Chapter 17

The Liturgy and Sacred Language

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Introduction

Languages exist in the context of a structured system that is determined by a variety of factors (social, cultural, psychological, and so on). The languages used in Christian worship have developed under certain conditions and circumstances that need to be considered to understand its characteristics. For this purpose, the work of Christine Mohrmann and the Nijmegen School on Latin in the liturgy is still essential, despite the valid criticism of the idea of Christian Latin as a “special language” that would be marked by particularities in morphology, lexis and syntax.¹ Mohrmann’s approach to liturgical language is based on Ferdinand de Saussure and other representatives of the Geneva school of linguistics, who propose to see language not only as a means of social communication in ordinary life, but also as a medium of expression of persons in a comprehensive sense. Human speech is not just a utilitarian instrument that serves to communicate facts, and should do so in the most simple and efficient manner; it also provides the forms of expressing and interpreting the rich and subtle workings of the human mind, including the arts, philosophy and religion.²

Language is also the medium in which religious thoughts and experiences are expressed. It reaches its limits in two extreme forms of expression: “speaking in tongues” and “mystical silence”. Speaking in tongues, or glossolalia a phenomenon familiar to us from St Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians and has had an astonishing revival for the last hundred years or so in the charismatic movements; it also known also in other religion traditions, for


example, the Oracle of Delphi. *Glossolalia* makes human communication impossible; the person who speaks “in tongues” can only be understood with the help of an interpreter. St Paul clearly has reservations about *glossolalia* and prefers “prophecy”, because this is in the service of charity and builds up the church (1 Corinthians 14). In “mystical silence”, human communication is excluded as well, as in the experience Augustine and his mother Monica shared at Ostia, described in book nine of the *Confessions.*

“Sacred language” does not go as far as *glossolalia* and mystical silence in excluding human communication completely, or at least attempting to do so. However, it reduces the element of comprehensibility in favour of other elements, notably that of expression. Mohrmann proposes to see in sacred language, and in particular in its vocabulary, a specific way of organising religious experience. She also argues that every form of belief in the supernatural, in the existence of a transcendent being, leads necessarily to adopting a form of sacred language in worship – just as a consistent secularism leads to rejecting any form of it.

Sacred language is the medium of expression not just of individuals, but of a community living according to certain traditions. Its linguistic forms are handed down from generation to generation; they are often deliberately “stylised” and removed from contemporary language. There exists a similar phenomenon in the field of literature, the stylised language of the Homeric epos with its consciously archaic and colourful word forms. The language of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which is also found in Hesiod and in later poetic inscriptions, was never a spoken language used in everyday life. With Mohrmann, we can name three characteristics of sacred or, as she also says, “hieratic” language:

First, sacred language is conservative; it shows tenacity in holding on to archaic linguistic forms. In the pagan Roman tradition, this characteristic was so pronounced that that for centuries prayers were used, while their meaning was not even understood by the priests who recited them. A similar phenomenon seems to have arisen in the early Middle Ages, when command of Latin had become so poor that prayer texts were transmitted in a form that made them hardly intelligible and distorted their sense.

Secondly, foreign elements are introduced in order to associate with ancient religious tradition; a case in point is the Hebrew Biblical vocabulary in the Latin use of Christians. Augustine makes pertinent observations on this in his *De doctrina christiana:* “In some cases, although they could be translated, the original form is preserved for the sake of its solemn authority”, such as “*amen*” and “*alleluia*”. Other words “are said to be incapable of being translated into another language. … This is especially true of interjections, which signify emotion, rather than an element of clearly conceived meaning”; as an example, he cites “*osanna*."

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Thirdly, sacred language uses rhetorical figures that are typical of oral style, such as parallelism and antithesis, rhythmic clausulae, rhyme, and alliteration.  

From a theological perspective the use of sacred language in the liturgy belongs to the “solemnity” that is observed in the celebration of the sacraments, especially of the Eucharist. The idea of solemnitas is central to St Thomas Aquinas’ understanding of the liturgy. The German philosopher Josef Pieper proposed a broad definition of “sacred language”, which includes signs and gestures as well as the words used in public worship; this would cover more or less covers the same ground as Aquinas’ idea of solemnitas. However, in this contribution, I follow the more restricted sense of the “sacred language”, that is, the linguistic forms and expressions used in the Church’s public worship.

It should be noted that by “sacred language” I do not mean to refer here to the Medieval tradition of Hebrew, Greek and Latin as the tres linguae sacrae of Christianity. Church Fathers, such as Hilary of Poitiers and Augustine of Hippo, already honoured the three languages that were used on the title of Christ’s Cross according to John 19:20, because they had a special significance in the history of salvation and the preaching of the Gospel. Thus Hilary attributed particular merit to Hebrew, Greek and Latin, not because of some inherent quality, but because in these languages “is preached above all the mystery of the will of God and the expectation of the coming Kingdom of God”. Likewise, Augustine commented on the title of the Cross: “These three languages were prominent there before all others: Hebrew on behalf of the Jews who boasted in the law of God; Greek on behalf of the wise men among the pagans; Latin on behalf of the Romans who at that time were dominating many and almost all peoples”. This Patristic reading entered Medieval exegesis, and Augustine’s commentary in particular was regularly quoted by later theologians (see below chapter V on St Thomas Aquinas).

It would appear that no author actually called these three languages “sacred” before Isidore of Seville (c. 560-636). He considered Hebrew, Greek and Latin sacred because they were the languages of Sacred Scripture and insisted that familiarity with them was necessary for correct exegesis. There is no reference, however, whether explicit or implicit, to the Church’s liturgy in Isidore. This idea of the tres linguae sacrae, which was widely received in the Middle Ages, is manifestly different from the doctrine that has become known as

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7 Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae IIIa q. 64 a. 2 ad 1, IIIa, q. 83, a. 4, and IIIa, q. 66, a 10, resp.
10 Hilary of Poitiers, Tractatus super psalmos, prol. 15: CSEL 22, 13.
11 Augustine of Hippo, In Joan. Ev. tract. 117,4: CCC 36,653.
12 Isidore of Seville, Etymologiae IX, 1, 3-4: PL 82,326: “Tres autem sunt linguae sacrae ...”.
“trilinguism”, according to which the liturgy could be celebrated only in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. While it is often said that this was a widely held view among the Franks who opposed the missionary work of St Cyril and St Methodius, Francis J. Thomson has shown that “trilinguism” was rather a generic piece of Byzantine polemics against the Latin West. As he concludes from his comprehensive study of the available material, “the notion that the Western Church ever propagated trilinguism in the Cyrillo-Methodian sense belongs to the realm of myth, not history”. Where Latin authors reflected on the use of the three sacred languages of Scripture in the liturgy, this discussion remains within the Latin rites.

Early Eucharistic Prayers

The aforementioned characteristics of sacred language emerge clearly from the early history of the Christian Eucharistic prayers. It is generally agreed that these were relatively fluid in the first three centuries. Their exact wording was not yet fixed, and the celebrant had some room to improvise. However, as Allan Bouley notes, “Conventions governing the structure and content of improvised anaphoras are ascertainable in the second century and indicate that extempore prayer was not left merely to the whim of the minister. In the third century, and possibly even before, some anaphoral texts already existed in writing”. Bouley speaks of an “atmosphere of controlled freedom”, because concerns for orthodoxy limited the celebrant’s liberty to vary the texts of the prayer. This need became particularly pressing during the doctrinal struggles of the fourth century; hence this era saw the emergence of fixed Eucharistic prayers, such as the Roman Canon, the Anaphora of St John Chrysostom and others.

There is another important aspect of this development: the freedom to improvise existed only in a framework of fixed elements of content and style, which was, above all, biblically inspired. In a recent study on improvisation in prayer, Achim Budde analyses three oriental anaphoras used over a considerable geographical area, the Egyptian version of the Anaphora of St Basil, the West Syrian Anaphora of St James and the East Syrian Anaphora of Nestorius. With his comparative method, the German liturgist identifies common features of structure, style and rhetoric. Budde argues that these patterns and stable elements go back to the pre-literary history of these Eucharistic prayers and that they was studied and even

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15 For instance, Thomas Aquinas, who takes up and develops Augustine’s exegesis in his commentary on John: Saper Io., cap. 19 l. 4.

memorised by priests in the early Church.\textsuperscript{17} As noted by the Norwegian exegete Sigmund Mowinckel, known especially for his work on the Psalms, rapid development of fixed forms of prayer corresponds to an essential religious need and constitutes a fundamental law of religion.\textsuperscript{18} Budde’s methodological approach is an important supplement and corrective to that of Bouley and other liturgical scholars, who would appear to underestimate the significance of repetition and memorisation in an oral culture.\textsuperscript{19} The formation of stable liturgical texts can thus be ascertained from early on as a strong force in the process of handing on the Christian faith.

In the Western tradition, the freedom to improvise remained for a longer time than in the East, especially in certain liturgical prayers, such as the introductory part of the Eucharistic prayer we now call “preface”.\textsuperscript{20} This is the reason why there is such a great variety of prefaces in the early Roman sacramentaries. Mohrmann concludes that it is “this system which leads to a marked traditional prayer style”.\textsuperscript{21} A similar phenomenon can be observed in the earliest Greek epos: the freedom of individual singers to improvise on the given material led to a stylised language. In the liturgy, the early tradition of oral improvisation in prayer helped to create a sacred style.

Mohrmann introduces a useful distinction between sacred languages of a “primary” and a “secondary” kind. “Primary” sacred languages were formed as such from the beginning, for example, the language of the Greek oracles that was close to the \textit{Kunstsprache} of the Homeric epos. “Secondary” sacred languages have come to be experienced as such only in the course of time. The languages used in Christian worship would seem to fall under this category: Greek in the Byzantine tradition; Syriac in the Patriarchate of Antioch and the “Nestorian” Church of the East with its missions reaching to India and China; Old Armenian; Old Georgian; Coptic; Old Ethiopian (\textit{Ge’ez}); Church Slavonic; not to forget the Elizabethan English of the \textit{Book of Common Prayer} and the German used in the Lutheran books of worship (from the \textit{Brandenburgisch-Nürnbergische Kirchenordnung} of 1533 to the \textit{Lutherische Agende I} of 1955); and, of course, the Latin of the Roman Rite and other Western liturgical traditions.

There are stylistic features in all these liturgical languages that separate them from the ordinary languages of the people. This distance was often the result of linguistic developments in the common language that were not adopted in the liturgical language because of its conservative nature. However, in the case of Latin as the language of the


\textsuperscript{19} Cf. Budde, \textit{Improvisation im Eucharistiegebet}, 137.


\textsuperscript{21} Mohrmann, \textit{Liturgical Latin}, 24.
Roman liturgy, a certain distance existed right from the beginning: the Romans did not speak in the style of the Canon or of the collects of the Mass. As soon as Greek, originally the prevalent language of Christian communities in Rome, was replaced by Latin in the liturgy, a highly stylized medium of worship was created.22

This contribution focuses on the Latin tradition, and in particular on the Roman liturgy which became dominant in the Christian West. The field of research is of course much wider and it would be desirable to study the sacred languages of the Eastern Christian liturgies.23

The Language of the Roman Liturgy

The most important early source for the Roman Eucharistic prayer is St Ambrose of Milan, who in his *De sacramentis*, a series of catecheses for the newly baptised that was held around 390, quotes extensively from the Eucharistic prayer employed at that time in his city.24 The passages quoted are earlier forms of the prayers *Quam oblationem*, *Qui pridie*, *Unde et memores*, *Supra quae*, and *Supplices te rogamus*. Elsewhere in *De sacramentis*, the bishop of Milan emphasises that he desires to follow the use of the Roman Church in everything; for this reason, we can safely assume that the same Eucharistic prayer he quotes was also used in Rome.25

The wording of the prayers cited by Ambrose is different from the Canon that was settled by Pope Gregory the Great in the late sixth century and has come down to us, with only a few minor changes, in the oldest extant liturgical books, especially the Old Gelasian Sacramentary, dating from the middle of the eighth century, but believed to reflect the liturgical use of the middle of the seventh century. The differences between Ambrose’s Eucharistic prayer and the Gregorian Canon are far less remarkable than their similarities, given that the almost three hundred years lying between the two texts were a period of intense

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25 Ambrose, *De sacramentis* III,1,5: CSEL 73,40.
liturgical development. It is therefore a most remarkable fact that a mature version of the Roman Canon emerges without any antecedents in the late fourth century.

The available evidence strongly suggests that the transition from Greek to Latin in the Roman liturgy happened slowly and gradually. Parts of the liturgy were already in Latin before the second half of the fourth century, notably the readings from Holy Scripture. By the late fourth century, the ancient version of the psalms used in the liturgy had acquired such a sacrosanct status that St Jerome only revised it with caution. Later he translated the Psalter from the Hebrew, as he said, not for liturgical purposes, but to provide a text for scholarship and controversy. It is also likely that the baptismal liturgy was celebrated in Latin at an early stage.

This development took more than a hundred years and that it was completed in the pontificate of Damasus, who died in 384; from then on, the liturgy in Rome was mostly celebrated in Latin. In later periods, Greek elements were introduced into the Roman liturgy, most notably the invocation Kyrie eleison as part of the Latin litany known as Deprecatio Gelasii and named after Pope Gelasius (492-496). In the seventh century, there was a strong influx of Eastern Christians in Rome, which is reflected in the adoption of the Trisagion in the Improperia of the Good Friday liturgy and the use of bilingual readings on several solemn celebrations in the liturgical year, such as Christmas and Easter (Sunday and Monday), the Vigils of Easter and Pentecost, the four Ember Saturdays and the Mass for the ordination of a pope. An interesting case is the so-called “Missa graeca”, which is attested in several manuscripts from the Carolingian age. Texts of the Roman Ordinary of the Mass are written in Greek, but in Latin letters and they are sometimes provided with neumes, indicating that they would have been sung. This phenomenon spread throughout Europe even to places.

where Greek culture was quite remote and illustrates the prestige of Greek as a liturgical language in Western Christendom.\textsuperscript{32}

Peter Burke, a major contributor to the relatively new academic discipline of “sociolinguistics” or “social history of language”, has alerted us to the fact that “the choice of one language over another is never a neutral or transparent one”.\textsuperscript{33} As for the question why the move towards a Latin liturgy in Rome occurred rather late, various answers have been given, and there is something to be said for all of them. The German liturgist Theodor Klauzer attributed this to the general conservativism of Romans and their tenacity in keeping religious traditions. This is certainly true for the Roman Church as well. According to Allan Bouley, the need for a carefully formulated orthodox language, especially during the Arian crisis of the fourth century, provided the leaven for creating an official Latin form of the prayers of the Mass. Bouley’s thesis that it was the need for orthodox prayers that advanced the creation of Latin rites is certainly borne out by the efforts of St Ambrose to formulate the orthodox faith in liturgical hymns and prayers against the current Arianism of the barbarian tribes. Christine Mohrmann argues that the formation of liturgical Latin became possible only after the Peace of the Church, established by the Emperor Constantine. There was no longer such a strong need for Christian communities to define themselves in opposition to the surrounding pagan culture. Their new secure status gave the local churches in the West greater freedom to draw, at least for purposes of style, not for contents, on the religious heritage of Rome for the development of their liturgies.

Moreover, the formation of a Latin liturgical language should be seen as part of a wide-ranging effort to Christianise Roman culture. The popes of the late fourth and the fifth century, beginning with Damasus, made a conscious and comprehensive attempt to appropriate the symbols of Roman culture for the Christian faith. Parts of this attempt were the appropriation of public space through extensive building projects and the appropriation of public time with a cycle of Christian feasts throughout the year replacing pagan celebrations, as with the Philocalian calendar of the year 354. The formation of liturgical Latin was part of this effort to evangelize Roman culture and attract the influential elites of the Empire to the Christian faith. It would not be accurate to describe this process as an adoption of the “vernacular” language in the liturgy. The Latin of the Roman Canon, of the collects and prefaces of the Mass was removed from idiom of the ordinary people. It was a highly stylised language that required some effort fully to understand and appreciate by the average Roman Christian of the fifth century or later, given especially that the rate of literacy was very low compared to our times.\textsuperscript{34}


\textsuperscript{33} In the words of Lafferty, Translating Faith from Greek to Latin, 24, referring to P. Burke, The Art of Conversation (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

These prayers of the ancient sacramentaries were formed according to technical rules of composition. Liturgical prayer is a form of public speech, and hence it is not surprising that in Christian antiquity, the threefold officia of classical rhetoric were applied to it as well. The reasons for this are presented succinctly by Mary Gonzaga Haessly in work on *Rhetoric in the Sunday Collects of the Roman Missal*: “… all these devices of the art of language are necessary for us, for they enable us: (1) to grasp clearly the lessons embodied in the Prayers (docere); (2) to make these lessons more acceptable to us through the charm of diction and structure, in a word, through their appeal to our aesthetic sense (delectare); (3) to persuade us (movere) to mold our conduct in accordance with the principles of faith set forth in the Prayers. This explains why rhetoric is, and must be, found in the liturgy: it is to dispose us to pray “ut oportet,” as we ought to pray”.

It was by no means a foregone conclusion that the Western church would generally adopt Latin as its liturgical language. There were native languages in the Western Empire, such as Gothic, Celtic, Iberic or Punic. It is possible to imagine a Western Church with local languages in its liturgy, as in the East, where, in addition to Greek, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian and Ethiopic was used. However, the situation in the West was fundamentally different; the centralizing force of the Roman church was such that Latin became the only liturgical language. This was an important factor in furthering ecclesiastical, cultural and political unity. *Latinitas* became one of the defining characteristics of Western Europe.

From *Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages: Decay and Renewal*

Studies of liturgical Latin, such as those of Christine Mohrmann, used to concentrate on what may be called the “classical” period of formation of the Roman rite from the fourth to the sixth century. Recently, more attention has been devoted to liturgical texts from a later period and originating not from Rome, but from Gaul, Spain and other parts of the Latin Church. Els Rose has published a substantial study of liturgical Latin in the *Missale Gothicum*, along with her critical edition of this late seventh-century witness to the Gallican tradition. Whilst the merits of this research in the wider field of liturgical Latin are beyond doubt, Rose uses the opportunity for some harsh criticism of Mohrmann’s approach. She

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charges Mohrmann with a promoting a “one-sided view of liturgical Latin [i.e. a hieratic, highly stylized language with hardly any popular features]”, because she confined her interpretation “to the liturgical texts of the Patres and the liturgy of the church of Rome, choosing her examples from these undoubtedly rich but restricted treasuries”, passing over other traditions, such as the Gallican or Visigothic ones. Thus Mohrmann is said to present “an opinion on liturgical Latin based on a select corpus of sources but presented as a general view on the subject”. ³⁹ As mentioned above, scholars have presented important correctives to Mohrmann’s methodology, but this does not mean that it needs to be discarded entirely. There can be no doubt that she was aware of non-Roman Latin liturgical sources,⁴⁰ but she chose as the scope of her studies an in-depth analysis of the characteristically Roman prayer style, which liturgical scholars before her, such as Edmund Bishop,⁴¹ had identified. This approach can and should be enlarged, and Rose’s research, leaving aside unnecessary polemics, serves this purpose.

In her study of the Bobbio Missal, another manuscript from the Gallican tradition dating from the turn of the eighth century, Rose takes issue with Robert Coleman, whose criticism of Mohrmann has been discussed in the first chapter of this book, because he considers non-Roman liturgical sources of the seventh and eighth centuries as evidence of extensive vulgarisation. As an example, Coleman observes that the Roman Canon appears in the Bobbio Missal in a truncated form that obscures its meaning. He rightly speaks of a “garbled form” and concludes that “in a religion where departures from the prescribed form of words could raise doubts about the validity of the rites enacted by them, the motivation to restore was strong”. ⁴² I cannot see how one could reasonably question this conclusion. In fact, Rose herself provides several examples of how the Bobbio Missal radically shortens prayers of the Missale Gothicum to the point that their grammar becomes confused and their contents can be understood only with difficulties. ⁴³ This is not just a question of orthographic peculiarities that would be typical of a period of transition from Latin to the Romance vernaculars. In fact, Rose herself concedes that in some cases “the scissor and paste work of the compiler of the Bobbio Missal has led to grammatically incorrect and incomprehensible texts”. ⁴⁴ This is just one aspect of the decay of Latin literary culture in the Merovingian period, which prompted the efforts of churchmen and scholars under Charlemagne to purify


⁴⁰ Cf. Mohrmann, Quelques observations sur l’évolution stylistique, 235, n. 21.


⁴² Coleman, Vulgar Latin and the Diversity of Christian Latin, 47.

⁴³ See Rose, Liturgical Latin in the Bobbio Missal, 71-76.

⁴⁴ Rose, Liturgical Latin in the Bobbio Missal, 72.
and standardize liturgical books. The Carolingian Renaissance restored the classical forms of liturgical Latin; however, by doing so, at the same time it created a greater distance between the language of the liturgy and the developing vernacular of the people.\(^45\)

**Speech and Silence**

Liturgical prayer is a form of public speech and it is to be expected that it would be said or sung by the officiating clergy in an audible voice, as would seem to have been the universal rule for Christian worship in the first centuries. In the case of the Eucharist, the celebrant bishop or priest recites prayers in the name and on behalf of the whole assembly, and the people usually respond with “Amen”, as elicited by the concluding formula of the prayers themselves.

However, from the early Middle Ages certain parts of the Roman rite of Mass were recited by the celebrant in a low voice, most notably the centre of the Eucharistic liturgy, the Canon. Its silent recitation became the norm until the liturgical reforms following the Second Vatican Council and continues to this day in what Pope Benedict XVI has established as the “extraordinary form”, or *usus antiquior*, of the Roman rite.\(^46\) This practice is by no means limited to the Western tradition; on the contrary, Eastern liturgies, such as the Byzantine Anaphora of St John Chrysostom, also contain prayers that are to be said *submissa voce* by the celebrant bishop or priest.\(^47\)

The earliest clear evidence for a partial recitation of the Eucharistic prayer in silence is from the East Syrian tradition and is found in the *Homily on the Mysteries* attributed to Narsai, the head of the theological schools of Edessa and of Nisibis (d. 502).\(^48\) The liturgical practice emerging from Narsai’s homily is confirmed by subsequent witnesses to the East Syrian tradition that are only a little later than Narsai: a short description of the liturgy by Catholicos Iso’yahb I (518-595/6),\(^49\) which is included in the *Synodicon Orientale*, and the more detailed liturgical commentary of Gabriel of Qatar (written between 615 and 625).\(^50\)

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\(^{50}\) Gabriel of Qatar, *Memra V*, 2, 66-67 (British Library, Or. 3336, fol. 201v-202r), published in the Syriac original and in an English translation by S. P. Brock, “Gabriel of Qatar’s Commentary on the Liturgy”, in
The custom of reciting large parts of the Anaphora in silence also spread to Greek-speaking churches by the middle of the sixth century, as we can infer from the Emperor Justinian’s legislation against it in his Novella of 26 March 565.\textsuperscript{51} By this time 565, the practice of reciting the Canon silently had not yet made its way to Rome.\textsuperscript{52}

Between the latter part of the sixth century and the second half of the eighth century, liturgical practice in Rome developed in such a way that by the year 800, the Canon of the Mass was recited by the celebrant in a low voice. The Ordines Romani of the eighth century present the Canon of the Mass, now understood to begin with Te igitur, as a “holy of holies”, into which only the Pontiff could enter.\textsuperscript{53} This idea would eventually lead to an entirely silent recitation of the Canon.\textsuperscript{54} It is conceivable that this practice was introduced in Rome by the Popes of Greek and Syrian origin that were elected to the See of Peter in the second half of the seventh century and the first half of the eighth century.

The development towards a recitation of liturgical prayers submissa voce is usually attributed to the increasing sense of reverence and awe towards the mysteries celebrated in the liturgy, which is tangible especially in the Eastern Christian traditions from the fourth century onwards. Two decisive factors are identified: the emphasis on the divinity of Christ in opposition to Arianism and the concern to protect the sacred from the uncatechized masses that were flocking into the church after the Constantinian settlement.\textsuperscript{55}

In the case of the Roman liturgy, there might be another consideration that should not be neglected: the architectural setting of the solemn celebrations of the Roman Pontiff. When the Pope celebrated Mass in one of the large Roman basilicas, such as the Lateran, St Peter’s in the Vatican, or St Paul’s Outside the Walls, before the existence of electrical amplification, it would be impossible in most parts of the church to follow the prayers he recited or chanted at the altar. Even in a smaller church like Santa Sabina, the audibility of the liturgical prayers would be much limited. Just as there were visible barriers, such as the relatively high cancelli separating the various precincts of the church’s interior, a ciborium over the main altar, sometimes decorated with curtains, so the physical dimensions of the church interior created


\textsuperscript{54} \textit{OR} XV,37-43: Andrieu, III,103-104; \textit{OR} V,58: Andrieu II,221

an audible barrier between the pope and his assistance at the altar and the faithful in the naves.56

The *Ordines Romani* describing liturgical practice in the city of Rome would not need to specify this, but when they were adapted to Frankish conditions, and thus to churches of medium or small size, it was actually written down that the Canon was to be recited in a low voice. This interpretation would in my view give justice to the development observed from *Ordo Romanus I* to *Ordo Romanus V*. Thus the emergence of the silent canon in the Western tradition should also be seen in the context of the liturgy’s architectural setting that had a decisive impact on the relation between speech and silence.

**Latin and the Vernacular in the Modern Age**

In the course of the Middle Ages, the formation of national languages and cultures in Europe meant the language of the liturgy became more and more removed from the language of the people. However, it would be an exaggeration to conclude that the use of Latin as a sacred language was a barrier to understanding of and participation in the Mass. In the first place, as the (Lutheran) liturgical scholar Frank Senn argues, such a conclusion rests on a narrow understanding of participation that “sees liturgy only as text and limits participation to speaking roles”. Senn continues:

The laity have always found ways to participate in the liturgy, whether it was in their language or not, and they have always derived meaning from the liturgy, whether it was the intended meaning or not. Furthermore, the laity in worship were surrounded by other ‘vernaculars’ than language, not least of which were the church buildings themselves and the liturgical art that decorated them.57

Senn also notes in passing that the common accusations against Latin in the liturgy have been greatly overstated. This would certainly hold in countries where the vernacular developed from Latin. Augustine Thompson shows in his study of ordinary religious practice in Italian cities in the high Middle Ages that, contrary to the claim made by heretical groups, such as the Waldensians, there was a basic understanding at least of the meaning conveyed in Latin liturgical texts, and that this was so even among the lesser educated, at least if they chose to follow attentively.58 Historical sources provide a number of interesting examples: as a layman and hermit, Francis of Assisi received the inspiration to found the Friars Minor during the celebration of Mass on the feast of St Mathias (24 February 1209), when the apostles’ commission to go and preach the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 10:7-19) was

56 Cf. Willis, *Further Essays in Early Roman Liturgy*, 128-129.
solemnly proclaimed. His grasp of Latin must have been good enough to be touched to the core by the words of the Gospel. In 1296, a synod in Grado decreed that deacons were not to use melismatic tones in their chanting of the Gospel “these impeded the understanding of the hearers and so the devotion in the minds of the faithful is reduced”. The elaborate tones were permitted only for the proclamation of the genealogies of Christ on Christmas and Epiphany and for “the first Gospel chanted by a newly ordained deacon”. In Italy, the spoken language of the people was still close enough to the Latin that comprehension of liturgical texts was by no means restricted to the educated clergy. Writing about early modern Europe, Peter Burke records that an increasing part of the laity was studying Latin, including the small but growing group of learned women. The cultural impact of the sacred language in everyday speech is also evident from the resonances of liturgical Latin in the vernacular languages of the Romance countries, some of which go back to the early modern period.

The use of Latin in this period still provided an example of “diglossia”, which means that “that it was considered appropriate to use that language in some situations and domains”. It was the language of the cultural elites and served to bind together international communities of ideas, above all the Church and the Republic of Letters. None the less, the objections to the use of Latin not only in the liturgy, but in public life at large and in other aspects of the Church’s life became more widely spread in the Renaissance and Reformation periods. The humanists’ movement for a return to the purity of Ciceronian Latin aggravated this situation, because it meant that Latin as a “living second language” was discarded in favour of reviving a language that had been truly “dead”.

The problem became acute in the sixteenth century, when the Protestant Reformers, in continuity with dissident movements of the later Middle Ages, attacked the use of Latin in the liturgy. There was also a theological rationale at the root of this critique: the Protestants’ idea of divine worship being essentially a proclamation of Word of God made them conclude that using a language that was not intelligible to the assembly was contrary to the Gospel. Martin Luther was happy to allow for some Latin, as far as it was understood by the people, and this custom was followed for some time in Lutheran communities. John Calvin, on the other hand, categorically rejected the use of Latin in worship.

59 Quoted after Thompson, Cities of God, 240.
60 See P. Burke, Languages and Communities in Early Modern Europe: The 2002 Wiles Lectures given at Queen’s University, Belfast (Cambridge: University Press, 2004), 49.
61 Burke, Languages and Communities, 50-51, provides a few delightful examples; see also R. Bracchi, “Il latino liturgico sulla bocca del popolo”, in, Il latino e i cristiani: Un bilancio all’inizio del terzo millennio, ed. E. dal Covolo – M. Sodi, Monumenta Studia Instrumenta Liturgica, 17 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002), 489-507.
62 Burke, Languages and Communities, 43.
63 See C. Mohrmann, “The Ever-Recurring Problem of Language in the Church”, in Études sur le latin des chrétiens, vol. IV, 143-59, at 152, and Burke, Languages and Communities, 144-145.
At the Council of Trent, the question of liturgical language was much debated, and the arguments produced by the Protestant Reformers were considered very seriously. The Decree on the Sacrifice of the Mass of the Council’s 22nd Session in 1562 contains a carefully worded doctrinal exposition on the subject, stating that it did not seem expedient to the Fathers that the Holy Mass should be celebrated in the vernacular, although they recognise the value of the texts of the Mass for the instruction of the faithful. However, pastors should preach frequently about what is read at Mass, especially on Sundays and feast days. Moreover, canon nine of the same Decree on the Sacrifice of the Mass declares anathema anyone who says that the vernacular language must be used in the celebration of Mass; again, the subtle wording of this conciliar text is to be noted.

The question of Latin and the vernacular in the Church’s liturgy continued to be discussed in the centuries after Trent, especially in the Catholic Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, and came to the fore especially in the twentieth century, but this will be the topic of the next chapter.

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65 Council of Trent, 22nd Session (17 September 1562), Decree on the Sacrifice of the Mass, ch. 8.

66 Much useful material is assembled in Pecklers, Dynamic Equivalence.
For further reading


Burke, P. *Languages and Communities in Early Modern Europe: The 2002 Wiles Lectures given at Queen’s University, Belfast* (Cambridge: University Press, 2004).


Haessly, M. G. *Rhetoric in the Sunday Collects of the Roman Missal: with Introduction, Text, Commentary and Translation* (Cleveland: Ursuline College for Women, 1938).


Wright, R. *Late Latin and Early Romance in Spain and Carolingian France* (Liverpool: Cairns, 1982).