

Liturgical Latin – Its Origin and Character: Three Lectures, by Christine Mohrmann (Washington, D.C., Catholic University Press, 1957; London, Burns & Oates, 1959)

As Dr. Christine Mohrmann was writing in the 1950's, the Church faced a crossroads with respect to the use of Latin as its liturgical language. Latin had been the language of the Church for 1,600 years, since the latter half of the Fourth Century. Except for the Saints of the earliest ages, nearly all of the Saints and until the 1960's Catholics of all stripes were formed by what we now call the Traditional Latin Mass. As we work to restore the Latin Mass to its rightful place at the center of life in the Church, it is perhaps useful to reconsider our 50 years' experience with liturgy in vernacular languages in light of the themes so ably elucidated by Dr. Mohrmann in *Liturgical Latin*.

In what follows I let Dr. Mohrmann speak with her own voice. My contribution is limited to culling key passages from her work, facilitating comprehension by means of appropriate point headings, and stressing certain themes through a judicious use of italics. Enjoy! jab

A. The Purpose of Language

1. Language Is For More Than Communication

“A language is not merely a sort of code to facilitate intercourse between human beings in daily life. The phenomenon of language is infinitely more complicated and has many more functions than that of communication among people....”

“Besides the dialogue between one person and another, one has also the dialogues regularly carried on inside oneself...[L]anguage by no means serves only to communicate actual facts but is also the interpreter of all the motions and workings of the human mind, and, above all, human sensibility....”

2. Language as a Medium of Expression

“Language is also...a medium of expression. Whereas...language used purely as a means of communication normally strives towards a certain degree of efficiency, which results in linguistic simplification and standardization, language as expression usually shows a tendency to become richer and more subtle. It aims at becoming, by every possible means, more expressive and more picturesque, and it may try to attain this heightened power of expression both by the coining of new words and by the preservation of antiquated elements already abandoned by the language as communication. Thus language as expression also serves the cause of linguistic art...”

3. Expression and Prayer

“Expression can have various aims: the establishing of contact between one person and another, of man with himself and also of man with God. *Prayer, considered from a linguistic point of view, usually lies more within the domain of expression than in that of communication*, although here one must naturally allow for differences and degrees. Not only personal prayer, with meditative prayer as its highest form, belongs to the realm of expression, but also the collective prayer of the Church in her liturgy...”

“In prayer considered as expression – in this case it makes no essential difference whether we speak of personal or collective prayer – *the dialogue no longer lies on the human plain*. We are here concerned with a *transcendental contact between the praying individual and the divine being*. For this reason the dominant element is no longer that of intelligibility, as in human dialogue. This is replaced, at least in part, by more subtle elements, partly spiritual, partly affective, which can be crystallized in the rhythm, the tone of delivery or in the style. There often appears a certain hankering after archaism – essentially a traditional stylistic phenomenon, a preference for older modes of expression no longer current in everyday linguistic usage. Such archaizing and stylizing tendencies can be carried so far that the language of religious expression becomes incomprehensible for outsiders.”

4. Scriptural Reflections

“Thus, in the phenomenon of the gift of tongues as analysed by St. Paul 1 Cor. 14, we see – in an early Christian connection – an extreme case of linguistic expression in which the communication element seems completely eliminated. On the other hand, one might consider the miracle of Whitsunday, the gift of tongues on the occasion of the first preaching by the Apostles, as a miraculous amplification of language as communication....”

5. The Inherent Problem of Liturgical Language

“Anyone praying in a familiar tongue, prays with both spirit and mind; but whenever he prays in a foreign tongue, the spirit, given to him in baptism, still knows what he is praying. We could say, in other words, that the spiritual value of a Christian’s prayer is not dependent on its intellectual value. With this exposition Ambrosiaster has touched on the essential problem of the phenomenon of a foreign traditional liturgical language, which really turns on the conflict between religious expression and communication.”

6. Conversely, the Adverse Effect of Rationalism

“There is now a general tendency to reduce the things of the world about us, in the widest sense, to their scientific formulas, and language does not escape the trend. Yet on the other hand people are gradually becoming more and more conscious that this attitude of mind means *an atrophy of our power to seize the essence of things....*”

7. Reform versus Tradition

“...[U]nder the influence of positivism, people, especially people in non-professional circles, are still inclined to regard language as pure communication, as a utilitarian instrument, as a means of social intercourse, as language par excellence and as the only real linguistic phenomenon....”

The colloquial language is the language; the ideals of efficiency and intelligibility, the idea of language as communication, dominate the conception of language as a human phenomenon. People thus tend to forget that language as expression – which in many cases includes language as a literary tool – is certainly just as important a phenomenon, and plays a great role in many spheres of human life. In this latter case, i.e., language as a means of expression, it is not merely a question of the individual element, the personal style of the writer or poet. This phenomenon can also occur as a mode of expression based on a collective tradition. Linguistic form is then no longer chiefly and exclusively a medium of communication but rather the *medium of expression of a group living according to a certain tradition*. In such cases linguistic usage is often deliberately stylized, and there exist language and style in many forms, transmitted from generation to generation, in which *people deliberately deviate from language as communication, as current in everyday life, in order to obtain a certain artistic, religious, or spiritual effect*. Here we have the very opposite of the matter-of-fact development of languages as media of communication that are so rapidly evolving in our times. This is probably the reason why the man of today, when confronted with the phenomenon of stylized languages as the traditional means of expression of a collectivity, languages not only accepted but maintained in use by countless generations, finds them incomprehensible, peculiar and, therefore, usually to be discarded. Thus we can understand too how the modern Christian, in the liturgical prayer texts, for example, longs first and foremost for intelligibility, clarity and lucidity....”

7. Tradition: The Analogy of Homeric Greek

“One of the artificial languages about which we know most and from which we can thus most easily gain an idea of the nature of this phenomenon is that of the Homeric poems. Homeric Greek, or rather the artificial language of the Greek epic...was never a spoken language and never led an organic life in a civilized community. It is a combination of heterogeneous elements which together form the stylized instrument employed by the epic poets...It not only provided the material for two

of the greatest works in the history of world literature, but continued to be used for centuries as the language of epic poetry. Generation after generation of Greeks were brought up on it, and this explains its viability. *Every generation took the trouble to steep itself in this artificial idiom, and in this way a great national artistic asset was preserved....*”

8. Sacral Language

“Whenever man comes into contact with the divine, his language shows a tendency to dissociate itself from ordinary colloquial speech. It is as though *contact with the divine draws man out of his ordinary life, and this is reflected in his language....*”

“The memory of and contact with sacral languages is often given concrete expression in *the supposition of the existence of a language of gods, spirits, or, among Christians, of angels*. One has only to think of St. Paul, 1 Cor. 13.1: ‘If I should speak with the tongues of men and of angels.’ It is again the Homeric epic which provides us with interesting material in this respect. In Homer continual mention is made of a language of the gods, and we shall probably not be straying far from the truth if we see in the usually etymologically obscure words of this so-called divine language a last echo of ancient sacral words....”

B. Latin as a Liturgical Language

1. The Introduction of Latin in the Life of the Church

“Liturgical Latin, as constituted towards the end of Christian Antiquity and preserved unchanged – in its main lines at least – down to the present time, is a deliberately sacral stylization of Early Christian Latin as it gradually developed in the Christian communities of the West. The Latin Christians were comparatively late in creating a liturgical language. When they did so, the Christian idiom had already reached full maturity and circumstances rendered it possible to draw, for purposes of style, on

the ancient sacral heritage of Rome. This would have been impossible during the first centuries, given the original repugnance to anything connected with paganism.”

“This linguistic and stylistic form, which was more or less artificial and which, partly as a result of a long tradition of improvisation and free composition, possessed a large number of traditional forms and formulas, was certainly not easy for the average Christian of late Antiquity to understand. To this extent, the present situation, i.e., the fact that the liturgical language is not understood by a large section of the faithful, is not entirely new. We must bear in mind, however, that we have technical means of reducing the inconvenience of an ‘incomprehensible’ language to a minimum which Christian Antiquity and the Middle Ages did not possess....”

2. The Present Unsuitability of the Vernacular

“...[W]e are justified in asking whether, at the present time, the introduction of the vernacular into the liturgy would not mean more loss than gain. First and foremost there is the question, which...also troubled the first centuries, whether or not the vernacular would be suitable for the composition of a sacral prayer style....[T]he early Christian West waited a long time before adopting the use of Latin. It waited until the Christian language possessed the resources necessary to create an official ecclesiastical prayer language. If we confine ourselves to the modern, so-called Western languages, we are obliged to note that all of them are now striving for a greater degree of efficiency....There is no doubt that this development furthers the efficiency of our languages as media of communication in daily life, but at the same time it renders them less suitable for sacral stylization. And yet we must realize that *sacral stylization forms an essential element of every official prayer language and that this sacral, hieratic character cannot, and should never, be relinquished.* From the point of view of the general development of the Western languages – to say nothing of the problems raised by other languages – the present time is certainly not propitious for the abandonment of Latin.”

3. Latin as a Cultural Connection to Christ

“When Antiquity came to an end and new peoples with new languages adopted Christianity, the Western Church not only retained Latin as the language of her religious ceremonies but also used it as the instrument for the transmission of culture to the young Germanic peoples. This made possible a *living continuity with Christian Antiquity, with that world in which the historical facts of the Redemption and the first preaching took place* and with which Christianity and the Christians themselves, whether they will or no, in whatever language they may speak, are, and must remain, connected. For Christianity is not a timeless myth, but is founded on a historical fact, localized in time and history. Latin is thus a vinculum unitatis, not only horizontally but vertically, and *Liturgical Latin is like a living element of the Church which makes possible the survival of this vertical link.*”

4. Latin as a Bond of Unity Among Peoples

“I do not mean to speak of the horizontal band, the vinculum unitatis, which binds the numerous peoples of Mother Church in the liturgy by the use of one language. This argument is commonly dismissed as ‘sentimental’. But it does not seem to me to be sentimental to remark that in our time there exists throughout the whole world a movement whose aim is to bring the peoples closer together, to abolish frontiers. Is it not remarkable, then, that precisely at this time we should wish to cast off a vinculum unitatis which has existed for fifteen centuries?”

5. The Unity Called “Pax”

“...[T]he language used in the prayers of the Church, in which the individual believer takes part, lies not so much in the realm of communication as in that of expression. The *most important actor here is the spirit* (Ambrosiaster speaks of the spirit which we receive in baptism), *that spirit which, in the unity of the ecclesia, a unity called pax by the first centuries, turns towards God.* In addition, the individual can, and must, have his own, personal

communication with God. Now *it has always been the desire of the Western Church that language, as the religious expression of the Church, should reflect as far as possible the unity of the mystical body of Christ. To this end she demands a certain loosening of the bond of the concrete human word as a medium of communication.*"

6. St. Augustine on Personal and Liturgical Prayer

"There is no doubt that Augustine was fully conscious of the value of personal prayer, formulated if necessary in plain words. And yet, in his opinion, *man, in his contact with God, must also learn to free himself from dependence on the personal linguistic expression of words as such, so that all may praise the One God together and as one, thus anticipating what will later come to pass in the heavenly liturgy.* At the end of his great work, De trinitate, he formulated these ideas as follows: 'Free me, O Lord, from the excess of words that torments my soul, which is wretched in Thy sight and which casts itself upon Thy mercy. For even in thought I am not silent, even when my words are hushed.' ... And he continues: "Thou knowest that many of my thoughts are human thoughts, for they are vain (Ps. 93.11). Grant that I may not succumb to them...that I may not, as it were, be lulled to sleep by them ... For, when once we have reached Thee, then all that outpouring of words which we utter without reaching Thee will be at an end...and *then we shall ceaselessly say but one word, praising Thee with one voice and being made one in Thee.*"

"As we have already seen, the Church, from the earliest times, has felt herself closely united with the heavenly liturgy, and we may say that she seeks here already, in the form of her liturgy, what Augustine termed 'praising Thee with one voice, and being made one in Thee': laudantes te in unum, et in te facti unum – an experience which will only be fully realized in the 'aeon' to come, but of which we can have a foretaste here on earth."