

Latin - The Language Of The Church

By Pope John XXIII.

Catholic Truth Society of Ireland No.dd1262a (1962)

Why was this Letter written?

Thanks to JWY.

At some point, roughly from the beginning of the twentieth century, Latin education must have taken a hit. When the Hungarian bishops visited Pope Pius XII, his Latin was not quite at their level. Similarly, during the reign of Paul VI, Pope Paul asked his Latin secretaries to compose for him a few lines in Latin with which he might respond to some visiting bishops who had eagerly greeted him in Latin the day before. So, some people, out in the provinces, as it were, were still receiving an education in Latin, but the state of affairs had fallen to the point where the Supreme Pontiff was inadequate in this language, the language of the Church, Latin.

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that a great number of priests and bishops, on the eve of the Council, while they said Mass and the Office in Latin, understood little of what they were saying. I sympathize: if you don't know the language of your prayers, there will certainly be a tendency to prefer to have them in a language that one does know. The Roman Breviary is not an easy book; one finds a great range of style and vocabulary therein; in order to understand every bit and piece of it, one really has to take some care with it. Moreover, when priests are rushing through the Office each day, for it is time-consuming, it's not surprising that comprehension would go by the wayside. Yet the solution to these difficulties, it was suggested, was not to jettison Latin, but to learn Latin better. Thus, *Veterum Sapientia* was written. It is useful for Catholics to be aware of it and for them to pray for the Church so that it may transform this world with the holiness that will lead us all to our true homeland in Heaven, with Our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.]

LATIN — THE LANGUAGE OF THE CHURCH.

Veterum Sapientia.

BISHOP JOHN THE SERVANT OF THE SERVANTS OF GOD ON PERMANENT RECORD

PART I.

THE VALUE AND IMPORTANCE OF LATIN.

1. The Church's heritage.

1a. THE WISDOM OF THE ANCIENT WORLD, enshrined in Greek and Roman literature, and the truly memorable teaching of ancient peoples, served, surely, to herald the dawn of that gospel which God's Son, 'the judge and teacher of grace and truth, the light and guide of the human race', proclaimed on earth. [Quote from 'Tertullian, Apology. 21; Migne, Patrology Latin, page 394.]

Such, at any rate, was the view of the Church's Fathers and Doctors. In these outstanding literary monuments of antiquity, they recognized man's spiritual preparation for the supernatural riches which Jesus Christ communicated to mankind 'to give history its fulfilment'. [Ephesians 1:10.]

Thus, the inauguration of Christianity did not mean the obliteration of man's past achievements. Nothing was lost that was in any way true, right, noble, and beautiful.

1b. The Church has ever held the literary evidences of this wisdom in the highest esteem. She values especially the Greek and Latin languages, in which wisdom itself is cloaked, as it were, in a vesture of gold. She has likewise welcomed the use of other venerable languages, which flourished in the East, for these too have had no little influence on the progress of humanity and civilization. By their use in sacred liturgies and versions of Holy Scripture, they have remained in force in certain regions even to the present day, bearing constant witness to the living voice of antiquity.

1c. But amid this variety of languages, a primary place must surely be given to that language which had its origins in Latium and later proved so admirable a means for the spreading of Christianity throughout the West.

And since in God's special providence this language united so many nations together under the authority of the Roman Empire — and that for so many centuries — it also became the rightful language of the Apostolic See. [EPISTLE Sacred Congregation Studiorum, Vehementer sane, ad Episcopos universos, 1 July 1908; Enchiridion Clergy, Number 820. Consult also EPISTLE APOSTOLIC, Pius XI, Unigenitus Dei Filius, 19 March, 1924; Acts of the Apostolic See, (A.A.S.) XVI (1924), page 141.] It was thus preserved for posterity and was instrumental in joining the Christian peoples of Europe together in the close bonds of unity.

2. The cultural value of Latin.

2a. Of its very nature, Latin is most suitable for promoting every form of culture among peoples. It gives rise to no jealousies. It does not favour any one nation, but presents itself with equal impartiality to all, and is equally acceptable to all.

Nor must we overlook the characteristic nobility of Latin's formal structure. Its 'concise, varied, and harmonious style, full of majesty and dignity', makes for singular clarity and impressiveness of expression. [Quote from Pius XI, EPISTLE APOSTOLIC, Officiorum omnium, 1 August, 1922; A.A.S. XIV (1922), pages 452-453.]

3. Its religious value.

3a. For these reasons the Apostolic See has always been at pains to preserve Latin, deeming it worthy of being used in the exercise of her teaching authority 'as the splendid vesture of her heavenly doctrine and sacred laws'. [Pius XI, Motu Proprio Litterarum latinarum, 20 October, 1924; A.A.S. XVI (1924), page 417.] She further requires her sacred ministers to use it, for by so doing they are the better able, wherever they may be, to acquaint themselves with the mind of the Holy See on any matter, and communicate the more easily with Rome and with one another.

3b. Thus the 'knowledge and use of this language', so intimately bound up with the Church's life, 'is important not so much on cultural or literary grounds as for religious reasons'. [Pius XI, EPISTLE APOSTOLIC, Officiorum omnium, 1 August, 1922; A.A.S. XIV (1922), page 452.] These are the words of Our Predecessor, Pius XI, who conducted a scientific enquiry into this whole subject and indicated three qualities of the Latin language which harmonize to a remarkable degree with the

Church's nature. 'For the Church, precisely because it embraces all nations and is destined to endure until the end of time... of its very nature requires a language which is universal, immutable, and non-vernacular.' [Pius XI, EPISTLE APOSTOLIC, *Officiorum omnium*, 1 August, 1922; A.A.S. XIV (1922), page 452.]

4. The Church's living language.

(I) Universal.

4a. Since every Church must assemble round the Roman Church', [Saint Irenaeus, *Adversus Haer.* 3, 3, 2; Migne, *Patrology Greek VIII*, page 848] and since the Supreme Pontiffs have 'true episcopal power, ordinary and immediate, over each and every Church and over each and every Pastor, as well as over the faithful' of every rite and every language, [for the quote consult the Code of Canon Law C.I.C., canon, 218, section 2,] it seems particularly desirable that the instrument of mutual communication be uniform and universal, especially between the Apostolic See and the Churches which use the same Latin rite.

When, therefore, the Roman Pontiffs wish to instruct the Catholic world, or the Congregations of the Roman Curia handle affairs, or draw up decrees which concern the whole body of the faithful, they invariably make use of Latin, for this is the 'mother tongue' acceptable to countless nations.

(II) Immutable.

4b. Furthermore, the Church's language must be not only universal but also immutable. Modern languages are liable to change, and no single one of them is superior to the others in authority. Thus, if the truths of the Catholic Church were entrusted to an unspecified number of them, the meaning of these truths, varied as they are, would not be manifested to everyone with sufficient clarity and precision. There would, moreover, be no language that could serve as a common and constant norm by which to gauge the exact meaning of other renderings.

But Latin is indeed such a language. It is set and unchanging. It has long since ceased to be affected by those alterations in the meaning of words which are the normal result of daily, popular use. Certain Latin words, it is true, acquired new meanings as Christian teaching developed and needed to be explained and defended, but these new meanings have long since become accepted and firmly established.

(III) Non-vernacular.

4c. Finally, the Catholic Church has a dignity far surpassing that of every merely human society, for it was founded by Christ the Lord. It is altogether fitting, therefore, that the language it uses should be noble and majestic, and non-vernacular.

5. Other advantages of Latin: its educational value.

5a. In addition, the Latin language 'can be called truly Catholic'. [Consult Pius XI, EPISTLE APOSTOLIC, *Officiorum omnium*, 1 August, 1922; A.A.S. XIV (1922), page 453.] It has been consecrated through constant use by the Apostolic See, the mother and teacher of all Churches, and must be esteemed 'a treasure... of incomparable worth'. [Pius XII, *Allocution*, *Magis quam*, 23 November, 1951: A.A.S. XLIII (1951), page 737.]

It is a general passport to the proper understanding of the Christian writers of antiquity and the documents of the Church's teaching. [Leo XIII, EPISTLE ENCYCLICAL *Depuis le jour*, 8

September, 1899; *Acta Leonis XIII*, 19 (1899), page 166.] It is also a most effective bond, binding the Church of today with that of the past and of the future in wonderful continuity.

5b. There can be no doubt as to the formative and educational value of the language of the Romans and of great literature generally. It is a most effective training for the pliant minds of youth. It exercises, matures and perfects the principal faculties of mind and spirit. It sharpens the wits and gives keenness of judgment. It helps the young mind to grasp things accurately, and develop a true sense of values. It is also a means for teaching highly intelligent thought and speech.

6. The Church's policy with regard to Latin.

6a. It will be quite clear from these considerations why the Roman Pontiffs have so often extolled the excellence and importance of Latin, and why they have prescribed its study and use by the secular and regular clergy, forecasting the dangers that would result from its neglect.

6b. And We also, impelled by the weightiest of reasons — the same as those which prompted Our Predecessors and provincial synods [see the note at the end of this sentence] — are fully determined to restore this language to its position of honour and to do all We can to promote its study and use. [Note: Consult *Collectio Lacensis*, especially: Volume III, page 1018 (s) and following: (Concil Province Westmonasteriense, anno (1859); Volume IV, page 29 (Concil Province Parisiense, anno 1849); Volume IV, pages 149, 153 (Concil Province Rhemense, anno 1849); Volume IV, pages 359, 361 (Concil Province Avenionense, anno 1849); Volume IV, pages 394, 396 (Concil Province Burdigalense, anno 1850); Volume V, page 61 (Concil Strigoniense, anno 1858); Volume V, page 664 (Concil Province Colocense, anno 1863); Volume VI, page 619 (Synod. Vicariatus Suchnensis, anno 1803).]

The employment of Latin has recently been contested in some quarters, and many are asking what the mind of the Apostolic See is in this matter. We have therefore decided to issue the timely directives contained in this document, so as to ensure that the ancient and uninterrupted use of Latin be maintained and, where necessary, restored.

6c. It seems to Us that We made Our own views on this subject sufficiently plain in Our address to some eminent Latin scholars. 'It is a matter of regret', We said, 'that so many people, unaccountably dazzled by the marvellous progress of science, are taking it upon themselves to oust or restrict the study of Latin and other kindred subjects... Yet in spite of the urgent need for science, Our own view is that the very contrary policy should be followed. The greatest impression is made on the mind by those things which correspond more closely to man's nature and dignity, and therefore the greater zeal should be shown in the acquisition of whatever educates and en-nobles the mind. Otherwise, poor mortal creatures may well become like the machines they build — cold, hard, and devoid of love.' ["International Convention for the Promotion of Ciceronian Studies, 7 September, 1959; in *Discorsi Messaggi Colloqui* of the Holy Father John XXIII, Volume 1, pages 234-235; consult also Address to Roman pilgrims of the Diocese of Piacenza, 15 April 1959: *L'Osservatore Romano*, 16 April 1959; EPISTLE *Pater misericordiarum*, 22 August 1961: A.A.S. LIII (1961), page 677; Address given on the occasion of the solemn inauguration of the College of the Philippine Islands at Rome, 7 Oct. 1961: *L'Osservatore Romano*, 9-10 October, 1961; EPISTLE *Lucunda laudatio*, 8 December, 1961: A.A.S. LIII (1961), page 812.]

PART II.

PROVISIONS FOR THE PROMOTION OF THE STUDY OF LATIN.

With the foregoing considerations in mind, to which We have given careful thought, We now, in the full consciousness of Our office and in virtue of Our authority, decree and command the following:

1. Bishops and superiors-general of religious orders shall be at pains to ensure that in their seminaries, and in their schools where adolescents are trained for the priesthood, all shall studiously observe the Apostolic See's decision in this matter and obey these Our prescriptions most carefully.
2. In the exercise of their paternal care they shall be on their guard lest anyone under their jurisdiction, being eager for innovation (*novarum rerum studiosi*), writes against the use of Latin in the teaching of the higher sacred studies or in the liturgy, or through prejudice makes light of the Holy See's will in this regard or interprets it falsely.
3. As is laid down in Canon Law (canon 1364) or commanded by Our Predecessors, before Church students begin their ecclesiastical studies proper they shall be given a sufficiently lengthy course of instruction in Latin by highly competent masters following a method designed to teach them the language with the utmost accuracy. 'And that too for this reason: lest later on, when they begin their major studies... they are unable by reason of their ignorance of the language to gain a full understanding of the doctrines or take part in those scholastic disputations which constitute so excellent an intellectual training for young men in the defence of the faith.' [Pius XI, EPISTLE APOSTOLIC, *Officiorum omnium*, 1 August, 1922; A.A.S. XIV (1922), page 453.]

We wish the same rule to apply to those whom God calls to the priesthood later on in life and whose classical studies have either been neglected or conducted too superficially. No one is to be admitted to the study of philosophy or theology except he be thoroughly and perfectly grounded in this language and capable of using it.

4. Wherever the study of Latin has suffered partial eclipse through the assimilation of the academic programme to that which obtains in State schools, with the result that the instruction given is no longer so thorough and well-grounded as formerly, there the traditional method of teaching this language shall be completely restored. Such is Our will, for there should be no doubt in anyone's mind about the necessity of keeping a strict watch over the course of studies followed by Church students; and that, not only as regards the number and kind of subjects they study, but also as regards the length of time devoted to the teaching of these subjects.

Should circumstances of time and place demand the addition of other subjects to the curriculum besides the usual ones, then either the course of studies must be lengthened, or these additional subjects must be condensed or their study relegated to another time.

5. In accordance with numerous previous instructions, the major sacred sciences shall be taught in Latin, which, as we know from many centuries of use, 'must be considered most suitable for explaining with the utmost facility and clarity the most difficult and profound ideas and concepts'. [EPISTLE Sacred Congregation Studiorum, *Vehementer sane*, ad Episcopos universos, 1 July 1908; *Enchiridion Clergy*, Number 821.] For apart from the fact that it has long since been enriched with a vocabulary of appropriate and unequivocal terms best calculated to safeguard the integrity of the Catholic faith, it also serves in no slight measure to prune away useless verbiage.

Hence, the professors of these sciences in universities or seminaries are required to speak Latin and to make use of textbooks written in Latin. Those whose ignorance of Latin makes it difficult for them to obey these instructions shall gradually be replaced by professors who are suited to this task.

Any difficulties that may be advanced by students or professors must be overcome either by the patient insistence of the bishops or religious superiors, or by the good will of the professors.

6. Since Latin is the Church's living language, it must be adequate to daily increasing linguistic requirements. It must be furnished with new words that are apt and suitable for expressing modern things, words that will be uniform and universal in their application and constructed in conformity with the genius of the ancient Latin tongue. Such was the method followed by the sacred Fathers and the best scholastic writers. To this end, therefore, We commission the Sacred Congregation of Seminaries and Universities to set up a Latin Academy staffed by an international body of competent Latin and Greek professors. The principal aim of this Academy — like the national academies founded to promote their respective languages — will be to superintend the proper development of Latin, augmenting the Latin lexicon where necessary with words which conform to the particular character and colour of the language.

It will also conduct schools for the study of Latin of every era, particularly the Christian one. The aim of these schools will be to impart a fuller understanding of Latin and the ability to use it and to write it with proper elegance. They will exist for those who are destined to teach Latin in seminaries and ecclesiastical colleges, or to write decrees and judgments or conduct correspondence in the ministries of the Holy See, diocesan curias, and the offices of religious orders.

7. Latin is closely allied to Greek both in formal structure and the importance of its extant writings. Hence — as Our Predecessors have frequently ordained — future ministers of the altar must be instructed in Greek in the lower and middle schools. Thus, when they come to study the higher sciences — and especially if they are aiming for a degree in Sacred Scripture or theology — they will be enabled to follow the Greek sources of scholastic philosophy and understand them correctly; and not only these, but also the original texts of Sacred Scripture, the liturgy, and the sacred Greek Fathers. [Leo XIII, (Letters and Encyclicals) *ENCYCLICAL* Letter, *Providentissimus Deus*, 18 Nov. 1893; *Acta Leonis XIII*, Volume 13 (1893), page 342; *EPISTLE*, *Plane quidem intelligis*, 20 May 1885, *Acta Leonis XIII*, Volume 5, pages 63-64; Pius XII, *Allocution*, *Magis quam*, 23 November, 1951: *A.A.S.* XLIII (1951), page 737.]

8. We further commission the Sacred Congregation of Seminaries and Universities to prepare a syllabus for the teaching of Latin which all shall faithfully observe. The syllabus will be designed to give those who follow it an adequate understanding of the language and its use. Bishops in conference may indeed rearrange this syllabus if circumstances warrant, but they must never curtail it or alter its nature. Ordinaries may not take it upon themselves to put their own proposals into effect until these have been examined and approved by the Sacred Congregation.

Finally, in virtue of Our Apostolic Authority, We will and command that all the decisions, decrees, proclamations and recommendations of this Our Constitution remain firmly established and ratified, notwithstanding anything to the contrary however worthy of special note.

Given at Rome, at Saint Peter's, on the feast of Saint Peter's Throne, on the 22nd day of February, in the year 1962, the fourth of Our Pontificate.

JOHN PP. XXIII.

Translated by Rev. H.E. Winstone.
