the Church

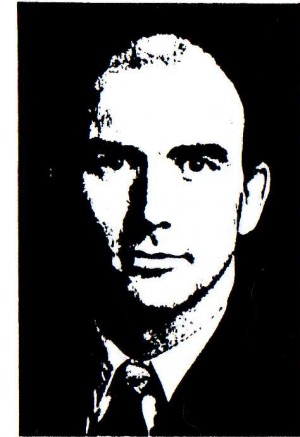
So what are the advantages and disadvantages of using a dead language?

Father Leslie Rumble, in volume one of his *Radio Replies*—aimed at "uninformed Catholics and prospective converts"—says the Church clings to Latin precisely because it is a dead language. "The essential doctrine and significance of Christianity must not change, and the safest way to preserve it intact is to keep it in an unchangeable language.

"Again, a universal Church must have at least her chief form of worship in a universal language. Christ came to save all men (*whoops! another vernacular solacism!*) and wherever a member of the true Church may be in this world, he should be able to find himself at home at the central act of Christian worship. The Mass, being said in Latin, is the same in all lands.

"I myself have said Mass with as many as fifteen nationalities present but, being all Catholics, they were quite at home the moment I turned to the altar and went on with the Mass in Latin."

Fr. Rumble adds that smaller churches which adopted national languages "are



Mr. Kieron Wood is a journalist and former religious affairs correspondent for Ireland's national television and radio network. He is the father of four children and lives with his family near Dublin. Mr. Wood writes for a number of Catholic publications. This is his first article for HPR.

divided from one another, are national in character and are splitting up into innumerable sects as their doctrines change with every change in the sense of modern words."

Cardinal Ratzinger agrees. In *The Ratzinger Report*, he said: "This disappearance of a common liturgical language could possibly increase the centrifugal forces at work in the different Catholic regions."

Universality of language is particularly important in nations divided by their mother tongues. In countries like Belgium where the Flemish are separated from the Walloons by language, in the United States where Spanish is now widely spoken, in Ireland where dissent over Irish Masses has split communities, a universal language is a focus of unity instead of division.

At international shrines and places of pilgrimage, such as Lourdes, Fatima and Rome, the absence of a single liturgical language has caused inconvenience at best and a decline in faith at worst.

How important is the argument about the immutability of Latin? Language is a living thing and words change their meaning with startling rapidity. Thirty years ago, the use of the word "gay" to describe a man would have been taken as a compliment! Although such words may not appear in the liturgy, they point to the danger of using a living and changing language to reflect an eternal and unchanging reality.

### Latin safeguards doctrine

Other religions, too, appreciate the value of an unchanging liturgical language. Christ himself used Hebrew in the synagogue, while his native tongue was Aramaic. The Eastern Churches use old Slavonic in their rites.

And what about the dangers of mistranslation? Although the Mass is now generally celebrated in the vernacular, the official language of the Missal is still Latin, and translations are authorized from the original Latin. In the current English liturgy, there is one outstanding example of dubious translation: the words "pro vobis et pro multis" which occur in the *new* Latin liturgy at the consecration of the chalice are translated into English as "for you and for all (men)." This translation — which is not reflected in *any* New Testament translation — blurs the distinction between the *sufficiency* of Christ's death (by virtue of which all may be saved) and the *efficacy* of his death (by which the effectiveness of Christ's Passion is only communicated to those who are actually saved).

The phrase "for many" is defended by St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Alphonsus Li-guori, Pope Benedict XIV and others, and endorsed by the Catechism of the

Council of Trent which states: "With reason, therefore, were the words 'for all' not used, as in this place the fruits of the passion are alone spoken of, and to the elect only did that bring the fruit of salvation."

The translation of "pro multis" as "for all" also separates Latin-rite Catholics from their Eastern brethren. The first anaphora in the Syro-Malabar rite, for example, says "This is My Blood, of the New Covenant, which is shed *for many* for the forgiveness of sins." The liturgy of St. John Chrysostom has: "Drink of this, all of you, this is My Blood of the New Testament, which is shed for you and *for many*, for the remission of sins." In the Chaldean rite, the priest says "This is My Blood of the new, eternal covenant, the mystery of faith, which is poured out for you and *for many* for the forgiveness of sins." The French translation of the Syrian rite has "Ceci est mon Sang de la Nouvelle Alliance, qui, pour vous et pour un grand nombre (*for many*), sera répandu et donné pour la rémission des péchés et de la vie éternelle."

Recently, in the English *Tablet* magazine, Jesuit priest Fr. Michael Simpson from Clwyd in North Wales began a lengthy correspondence by stating that he felt unable to preside at any Eucharist where Anglicans were unable to receive communion. In support of his argument he quoted the same ICEL translation of the words of consecration! That's how heresies begin.

The mistranslation of the opening words of the fourth Eucharistic prayer in the English Mass — "Father, You alone are God, living and true" — leaves the translators open to charges of the heresy of Arianism!

The benefits of Latin in the maintenance of orthodoxy were stressed by Pope Pius XII in his 1947 encyclical *Mediator Dei*. He said: "The use of the Latin language . . . affords at once an imposing sign of unity and an effective safeguard

against the corruption of true doctrine."

Pope John Paul himself, in his 1980 instruction on norms concerning Eucharistic worship, welcomed the "many positive results of the liturgical reform" including "doctrinal and catechetical enrichment through the use of the vernacular." At the same time he apologized for the "varied and frequent abuses" including "the use of private texts, the proliferation of unapproved Eucharistic prayers, the manipulation of the liturgical texts for social and political ends."

### Interior involvement stressed

Archbishop Edward Cassidy, the head of the Vatican's Council for Christian Unity, during a talk in an Anglican church in Dublin in January 1991, deplored such liturgical abuses. He explained that, during his time as nuncio in Holland, some Catholic priests and Reformed Church ministers shared churches, and would alternate in taking the service every other week. The same congregation would attend both services and receive communion from whichever minister was celebrating. That, said the Archbishop, led to indifference and to anti-ecumenical reaction from liturgical conservatives.

Did any of those abuses happen while the Mass was in Latin? The only example that springs to mind is that of one unwilling curate in a Dublin parish who was "persuaded" by his parish priest to celebrate a scheduled new Latin Mass. He began the "Orate fratres" with the words "Orate, sorores et fratres!"

What are the advantages of the vernacular? That the people might understand the Mass better? Missals with vernacular translations always enabled them to follow the Mass, if they wished.

That the people might participate more fully in the Mass? The Council called for such an active participation, but used the Latin word "actuusus," stressing an *interior* involvement, rather



than "activus" which might have suggested a more *physically* active participation.

There is no doubt that there is an important place for the vernacular in the liturgy — in the readings, for example, which necessarily change from day to day. Those Massgoers unable by reason of age, poor education, sickness or poverty to follow a missal would otherwise miss out on the instruction and spiritual food the readings provide.

There could be a place, too, for the vernacular in the administration of certain sacraments, such as Baptism, where their reception would be enhanced by an understanding of the words and signs.

What, then, are the disadvantages of Latin? That the main areas of growth in the Church are in the Third World where Latin has no roots. The fact is that many Third World Bishops and clergy are competent in Latin and would appreciate a

common liturgical language which avoids problems of tribalism.

The Papal Nuncio to Ireland, Dr. Emmanuel Gerada, made good use of his knowledge of Latin in the 1960s when he was based in Japan. Two of the Japanese Bishops spoke no English or Italian, so he used to converse with them in Latin.

Some argue that Latin would not be understood by the vast majority. But parallel texts and proper catechesis would largely resolve that problem. (Anyway, is a lack of comprehensibility necessarily such a bad thing? The Eucharist itself is a mystery beyond our own understanding. To attempt to express it in our own language leads to the danger of diminishing the truth. The use of a special liturgical language—particularly for the most sacred moments of the Mass—sets the representation of Calvary apart from our humdrum, everyday life and allows us a glimpse of a higher reality.)

Others claim that Latin is anti-ecumenical and repels potential converts to Catholicism. One of England's best-known post-war converts was Douglas Hyde, a former senior British communist. In an anonymous letter to the *Catholic Herald* shortly before becoming a Catholic, he wrote: "At 11:30pm on Christmas Eve, I was twiddling the knob of my radio . . . As I switched from one European station to the next I tuned in to one Midnight Mass after the other. Belgium, France, Germany, Eire, yes, even behind the Iron Curtain, Prague. . . . And the important thing was, it was the SAME Mass.

"I am a newcomer to the Mass but I was able to recognize its continuity as I went from station to station, for it was in one common language.

"This aspect of Catholicism is but a single one and, maybe, not the most important. But I have a strong feeling that

it is precisely the catholicism of the Catholic Church which may prove the greatest attraction, and will meet the greatest need, for my disillusioned generation."

Some say there's no demand for Latin, particularly from young people. Canon Alfred Baldwin, in a letter to the October 1989 edition of the magazine *30 Days*, said: "It is almost 30 years since there were in parish churches regular Latin Masses in the old rite. A new generation has grown up who . . . have never experienced the sacredness and prayerfulness of the Latin Mass. They are a deprived generation and know no better. Of course there is no demand for what they do not know and have never known."

Following the introduction of a Tridentine Mass in Dublin in 1989, reporters for the *Irish Press* newspaper interviewed several young people attending a Latin Mass for the first time.

Schoolboy Peter Donnelly said: "Compared to this, you just don't feel you've got Mass at an ordinary service. It's just dull, a non-event. Latin Mass is more devout, it's easier to pray and there seem to be fewer distractions."

Computer salesman Matthew O'Hanlon, aged 25, said: "The new Mass has developed into a mockery of what it was. It has about as much mystery as watching the Rocky Horror Picture Show for the 157th time."

And Peter Murphy, a 26-year-old self-confessed "Yuppie" said: "More and more people like me are turning towards the Latin Mass. I don't really know the reason; maybe it's disillusionment with modern life or just a desire to return to the more traditional values it represents . . . Anyway, Latin has always been the language of the Church. It's fine to change something if it's for the better, but you can't change or improve on the truth." ■