



In Defense of Preserving Readings in Latin

by Peter Kwasniewski

photo by Ron Lawson

In the wake of the *motu proprio Summorum Pontificum* there has been considerable discussion of its provision for doing the readings of the traditional Latin Mass *in the vernacular*.

Although this permission is said to apply only to low Masses (in high Mass the readings must be chanted in Latin), and although it is only an option that need never be chosen, the very mention of the idea has prompted proponents of a “modified” *usus antiquior* to suggest that in the future we should simply drop Latin readings altogether and replace them with vernacular versions, in keeping with their understanding of the desire of the Second Vatican Council to make the Mass more “accessible” to the people.

Needless to say, changing the readings of the *usus antiquior* into the vernacular *as a rule* would be a major change in the manner in which this form of the Roman Rite is celebrated; it would mark a rupture in the way the Mass has come down to Catholics of the Latin rite for well over 1,500 years. In this article, I would like to reflect on some of the many reasons why

we should stalwartly resist such a vernacularization of the readings.

The Sacred Language of the Western Church

With the passing of ages, and even with considerable organic development in the various rites and uses of

Changing the readings of the usus antiquior into the vernacular as a rule would be a major change in the manner in which this form of the Roman Rite is celebrated; it would mark a rupture in the way the Mass has come down to Catholics of the Latin rite for well over 1,500 years.

the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the Catholic Church never jettisoned the mother tongue of the Roman Rite. Latin became a sacral and hieratic language and served a role that has been compared with that of ancient Greek for the Greek Orthodox, of Hebrew for the Jews, of Quranic Arabic for the Moslems, and of Sanskrit for the Hindus. Such languages are not simply exchangeable with a vernacular, as if the two stand on the same level, or as if any translation offered to the people could be said to convey the full meaning of the original religious text, which serves as a perennial gravitational center that keeps the forces of diverse cultures

and circumstances from assuming control.

Put differently, it is not equivalent to do the readings in Latin and in the vernacular, because the former,

as perfected and fixed over time, is for us the very language of formal liturgy, while the latter is a diverse and ever-changing medium of ordinary communication. It is a rationalist fallacy to think that languages are all equal to one another, so that it is a matter of indifference whether readings are given in Latin or in a vernacular language. Every language is a bearer of cultural, aesthetic, and even political values; every language flows from, evokes, and reinforces a certain world, greater or smaller, older or younger. It is therefore *not the same experience* to give or to hear readings in Latin and to give or to hear them in English; for the one vehicle is universal, tied down to no particular people or nation or age, redolent of the ages of faith, suited to the sacred ambiance of the church, while the other, whatever its merits, has not the same qualities.

Seamless Garment of the Lord

Another argument in favor of preserving Latin for the lections at Mass—and by no means a negligible one, given the sanctifying function of the liturgy—comes from the experience of worshipers accustomed to the unity and coherence, formality and dignity of the traditional Roman Rite.

Akin to the seamless garment of the Lord, this rite is woven of ecclesiastical Latin from top to bottom. To shift from Latin dialogues and orations to vernacular readings is experienced as a jarring disruption, an awkward movement away from theocentric focus and ceremonial formality. One steps outside of the realm of the liturgical action which is oriented towards the adoration of God into a didactic mode directed to the people. There is a time and place for such instruction, namely, the homily; and it is neither inappropriate nor surprising that in many places the readings are read in the vernacular from the pulpit prior to the homily. The inclusion of such vernacular readings is *not* considered to be part of the liturgical action, and for good reason: it is a moment of teaching the people, and is not directed to God *per se*. In the classical Roman rite, in contrast, the readings, whether spoken or chanted, are offered up to God as a kind of verbal incense, a spiritual offering of the word to the Word before Whom we come in adoration. The words here are a prayer of praise and petition. They teach us, indeed (how could they not?), but their function in the Eucharistic liturgy goes far beyond conveying a doctrinal message.

At the time of the homily (and, where it is custom-

ary, reading out the lections in the vernacular), it is the ministerial priest who comes to the fore and acts *in propria persona*. The priest's acting *in persona Christi*, on the other hand, is symbolized by the use of Latin throughout the rest of the Mass, the formality, the unchanging prayers, the appointed readings in a tongue consecrated for worship, the Canon or Rule which brings the entire people to the foot of the Cross on Calvary and communicates to them none other than the Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus Himself, Who as true God and true man is at once the Sacrifice offered, the Priest Who offers It, and the God Who receives It. The integrity of the parts of the Mass—that fact that many disparate elements come together in one great offering of worship—is strongly brought home to the

worshiper by the use of this noble, ancient, and worshipful language. The whole is a flowing river, a seamless garment, a landscape in which the various distinct objects are gathered together into a natural unity of environment. Think of mountains covered with pine trees—one can see many individual items, but the whole view is utterly *one*. There is no awkward transition or lack of transition from part

to part; there is simply the flow of one great action of Christ the High Priest, teaching, ruling, sanctifying.

Symbolism of Solemn Readings

One may not, of course, deny that the word of God is the word of God regardless of what language it is in. The point is rather a symbolic one, at least as regards the lections at Mass, and it should be readily apparent that symbolism is not something incidental to the liturgy but is rather a constitutive dimension of the entire sacramental system. Put differently, *how* we do the readings, how we treat the book and the handling of it and the chanting of it, is just as important, and in some ways more important, than the specific message delivered in any given set of readings. The special way Scriptures are treated at the Extraordinary Form is already a powerful formation of the soul of the believer.

Among the most moving and beautiful signs of the latreutic or adorational function of the readings in the *usus antiquior* are those times in the course of the liturgical year when the priest, ministers, and faithful genuflect during the reading of the Gospel at a passage that narrates some reality that *cries out* for the total response of the believer, in body and soul. Thus, on

The chanting of the Epistle towards the people, the Gospel towards the (pagan) North, and the Preface towards the altar, itself symbolizes the gradual and total conversio ad Deum which is the entire purpose of Scripture and the Holy Sacrifice.

Epiphany and during its octave, when the priest reads or chants that the Magi fell down and worshiped the Christ-child, he, and everyone with him, bends the knee in silent adoration. In Lenten Masses the priest kneels at the Tract *Adiuva nos*; on the second Passion Sunday, the Finding of the Holy Cross, and the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, at the Epistle (“*ut in nomine Jesu omne genu flectatur*”); and on a number of other occasions, such as at the third Mass of Christmas, when the Prologue of Saint John is read; at the end of the Gospel for Wednesday of the Fourth Week of Lent (Jn. 9:1-38); during the Alleluia before the *Veni, Sancte Spiritus* sequence; and at votive Masses of the Holy Spirit, the Passion of the Lord, and Deliverance from Mortality.

Sadly, in the revised Roman liturgy, this passionate yet peaceful gesture is reduced to Palm Sunday and Good Friday, at the moment of the narration of the death of our Lord. One might compare this reduction to the parallel reduction of the number of times the faithful genuflect at the *Et incarnatus est*. In the 1962 *Missale Romanum*, the faithful kneel for that statement every time the Creed is recited or sung, in a poignant reminder that the Incarnation of the Son of God is the center of all time and indeed of all reality; in the revised *Missale Romanum*, the rubrics call for such kneeling at the *Et incarnatus est* exclusively on Christmas and the Annunciation, and in practice, such kneeling is often omitted through lack of familiarity, or causes confusion when attempted. In the *usus antiquior*, exactly parallel to the kneeling at the *Et incarnatus* is the kneeling at *Et Verbum caro factum est* of the Last Gospel. In these and many other instances, we see how the traditional Mass literally *embodies* our faith by bringing into play not only man’s mind or voice, but his entire body—as befits a religion founded on the Word made flesh.



photo by Ron Lawson

In the usus antiquior, exactly parallel to the kneeling at the Et incarnatus is the kneeling at Et Verbum caro factum est of the Last Gospel. In these and many other instances, we see how the traditional Mass literally embodies our faith by bringing into play not only man’s mind or voice, but his entire body—as befits a religion founded on the Word made flesh.

The Sacrality of the Act of Reading

One way in which the ancient Mass sets apart the word of God for special veneration and allows the faithful to *perceive* its unique character is by treating it in a way that mere profane texts are never treated, namely, by chanting it in its entirety. Right away, we are catapulted, as it were, into a different world, the world of God, in which His holy words, so beautiful and so beloved, must be lovingly lingered over, savored and revered, lifted up in a solemn sacrifice of song. One cannot overestimate the formative power of the chanted readings to communicate immediately to the faithful that we are plunged into the very midst of God’s holiness when we encounter His word in Scripture. This liturgical action of reading puts us in contact with the source of sanctification, and does so in a way that deserves a treatment no less noble than any part of the Ordinary (*Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Agnus Dei*) or the Preface of the Mass receives. How strange it would be to chant so many other prayers, written by holy men but not equivalent to the revealed and infallible word of God, and yet to leave unchanted the very words of God Himself! If it is only the lover who sings, according to Saint Augustine, should not the lover of God sing most of all the words of God?

With this theological background in mind, it is fair to say that the chanting of the lections would suffer considerably if a sudden and rash change were to be made in favor of vernacular readings. The chanting tones for the various classes of readings are ancient, solemn, noble, and perfectly fitted to the language. Although vernaculars *can* be sung by those capable of adapting the tones to the character of a particular language, the Church of the Roman Rite had never done this historically, and so an organic opportunity for developing vernacular chant

never occurred. In any event the very worst thing that could happen would be the loss of chanted readings right at a time when this magnificent custom is beginning to make a return thanks to the solemn celebration of the *usus antiquior*.

In the Low Mass, by contrast, when the Epistle and Gospel are merely spoken, proper reverence for the Word of God is assured by the priest reading it *at the altar*, signifying two things: first, that this word of Scripture is *derived from* and *ordered to* the primal Word of God, Jesus Christ the High Priest, the Lawgiver, the very *life* of the word; second, that this word of Scripture is so sacred that it is not treated like any other word (e.g., announcements or homily), but is reserved to the spiritual domain symbolized by the altar of divine sacrifice. This is a guarantee that the uniquely *sacred* character of the text will be appreciated and respected. There is ample room in the homily to *apply* the word of God to the lives of the faithful, so that there is no need to fear too great a “separation” between the domain of the spiritual and the domain of life in the world. The word of Scripture should never be severed from its home—the Word, the font of life, the fire of love, the pleasing and acceptable sacrifice of holiness.

That is why it is not only *not* confusing for the priest to chant or read the readings at the altar, but eminently *fitting* when the liturgy is not of a more solemn character, with a greater diversity of hierarchical ministers. The more solemn the liturgy, the more appropriate it is to separate out the elements and give each of them greater prominence. Thus, the chanting of the Epistle towards the people, the Gospel towards the (pagan) North, and the Preface towards the altar, itself symbolizes the gradual and total *conversio ad Deum* which is the entire purpose of Scripture and the Holy Sacrifice.



Four Fathers of the Latin Church (detail) by Jacob Jordaens

It is therefore not the same experience to give or to hear readings in Latin and to give or to hear them in English; for the one vehicle is universal, tied down to no particular people or nation or age, redolent of the ages of faith, suited to the sacred ambiance of the church, while the other, whatever its merits, has not the same qualities.

Widespread Literacy

Lastly, in this age of widespread literacy and hunger for the sacred, there is no really pressing need for the change from Latin to vernacular. In the words of the Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, “there must be no innovations unless the good of the Church genuinely and certainly requires them” (SC 23). It is clear to all who are involved in the movement to recover the traditional worship of the Roman Rite that the Latin language is a dearly loved and particularly beautiful sign of the unity of the Catholic Church and the grandeur of our millennial history. As far as *participatio actuosa* is concerned, either the readings can be given in the vernacular *after* they are read or chanted in the Church’s mother tongue, as is done in many places; or today’s faithful can follow along in their daily missals or with a pamphlet prepared for the occasion.

No one goes to the traditional Mass in order to “hear Scripture,” since that is hardly the main purpose of the Holy Sacrifice; we go to worship God and be nourished by His Word and His Flesh, and to this profound and specific purpose the modest but well-chosen Scripture passages make a decisive

contribution. It is my conviction, and that of many of my fellow Catholics in the new liturgical movement, that the use of the traditional Latin language makes a similarly decisive contribution, one that deserves to be understood, cherished, and preserved for all future generations. ✠



Dr. Peter A. Kwasniewski is Professor of Theology and Philosophy at Wyoming Catholic College in Lander, Wyoming. He is also a composer of sacred music and directs the College’s Choir and Schola.