

The Future
of the
Catholic Church
with
Pope Francis

GARRY WILLS

Author of WHY PRIESTS?

ALSO BY GARRY WILLS

Why Priests?

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What Paul Meant

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*To Carolyn Carlson
for her guidance*

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Key to Brief Citations

- CD** Augustine, *City of God (De Civitate Dei)*, edited by Bernard Dombart and Alphonsus Kalb, fifth edition (Teubner, 1981), two volumes.
- DF** Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, edited by J. B. Bury, seven volumes (Methuen & Co., 1909–12).
- S 1** J. Stevenson and W. H. C. Frend, *A New Eusebius: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*, third edition (Baker Academic, 2013).
- S 2** J. Stevenson and W. H. C. Frend, *Creeeds, Councils and Controversies: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church, AD 337–461*, third edition (Baker Academic, 2012).
- ST** Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, four volumes (La Editorial Católica, 1958).
- VC** Eusebius, *Life of Constantine (Vita Constantini)*, translated with introduction and commentary by Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall (Oxford University Press, 1999).

Introduction: Reading History Forward

In a higher world it is otherwise; but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.

—John Henry Newman¹

To be faithful, to be creative, we need to be able to change.

—Pope Francis²

Pope Francis heartens some Catholics, but frightens others—both of them for the same reason, the prospect of change. The Catholic Church is the oldest institution in Western civilization. Surely the secret to its longevity is its ability to defy and outlast all the many breaks and discontinuities over the last twenty centuries. From that vantage point, a changing church is simply not the Catholic Church. Immutability must be built into its DNA.

It helps, in holding such a view, not to know much history. There was no need to know much. Since one begins from a certitude that the church was always what it has become, one simply has to extrapolate backward from what we have. We have priests, so we must always have had them—though they never show up in the Gospels. We have popes, so they must have been there too—they were just hiding for several centuries. We have transubstantiation, so we did not have to wait for the thirteenth century to tell us what that is. The beauty of the church is its marble permanence. Change would be its death warrant.

Early on, I was given a different view of the church from reading G. K. Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man*. It was published nine years before I was born, and it took me sixteen years after that to catch up with it—but I was intrigued, then, by a chapter called “The Five Deaths of the Faith.” This offered a different story of the church's long life. For Chesterton, it was not a tale of certainty formed early and never altered. It was a story of hairbreadth escapes, as the church kept dying, of old age, or of inanition, or from external causes. There were many times when it could have died—when, by the laws of historical probability, it should have died—yet it was constantly reanimated from some supernatural deathlessness. Corruption should have killed it, or the Roman Empire should have, or the Renaissance, or Galileo, or Darwin, or Freud. “Christianity has died many times and risen again; for we had a God who knew the way out of the grave.”³

This was not because it simply defied change. In fact, it often changed with the age—became

Roman with the Roman Empire, shedding its Middle Eastern roots and adopting a Latin structure; became a super-monarchy in the age of monarchs; became super-ascetic in the age of Stoic contempt for the body; became misogynistic in the various patriarchies; became anti-Semitic when the world despised Jews. But when the age died of old age, the church somehow didn't. As Chesterton put it:

It has not only died often but degenerated often and decayed often; it has survived its own weakness and even its own surrender . . . It was said truly enough that human Christianity in its recurrent weakness was sometimes too much wedded to the powers of the world; but if it was wedded it has very often been widowed. It is a strangely immortal sort of widow.⁴

Sometimes, of course, it clung too long to what it had worn as a new set of up-to-date garments. The recovery of Aristotle was a fresh and challenging thing when Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas led it, but it became an unnecessary encumbrance when Rome thought it something too good to let go of. The Latin tongue looked, for a long time, like a universal language, spreading opportunities for communication, till it became an outmoded thing trammelled in its own particularities. The Irish practice of private confession introduced a deeper kind of spirituality for monastic specialists, till its broader use for everyone, including children, made it commonplace and subject to abuse.

The church outlasted things that seemed to undermine it—not because it was unaffected by these transitory things, but because it joined them, drew on other sources, and lived to adopt different new things. Instead of reading history backward, from its current form to a fictive immutability in the past, Chesterton led me to read history forward, from the early evidences and from the different guises the church had to adopt in order to survive. That is not only a more interesting story, but an exciting one—of narrow escapes and improbable swerves. It calls to mind Buster Keaton's *Seven Chances* (1925) in which Buster runs full speed down a sloping mountainside, pursued by a giant landslide of boulders dodging some, leaping over others, maneuvering through repeated impasses, caught by a smaller rock that knocks him out of the path of a bigger one, ducking into cover that itself gives way. And then, toward the bottom of the mountain, an even greater menace forces him to run back up through the continuing rain of rocks.

Going back to read the church's story as it happened was called *ressourcement* (re-sourcing) in the 1940s and 1950s, when Pius XI and Pius XII silenced its practitioners. The only way to look back, for those popes, was to reaffirm what “always was” in the church, not to find anything new there. There can be no history at all for those who just retroject the present into the past. But Pope Francis champions *ressourcement*, as he told his fellow Jesuits at *America* magazine. Newman's concept of doctrinal development breathes through that interview:

The joint effort of reflection [with the Orthodox Church], looking at how the church was governed in the early centuries, before the breakup between East and West, will bear fruit . . . St. Vincent of Lerins makes a comparison between the biological development of man and the transmission from one era to another of the deposit of faith, which grows and is strengthened with time. Here, human self-understanding changes with time and so also human consciousness deepens.⁵

The suppression of the “re-sourcers” is an old story with the church. Yesterday's heretic becomes today's authority—and vice versa. I want to trace, in this book, how change—far from being the enemy of Catholicism—is its means of respiration, its way of breathing in and breathing out. Even

before Pope Francis, the Second Vatican Council had found in the church's sources that "the church" did not always mean what some of its defenders insist that it *must* mean. Their meaning is implicit in usages like "the church teaches," or "you must obey the church." For some, "the church" is the Vatican, the papacy, the *magisterium*, the church's teaching authority. But that apparatus was not there at the beginning. Another usage of "church" was older, broader, and better attested in the sources. Vatican II returned to that meaning when it proclaimed that the church is "the People of God."⁶ This people includes all those who believe in, follow, and love Jesus.

This people first organized itself under the guidance of the Spirit imparted to it at Pentecost. It chose its own leaders, it tested authority, it rejected attempts to dictate to it from above. It had various leaders, playing them off against each other—James in Jerusalem, Peter in Antioch, Paul in Corinth. Its councils voted on doctrine through representatives (bishops) who were themselves elected by the people. In John Henry Newman's time, the *magisterium* was so far from this understanding of the church that he was silenced for claiming that the laity had *some* role in forming doctrine, and that the church could undergo *some* change (under the rubric of "development"). It was impossible for Newman to carry his thought further, developing its own implications. The very concept was quashed in its initial formulations. The need to hang on to set ways stifles creativity. Pope Francis describes the condition:

Whenever we Christians are enclosed in our groups, our movements, our parishes, in our little worlds, we remain closed, and the same thing happens to us that happens to anything closed: when a room is closed, it begins to get dank. If a person is closed up in that room, he or she becomes ill.

We are now able to read history forward again, to test evidence and trace changes—changes that came, were changed themselves, and then fell away. We can see the People of God weathering all kinds of vicissitudes, while not losing belief, while still following Jesus, while still expressing love of him in the care for each other and for the needy. We can see the coming and going of the papacy as a worldly empire, the rise and final rejection of a "universal language," the rejection of the Jewish covenant and its renewed recognition, the fad for biblical fundamentalism returning to figurative readings, the condemnation of the body circling back to its recognition. I mean in this book to watch the phases of this process, the reaction of the church as a living body in real situations.

To say that change has often shaken the church does not mean that change is always an easy process. And we should not expect it to come from any one man, even though he is the pope. We sometimes think John XXIII changed much in the church. But he was not so much the initiator as the welcomer of changes long in preparation and not to be imposed, "top down," by fiat. Three of the changes I treat in this book—from the Latin liturgy, from rejection to acceptance of the Jewish covenant, and from the ideal of a state church to one of religious freedom—were made not by Pope John but by the Vatican Council he called together. He was in many ways a conservative in his tastes. He personally loved the Latin liturgy, and his own scholarship was pretty much restricted to editing writings of the quite autocratic Charles Borromeo.⁸ But he did not try to mold the church in his own image. He knew that would be going against the true meaning of the church. He called in others to consider change. And the council fathers summoned or listened to prophetic scholars who had been silenced by autocratic popes—men named Daniélou, Congar, Chenu, Rahner, Murray.

The papacy is not a prophetic office. People may be lodging too much hope in the name Cardinal Bergoglio took for himself. No other pope has taken that name, probably for good reasons. Francis of

Assisi was, notoriously, not a good administrator—prophets never are. The religious order he founded rushed off in all directions, splintered, and quarreled, while—in broader and lasting ways—the whole church was aerated and exalted by his example. It would have been more expectable for Bergoglio, a Jesuit, to have taken one of the Saint Francis from his own order—Saint Francis Xavier, for instance, or even Saint Francis Borgia. He made a riskier choice, but we would make the long shot even longer by expecting a prophet instead of a pope. Leonardo Boff, the leader of liberation theology once avoided by Bergoglio, now embraced by Francis, thinks that, in this case, *nomen* truly is an *omen*. He says, “Francis is more than a name—it’s a plan.”⁹ But Francis of Assisi was not good at plans, and the name can promise too much.

Though the pope has changed much in the style and presentation of the papacy, conservatives keep telling themselves that he has not changed dogma, and liberals say that even his stylistic changes have kept much they disapproved of in place. He has, for instance, canonized the authoritarian John Paul I and retained Benedict XVI’s favored disciplinary instrument, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. He has not only retained Benedict’s choice as prefect of the CDF, Gerhard Müller, but promoted him to cardinal. And under Müller the harsh investigation of American nuns was allowed to continue.

The pope has said that to be truly Christian one must be a revolutionary, as Jesus was. “In this day and age, unless Christians are revolutionaries, they are not Christians.”¹⁰ But the man at the center cannot rebel against himself. The pope must, by his office, care for continuity and minimize disruption. It is true that some popes care more for continuity than for the life of the church—Paul VI and John Paul II were so urgent to keep continuity with the 1930 encyclical *Casti Connubii* that they wrote *Humanae Vitae* (1968) and *Familiaris Consortio* (1981), ignoring the voices of theologians, bishops, and the people. But that does not mean that a pope can just disregard any need for continuity. Though Francis can renounce the more ostentatious flourishes of his office, he cannot knock the prop out from under the throne he sits on. Prophets levitate; popes rarely do. Francis cannot simply draw up the ladder by which he climbed. That was as true of John XXIII as it is of Francis.

All popes show a proper deference to their predecessors; but no other pope had a predecessor still living, and living right next door. Some earlier popes had resigned or been forced from office, but they did not hang around to keep an eye on what their successor was doing. Francis is in the ticklish position of having to look over his shoulder, much of the time, at Benedict. The canonization of John Paul II, for instance, was an uncompleted project of Benedict. Francis completed it. The prefect of the CDF is another example of Francis’s limited room for maneuver. Müller was not only a friend of Pope Benedict, he is the man he commissioned as the editor of his writings. Benedict also appointed him to the signature office he had held himself in a stormily contested tenure. No one could be more trusted to guard Benedict’s legacy and reputation at the CDF. For Francis to reject him would be a direct insult to Benedict.

On the other hand, as the expert Jesuit Vaticanologist Thomas Reese has pointed out, Francis has done much to whittle down the centrality of the CDF, creating different centers of power in gradual shifts of emphasis and organization.¹¹ This is the kind of balancing act by which popes make change digestible, if not palatable. Francis, like John XXIII, calls on others to take steps moving the whole church, not just its ceremonial head. Liberals, for instance, have called for him to repeal the informal excommunication of sincere Catholics who have lapsed from some doctrinal demands. Francis has called on bishops to consider this question. But he has encouraged those who want to speak out to do so. He considers a hypothetical case in the confessional:

I also consider the situation of a woman with a failed marriage in her past and who also had an abortion. Then this woman remarries, and she is now happy and has five children. That abortion in her past weighs heavily on her conscience and she sincerely regrets it. She would like to move forward in her Christian life. What is the confessor to do?

He offers this simply as a matter for confessors to ponder, but he gives a hint where his own instincts lie when he says, “The confessional is not a torture chamber.”¹²

Though church reform is a matter Francis cannot avoid, he says that the Gospel energy for that must look outward, at the other tasks the church has neglected, draining its power to carry out its commission from Jesus—to care for the sufferings of the poor, of immigrants, of sexual victims of all kinds. Reforms that seem hard can become almost incidental when energy is generated and expended on these missions. A constant emphasis of his talks as pope has been on going out to the periphery, the margins, the frontiers, to take God’s love to them. And he wants Catholics to join with other Christian churches, East and West, in carrying Christ’s message to those in need. It seems at first as if he is just taking on more tasks, more external missions along with internal reforms. But he says that getting priorities straight will help with all these efforts. That is why he criticized the endless and repetitive harping on things like abortion and contraception.¹³

It is a huge undertaking. If the pope is not a prophet, he does need to be something of an acrobat, like Buster Keaton dodging and scrambling down the mountain under the steady pursuit of boulders large and small. He has multiple tasks no one can perform alone, which is why he calls on others to pray for and support him. These are tasks the whole church must take up—tasks for us, for the People of God. He has made the church as the People of God a leitmotiv in his pronouncements, as in his major document, *Evangelii Gaudium*:

[The church] exists concretely in history as a people of pilgrims and evangelizers, transcending any institutional expression, however necessary . . . The People of God is incarnate in the peoples of the earth . . . God furnishes the totality of the faithful with an instinct of faith—*sensus fidei*—which helps them to discern what is truly of God.

A pope who believes in *that* church will not try to change it all by himself—which is the best way to change it.

NOTES

¹ J. H. Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Penguin, 1994), 100

² Pope Francis, *The Church of Mercy* (Loyola Press, 2014), 18

³ G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (Ignatius Press, 1987), 250

⁴ *Ibid.*, 259–60

⁵ Interview with Pope Francis, *America*, September 30, 2013 The interview was drawn from six hours of conversation over three days.

⁶ *Lumen Gentium* 13, *Gaudium et Spes* 11, in *Vatican Council II*, edited by Austin Flannery, sixth printing (Costello Publishing Company, 2007), 17, 174

⁷ Pope Francis, *The Church of Mercy* (Loyola Press, 2014), 19

⁸ As Peter Hebblethwaite wrote, “[Roncalli] had discovered his scholarly vocation, editing the 39 volumes of Saint Charles Borromeo . . . But it took a lifetime. The five volumes appeared in 1936, 1937, 1938, 1946 and 1957” But the books were so expensive few could buy them. *John XXIII: Pope of the Council* (Geoffrey Chapman, 1988), 54, 240

⁹ Paul Vallely, *Pope Francis: Untying the Knots* (Bloomsbury, 2013), 198

¹⁰ Pope Francis, *The Church of Mercy*, 13

¹¹ Thomas Reese, S.J., “Vatican’s Doctrinal Congregation Isn’t So Supreme Anymore,” *National Catholic Reporter*, February

14, 2014

[12.](#) Pope Francis, *America* interview.

[13.](#) Ibid.: “We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage and the use of contraceptive methods . . . We have to find a new balance; otherwise even the moral edifice of the church is likely to fall like a house of cards.”

I

The Coming and Going of Latin



Inclusion

When I was growing up I often heard that a strength of the Catholic Church was its universality. Go anywhere in the world, and you would find the same words and rites being used at Mass. This made people as different as Joseph de Maistre and Arnold Lunn say that a Catholic was at home anywhere. Latin knew no spatial or temporal limits. It was the perfect vehicle for conveying eternal truths, absolute everywhere. No wonder people fought so hard at the Second Vatican Council to keep this symbol and pledge of supra-temporal consistency. Latin was the eternal language for an eternal church.

The idea of a common language, one that can span cultural differences and bring people together, is perennially attractive. The most persistent effort at this is Esperanto, invented in 1878 by Ludwig Zamenhof. He came from the town of Bialystok, where people spoke Russian, German, Yiddish, and lesser-known tongues. After mastering these, Zamenhof dreamed of breaking down divisions in the community by creating a shared language all could own and be proud of. His broader hopes for creating peace through a unity of language were fostered by thousands of people around the world. He was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Other artificial languages have been contrived, along with attempts to unify the spelling, phonetic, and morphology of single languages—for instance, George Bernard Shaw's promotion of a new alphabet for English. At a less ambitious and therefore more common level, there have been attempts by national academies or prescriptive dictionaries to impose standard usage for any and all words. These have all been strangled in the thickets of particularity they were trying to erase.

Esperanto, precisely because it seeks a neutral common ground, loses the color, nuance, and historical resonance of native words spoken over time in specific cultural contexts. These words all have echoes of their former uses, in many layers. Different people are aware of different levels of the usage, but every native speaker recognizes some of them, and they lend richness to the words. The words when joined have rhythms and accents that vary according to the linkages, recognizing old partner-words, or perking up at striking collisions with surrounding words, accompanied with the arc of their phrasing, the tune of the language as sounded. Esperanto and its congeners will always seem sterile and empty next to words that buzz with such possibilities, as suggestive as they are elusive. That is why it is impossible to write real poetry in Esperanto. As a language with the lowest common denominator of meaning, it is all a wide, thin surface over nonexistent depths.

Latin, however, seemed for a long time to escape these common dangers of a common language. It did have a history, with historical resonance. For centuries it served as a lingua franca for those with differing first languages. It facilitated diplomatic and scholarly exchanges. It was the language not only of the Christian churches, but of the learned in many secular circles. Treaties were better drawn

up in a language that extended to all parties. The civilization of a culture was judged by its degree of connection with the Latin language. That is why T. S. Eliot claimed that Dante is a more universal poet than Shakespeare, more accessible to those with the common heritage of Latin-derived Romance languages. (He hastened to say that this did not make Dante greater than Shakespeare, just a denizen of a wider culture.) As de Maistre wrote, “the European sign is Latin.”¹ That was a problem. Latin was “universal” only for Europe. It was parochial so far as the rest of the world was concerned. Those who championed Latin as the best expression of the faith also thought, in Hilaire Belloc’s familiar maxim that “Europe is the faith.” We no longer think that “universal” means European.

Even in the New World colonies of America, which were only partly non-European, there was a sense that one should find one’s own ways of thinking and speaking, outside the matrix of Latinity. Dr. Benjamin Rush, the Revolutionary leader in Pennsylvania, said that people in a young country should develop their own new ways of learning. Though classically trained himself, he said that starting out with Latin and Greek would cramp the minds of American children:

While the business of education in Europe consists in lectures upon the ruins of Palmyra and the antiquities of Herculaneum, or in disputes about Hebrew points, Greek particles, or the accent and quantity of the Roman language, the youth of America will be employed in acquiring those branches of knowledge which increase the conveniences of life, lessen human misery, improve our country, promote population, exalt the human understanding, and establish domestic, social, and political happiness.²

As a physician, Rush was especially upset at the long domination of medical theory by classical authors like Galen and Hippocrates. But other founding-era leaders, men like Thomas Paine and Noah Webster, also felt that training in the classical languages would inhibit freshness and creativity on American soil.³

When Benjamin Franklin established the Philadelphia Academy, which developed into the University of Pennsylvania, he ruled against a Latin language requirement. Later, when the school board reversed this policy, he tried to establish a separate school based on English.⁴ He knew that Greek and Latin would be necessary for some graduate programs, especially those in divinity, but he did not want children to suffer the drudgery of learning Latin forms that they would never use in later life. He knew from experience that French had replaced Latin as the vehicle for international diplomacy.⁵

Nor were Americans the only ones trying to break away from the static Latin schooling of the past. The scientific revolution of the seventeenth century led to the so-called “battle of the Ancients and the Moderns” celebrated by Swift and Pope in *The Battle of the Books* and *The Dunciad*. John Locke had championed vernacular education in 1692:

[The gentleman] ought to study grammar . . . but it must be the grammar of his own tongue, of the language he uses, that he may understand his own country speech nicely, and speak it properly . . . And to this purpose grammar is necessary; but it is the grammar *only of their own proper tongues* [emphasis added].⁶

The attempt to teach modern science in Latin led to the invention of stilted and approximate terms based on Latin roots. That is why some early scientific work was carried on by academies and patron

organizations apart from the university systems. Franklin, the supreme autodidact, was in communication with such scientific academies in other countries.

It took a long and dogged fight to break the hold of Latin as the basic tool of education at the primary and secondary levels. Françoise Waquet tells the story of that struggle, primarily from the history of her own country, France, but with important looks around at the rest of Europe.⁷ Latin had not been taught to schoolboys as a way to appreciate important works of poetry or philosophy. It was imposed precisely as “a discipline,” the more severe the better, since it was supposed to be forming character as well as rigor of thinking. (If clarity of thought was the goal, why not just teach logic?) Locke and Franklin had early on exploded the concept that learning Latin grammar was the way to learn other languages. Even the claim that Latin gave a special entry into the Romance languages derived from it was disproved by Franklin. He had shown that it worked better the other way around—knowledge of French and/or Italian made it easier to pick up what Latin one might want for actual use.⁸

When one got beyond reading and composing by the rules, and actually read real poetry in the schools, it was still being learned as a chore, so that few continued the reading after they left school. Benjamin Rush said in the eighteenth century what was true of succeeding ones—that if boys labored through a book or two of the *Aeneid* in a classroom, they did not go on to read the whole poem later.⁹ Does one really know Vergil better for having read one book in the original than from reading the entire *Aeneid* in translation? Michel de Montaigne could say, even earlier, that “having learned” Latin was not the same as “knowing” it in later life.¹⁰ The language was just a painful barrier to be crossed making the first part of one’s schooling the most arid. Even the well educated in France and England actually used what Latin they retained mainly in familiar tags and mottos. The British poet Louis MacNeice, who not only studied but taught Latin at the university level, had no illusions about the usual result of that teaching. It bestowed

The privilege of learning a language
That is incontrovertibly dead
And of carting a toy-box of hall-marked marmoreal phrases
Around in his head.¹¹

What Rush called such “smatterings” have nothing to do with real scholarship.¹² Those who genuinely want to know and enjoy the classics can do that without imposing on others the labor of indoctrination without any of the later enrichment. Of course, to get translations you must have a supply of learned people who know and can convey the meaning of the originals. And, ideally, teachers using such translations should be able to enrich them from their own knowledge; but it would impoverish general education to insist that only Greek scholars could teach Homer in the schools.

I have been talking so far about Latin in the broad world. Whatever happened there, one could always claim that Catholics, at least, had kept Latin alive as the language of the church. While it is true that Latin was used in the sacraments and documents of the church, its claim as a living medium of exchange had quickly grown thin. This was true at many levels. To start low down in the formation of the ministry, I recur to my days as a Jesuit novice in the 1950s. We were required to speak only Latin during the day, reserving the use of English to our recreation period after dinner. I had had four years of Latin at a good high school, and my *carissimi* (as we were instructed to call each other) had comparable backgrounds. But we used only “kitchen Latin” vocabulary and repeated locutions during

the day, saving anything we wanted to say with richer meaning for our English exchanges. We took oral Latin tests in the same way, usefully restraining our answers to planned formulas as the safest in terms of matter and manner.

One might hope that as novices continued their studies, and became more practiced in Latin, its use would become more flexible and informative. But later, in my seminary philosophy classes, we actually used more English than Latin in studying Thomas Aquinas, and no one seemed to be reading the originals beyond assigned excerpts. I saw few priests in later life actually reading Latin works outside the formulas of their breviary. In the 1960s, after leaving the Jesuits, and getting a doctorate in the classical languages, I wrote a book on papal encyclicals. A few of these documents, the most famous ones, were available in English, but most of them were still in ecclesiastical Latin. To read them I had to go, in Baltimore, to Saint Mary's, the oldest seminary in America. There, text by text, I read them by slitting their uncut pages. If they were not being read there, where were they read?

The myth that Latin was a real means of living communication in the church took heavy blows at both of the ecumenical councils of the modern era. At the First Vatican Council (1869–70), conducted in Latin, bishops were less ready to use it and understand it than they pretended—which gave members of the Roman Curia an advantage for steering and limiting what went on. When bishops did speak up, they were not only halting in their attempts at spontaneous Latin, but they spoke in the different pronunciations of their own countries. Latin used by a bishop from Cyprus sounded like Greek to the Italian bishop of Lucca. In order to record the proceedings, a Roman secretariat arranged for twenty-three seminarians from different countries to try to puzzle out what their countrymen were saying, and their joint product had what were called “mediocre results.” One of the scribes, according to Françoise Waquet, remembered that “during the first few days one often saw a smile breaking through the gravity of the Italian bishops and cardinals, when they heard the language of Cicero being spoken with inflections strange to their ears.” Some bishops petitioned the pope to let them hold ancillary meetings in the different language groups to figure out what was going on. Waquet concludes her account of the event this way:

Different accents had resounded in the very place where unity was supposed to reign, detracting considerably from the claimed universality of the Latin language.¹³

That was in the nineteenth century, when Latin was still the basis of instruction in most European schools, for laymen as well as clerics. A century later, at the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), when bishops and priests themselves were far less used to Latin outside church formularies, Archbishop Richard Cushing of Boston faced the language problem squarely by trying to pay for UN-style simultaneous translations the bishops could listen to through earphones. That was at the first session of the council. He was told that the Curia was exploring this proposal and would follow up on his request; but by the end of the second session nothing had been done, and Cushing left the council for good.¹⁴ Maximos IV Sayegh, the Catholic Melkite patriarch, endorsed the request for simultaneous translation, to no effect.¹⁵ He made his own addresses to the council in French.

It did not serve the Roman officials of the Curia to make communication easier. This lent a note of absurdity to the time when Cardinal Spellman of New York presided over one debate on retaining Latin in the liturgy and had to have his own speech read by another, since no one could understand his Latin. The Redemptorist priest F. X. Murphy, writing from Rome as Xavier Rynne, concluded, “Latin as a medium of communication at the Council proved to be less than a success.”¹⁶ Andrea Riccardi

agrees: “The choice of Latin and the exclusion of simultaneous translation not only affected the ability of the fathers to understand what was happening; it also signified the choice of a mentality.”¹⁷ Latin is the language of dogma.

One can reply that the value of Latin comes not from the proficiency of its daily users, but from the stability of its rites and documents. The rites I will consider later; but the documents are not as firmly universal as they seem. The problem of sneaking subtle new meaning into creaky old formulas is harder to avoid than people think. Take, for instance, a famous dispute that arose from John XXIII's encyclical letter *Mater et Magistra* (1960). Paragraph 59 of that document referred to the modern world's increasing complexity of social interrelationships (*socialium rationum incrementa*). The first English translation authorized by the Vatican called this an increasing “socialization”—a valid translation, understandable by sociologists in a range of meanings; but the word suggested “socialism” to American readers and politicians, and for them socialism was synonymous with Soviet communism.¹⁸ Oceans of ink were wasted on this contretemps.¹⁹

The problem, one may object, was not with the Latin, but with inadequate translators. But such a modern concept was going to be translated “in the head” by all people having different associations with the phenomenon being referred to. The misconception is that all such differences can be extruded from one controlling language. No language is univocal. To think so was to hope for Latin as a higher Esperanto, escaping nuance through a medium that reduces all meaning to a lowest common denominator. At the councils, even if no simultaneous translators put things in the bishops' native languages, they were mentally translating what they understood of the Latin into the specific cultural environment each man carried within. Those different worlds could not be ground into a single cultural mishmash called “timeless” Latin.

There is no universal language that can level and stunt the busyness of mind needed to put thinking into words. To succeed at that, one would have to anesthetize minds, to make thinking cease. And that we may find, was the real hope offered by ecclesiastical Latin. It was not there to facilitate thought but to preserve it by freezing it. Some think it succeeded in that odd (they would consider it that “supernatural”) effort. To prove that Latin is not “universal” does not break its real hold on those who cling to it. They never wanted it to be a leveler. For them, Latin's function was not to lower barriers but to raise them. It was never an inclusive Esperanto. More like a secret code of the elect.

NOTES

1. Joseph de Maistre, *Du Pape* (Charpentier, 1841), 134

2. Carl J. Richard, *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment* (Harvard University Press, 1994), 198

3. *Ibid.*, 192, 202, 215, 224 Also Meyer Reinhold, *Classica Americana: The Greek and Roman Heritage in the United States* (Wayne State University Press, 1984), 123–26

4. Richard, *op. cit.*, 221–22

5. *The Autobiography*, in *Benjamin Franklin: Writings*, edited by J. A. Leo Lemay (Library of America, 1987), 1401

6. John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, Section 168

7. Françoise Waquet, *Latin, or the Empire of a Sign: From the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Centuries*, translated by John Howe (Verso, 2001).

8. Franklin, *op. cit.*, 1401

9. Richard, *op. cit.*, 223

10. Michel de Montaigne, “Du Pedantisme,” in *Essais*, edited by Pierre Michel (Gallimard, 1965), vol. 1, 211–13

11. Louis MacNeice, *Autumn Journal* XIII.

12. Richard, *op. cit.*, 223

13. Waquet, *op. cit.*, 17–71

14. “Xavier Rynne,” *Vatican Council II* (Orbis Books, 1999), 206

15. Mathus Lamberigts, “The Liturgy Debate,” in Giuseppe Alberigo, *History of Vatican II*, English edition by Joseph A.

Komonchak (Orbis/Peeters, 1997), vol. 2, 123–24

16. “Xavier Rynne,” *Letters from Vatican City* (Farrar, Straus & Company, 1963), vol. 1, 99–102

17. Andrea Riccardi, “The Tumultuous Opening Days of the Council,” in Alberigo, op. cit., 47

18. The Vatican later changed the translation to an “increase in social relationships.”

19. William F. Buckley Jr. was famously caught in this cross fire, though he did not think the pope was referring to communism. He called the encyclical “a venture in triviality.” He did not think the pope socialist, just irrelevant—as his friend Russell Kirk said that Eisenhower was not a communist, just a golfer.

TWO

Exclusion

One of the heartiest defenses of church Latin came from the great Renaissance essayist Michel de Montaigne:

We should not see the Holy Book, with the sacred secrets of our belief, bandied about in hallways and kitchens. Things once sacrosanct have become toys to play with. A subject so deep and reverent should not be studied in a random or hurried way. It should be an act of quietness and recollection to be begun with the *Sursum Corda* we say before prayer; and we should fit our very body to the expression of a different alertness and devotion. This is not a study open for anyone to indulge in. It is for those separately summoned by God's call—not for the evil or foolish, whom exposure to will just make worse. It is not simply a story to be recited, but one to be plumbed with trembling and devotion. It is folly to think it can be spread to ordinary folk by being put in their own languages. They think mere difference of language keeps them from understanding what is written. I make bold to say that bringing it down to them just removes it farther from them. Simple ignorance, if reliant on others, is more useful and wise than knowing words that breed a reckless self-confidence. I hold that freely scattering out this holy teaching in all the vernaculars is more dangerous than useful.¹

This is clearly different from the defenses of Latin considered in the preceding chapter. Those argued for a universal language, including as many people as possible, a language maximally understood. By that logic, Latin would fail only to the extent that it could not reach a wide audience. But Montaigne champions Latin because it keeps people out. It maintains the sacred by warding off the unworthy. There is no point in admitting people incapable or unwilling to be initiated into the secrets. In the ancient priests' cry, *Procul, Profani!*

Joseph de Maistre said, two hundred years later, exactly what Montaigne was saying in the sixteenth century: "If the people do not understand the [Latin] words, so much the better. Respect gains, and intelligence loses nothing. He who understands nothing understands more than he who understands badly."² It is not unusual for the keepers of a religious tradition to withhold its secrets from outsiders. The early Christian church observed such a *disciplina arcani* (guarding of the secrets) that people were forbidden to say the creed before unbelievers, and even beginning adherents to the faith were excluded from the communion part of the Mass.

In fact, this instinct is even wider than its religious uses. Some secular literature too has been cherished because it is confined to adepts. Certain kinds of knowledge, it is felt, should not be universally accessible. Even Benjamin Franklin, who favored easy instruction in the vernacular, said

that truly special knowledge should be difficult to acquire. If, as many claimed, ancient philosophy, politics, and literature were so elevated above ordinary varieties of knowledge, then it is understandable that climbing up to them should be restricted to those willing to invest in more than ordinary effort:

When youth are told that the great men whose lives and actions they read in history spoke two of the best languages that ever were [Greek and Latin], the most expressive, copious, beautiful; and that the finest writings, the most correct compositions, the most perfect productions of human wit and wisdom, are in those languages, which have endured ages and will endure while there are men; that no translation can do them justice, or give the pleasure found in reading the originals; that those languages contain all science; that one of them is become almost universal, being the language of learned men in all countries; that to understand them is a distinguishing ornament, etc.—they may be thereby made desirous of learning those languages, and their industry sharpened in the acquisition of them.³

But this draining off of great energy should take place only for those “that have an ardent desire,” and only so long as “other studies absolutely necessary” are not neglected. For most people, Franklin maintained, such recondite knowledge is more ornamental than useful.

But, of course, some people feel that ornaments *are* useful. They are ardently sought precisely because they are rare, as gems or fine art can be rare and difficult to acquire. This fits with a more general feeling that the finest things need disciplined taste to be appreciated. From this it follows that really good art must be “difficult,” with a matching hunch that anything instantly popular must be inferior. Anything ordinary people admired, including Shakespeare’s plays and Verdi’s operas, must have some taint. (The Elizabethan poet Ben Jonson felt that about Shakespeare, and Richard Wagner about Verdi.) The sacredness of religious language is merely an intensification of this instinct to keep the costly above ready purchase.

This is not—well, not always—mere snobbishness. It is true that knowing recondite things is not easy; but those who merely pretend to know them claim a superiority that is unearned. They affect a familiarity with other languages, or with “modern art,” or with Einsteinian physics, striking a pose rather than studying the things themselves. Still, we should not let the poseurs deflect us from recognition that some tastes are not instantly acquired, that exacting standards should keep important knowledge precise, and that some secrets are worth keeping.

Of course, once an elite is formed in terms of a linguistic monopoly, privileges will accrue to mark out that elite, and some abuses are inevitable. Since knowing Latin was the mark of the cleric, one was to claim that status was simply to show evidence that one read Latin. This led to the oddity of English law called *privilegium clericale* (benefit of clergy), whereby one could appeal from a civil court (where beheading was the penalty for certain crimes) to an ecclesiastical court (where penalties were generally less severe) by showing a knowledge of Latin. The standard test for reading Latin became a verse of Psalm 51, beginning *Miserere mei, Deus*—called the “neck verse,” since it was used to escape hanging. Ben Jonson used that verse in 1598 to escape the gallows for manslaughter, getting off with a mere brand on his right hand.⁴ This is just one of many ways Latin was used to mark out a privileged caste. But to those in authority, the advantages of exclusion outweighed any exploitations of it.

Mystery

For some, the great advantage of limiting knowledge of the truth by limiting the language in which it is transacted increased the value of that truth, even for those being kept in the dark. It was a blessing for them to be kept outside. It made them more reverent, and their reverence more meritorious. In the words of Felix Messerschmid, the twentieth-century German liturgist, the laity could sense the power of the Mass “independent of any comprehension in the natural sense of the word.”⁵ Mystery is enhanced by inaccessibility. Early in the nineteenth century, François-René de Chateaubriand wrote:

Orisons in Latin seem to redouble the religious feeling of the crowd. Might this not be a natural effect of our penchant for secrecy? In the tumult of his thoughts and the miseries that beset his life, man believes that, by pronouncing words that are unfamiliar or unknown, he is asking for things that he needs but of which he is unaware. The charm of the prayer lies in its vagueness; for his troubled soul, which hardly knows what it desires, loves to form wishes as mysterious as its needs.

This was not just the mystification of a Romantic. As early as the eleventh century, obscurantism was made holy by the pope. Gregory VII abolished a liturgy in Slavonic, restoring the Latin rite precisely because people could not understand it: “Had it been clear to all, it might perhaps have been less respected, or more easily ignored.”⁷ Dom Prosper Guéranger, often praised as the founder of the modern liturgical movement, wanted wide participation in liturgical acts, but wanted it celebrated in a single rite for all, stabilized by a single language, Latin:

While it is important for the language of the liturgical books to be fixed and inviolable, and not to be purely national, it is also in its nature to be mysterious; so it ought not to be vulgar.

For this it was not only “absolutely necessary” that the liturgy be in Latin; it was also desirable that it be murmured by the priest in low tones, so that the laity would not be distracted from its awe.⁸

The compulsion of mystery was explained by that reader of the human heart, Alessandro Manzoni, in his tale of a humble lay brother puzzled when a Capuchin priest admitted women to the monastery. The priest threw off a formula, *Omnia munda mundis* (all things are pure to the pure), forgetting that the brother knew no Latin. But he did not regret that failure to communicate, since it was only an apparent failure:

It was this very oversight that gave the words the right effect. If Fra Cristoforo had begun to argue and produce reasons, Fra Fazio would have been at no loss to find other reasons to oppose against him; and heaven knows how and when it would have ended. But at the sound of the words so pregnant with mysterious meaning, and uttered with such an air of decision, he felt that they must contain the solution to all his doubts. He calmed down, and said: “Ah well! You know better than I do.”⁹

The mystery should be wrapped in layers of further mystery. Only that would be worthy of the sacred act, of the Mass, conducted by the priest, as Guéranger writes, “in those fearful moments when he is placed between heaven and earth,” partly sealed off from the people to get close to God.¹⁰ This was theatrically underscored by the conduct of the Mass in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Not only was the priest turned away from the congregation, engaged in his sacred action where they could not see it; the whole sanctuary was sealed off by a “rood screen”—later modified to the communion

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