



Boston Catholic Journal

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GHETTO CATHOLICISM: the Need for Latin in the Mass

It was long overdue.

As Pope John Paul II noted:

"What is urgent is the evangelization of a world that not only does not know the basic aspects of Christian dogma, but in great part has lost even the memory of the cultural elements of Christianity." (January 26, 2004)

With tremendous courage, Our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI, recognized this as well. It was the proverbial elephant in the room that no one wanted to acknowledge and which no one could continue to ignore: the need for the restoration of Latin to the Mass.

Americans --- together with the English speaking world in general --- have always been reluctant to learn another language. The prevailing attitude is one of cultural insolence: "Let the world learn to speak English; we cannot trouble ourselves (or are simply too lazy --- or not bright enough --- or both) to learn another language." Most Europeans will concur, with justifiable resentment, with this perception.

How often have you watched, listened, to a person from Asia, Europe, Africa ... virtually any other country in the world, speak in English (and generally good English) to a television reporter --- and had not asked yourself with verging embarrassment, "Imagine if that were me ...?" How often have you cringed when you listened to the President, or any prominent political figure in any of these parts of the world, answer a reporter *in English* --- when every single President or Senator of the United States requires an interpreter during interviews with foreign correspondents?

Face it. We are either inexcusably lazy, culturally arrogant, or intellectually incompetent.

You choose.

The Holy Father is encouraging a return to the 2000 year historical and intellectual heritage of Catholicism in encouraging a return to the very signature of its identity in the use of Latin in the Most Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

It is a reacquisition of an identity that cannot be expunged from 2000 years of Latin texts, encyclicals, archives, inscriptions, engravings, and every other expression unique to Catholicism --- an identity illicitly (Vatican II never abolished Latin) repudiated only in the last ... mere 40 years.

What is really at the root of this aversion? Our comprehension of the Mass (which so few really comprehend anyway, in any language (see [The Mass: a Primer for Clueless Catholics](#))?)

The readings, the Prayer of the Faithful, the homilies --- all remain in the vernacular. What then is your contention?

We are being asked to learn, or to re-learn, some prayers --- prayers that our mothers and fathers uttered from every generation not just from century upon century, but from millennia past.

That the the Mass is in great need of rehabilitation from "entertainment" presided over by an MC --- often as eager to amuse us as the host of his own personality as to "intrigue" us with something personally anecdotal and all too often utterly irrelevant ... to a focus on the *Sacrifice* of the Mass, apart from which the Mass is senseless --- is unquestionable. Who has not been the sad witness to the Priest as the comedian more eager to solicit laughter than prayers? Who has not heard the uncomfortable laughter of the "congregation become audience" in their attempt to attenuate the embarrassing caricature they witness? "Solemnity" itself has become a "solecism", more likely to invoke derision than devotion. If one cannot see that the nature of language in the Mass --- and in the congregation --- shapes, defines, lends tangible substance to our spirituality, our assessment of ourselves and our assessment of God ... then he is blind. This is why the Mass stands in such dire need of remediation.

The Cenacle ... not Babel

What is more, it is becoming increasingly clear in an increasingly connected and traveled world, that a common tongue in the language of worship is becoming indispensable. When we gather as many nations in the one faith, we *speak* as children of *Babel* and consequently fail to understand what we hear --- *unlike* those who stood before the *Cenacle* when the Apostles first spoke as *one* --- and were understood by *all!*

This is our paradigm! One language ... understood by all!

Anyone who has visited Saint Peter's in Rome can attest to this fact: it is incredibly confusing to find a Mass celebrated in the vernacular of a given country. I had attended a Mass in English celebrated by an Irish Priest when a point came during Communion at which the Hosts had been depleted. *After* Mass, I then had to run around to various *other* Masses being celebrated in various *other* languages to find a Mass at which the Hosts were still being distributed in order to receive Holy Communion myself.

It is a suitably vexing fact that we --- *especially Americans* --- cannot have all things at all times, and most travelers have been to a Mass in which the homily and the Prayers of the Faithful had been in a language not understood. We followed the Mass largely by following the gestures and postures of the people around us, knowing equally, by the gestures of the Priest, what part of the Canon of the Mass was being celebrated. At such times we are struck by the fact that had at least *the Canon of the Mass* been celebrated in a language we *all* understood (not because we are all fluent in Latin, but because we had all routinely attended Mass in Latin) we would have experienced a greater sense of oneness in worship with those around us ... rather than otherness.

What then, I ask again, is your contention?

Are we really afraid that we will lose the spectacle of a congregation turning a full 360 degrees and waving the obsolete "peace sign" of the radical 60's to everyone in back, in front, and to all sides? Will we *really* feel a sense of deprivation that we cannot add our own personal --- and often social --- touch to each warm and fuzzy greeting ... no matter how uncomfortable the person beside us feels with either our overly effusive or utterly perfunctory frenzy? Do we *really* feel that the Mass in Latin will deprive us of our blowing kisses and winking and frenetically waving to those whom, on our way out of the Church, we immediately proceed to calumniate with our gossip?

GHETTO CATHOLICISM

Face it: in the English speaking world --- and probably most other countries --- we have become so smug in our own little corner of Catholicism that we find it far more acceptable to "pray in tongues" which no one understands and never will, than to abandon our provincial arrogance and pray in Latin which many of us do not presently understand but can easily learn. There is something comfortable in the exclusivity of our ethnic and cultural ghettos where we express Catholicism on *our* terms, even if it isolates us from the rest of the Catholic world.

Consider this: of the 1.2 billion Muslims worldwide (according to the Council on American-Islamic Relations), *all pray in Arabic, although only 80% understand Arabic.*

Wherever a Muslim goes, nothing separates him from his brother in prayer and worship.

Orthodox, among many other Jews, pray in Hebrew. At <http://www.jewfaq.org/prayer.htm> , it is argued that, "There are many good reasons for praying in Hebrew... it provides *a link to Jews all over the world ... and is the language of Jewish thought.*"

Why, then, are some Catholics so scandalized by the prospect of praying in Latin?

Arabic is mandatory in Islam.

Hebrew is strongly encouraged in Judaism.

Except in Saudi Arabia and Israel, neither language that is used in prayer is the vernacular. Where is the problem for Muslims? Where is the problem for Jews? They hold a common (*but not vernacular*) language to bind them despite distance and diversity. But we are Catholics! Not mindless and backwards Muslims and Jews ... right?

We are much more "progressive" and "enlightened". Hebrew is okay for Jews who do not speak Hebrew, and Arabic is okay for Muslims who do not speak Arabic, but Latin is unacceptable for Catholics who do not speak Latin ...? What are we implying by this ... to our fellow religionists?

Our Holy Father, despite the predictably bad press, is rightly attempting to re-establish an egregiously breached continuity in the Church ... a vital continuity that pertains to an identity inseparable from Catholicism; one which has always unified Catholics throughout the world in language as well as teaching, and bringing with it a sacred dignity to worship, in place of the often mindless but trendy inanities Catholics must now endure at Mass in both the Liturgy and the appalling music.

If it is presently "correct" that Catholics are to be bashed for using Latin, then it would appear that we must bash Muslims and Jews as well. Oddly enough, we are inclined to do the one and carefully refrain from the other ...

Pourquoi? Warum? Perché? *Cur?* ... in other words, in American, "how come, huh?"

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Also see: [The Return of Latin to the Mass: an Interview with Archbishop Malcolm Ranjith of the Congregation for Divine Worship](#)

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