

A Dinosaur Ponders The Latin Mass



We are fast becoming extinct, we dinosaur Catholics who passed through childhood, adolescence and into adult years with the Latin Mass. Now men and women in the generations after us are talking a lot about the Latin Mass. Perhaps my personal recollections of the journey from Latin to English, surely not unlike those of others from my era, can add to the conversation.

By [Emil A. Wcela](#) | OCTOBER 8, 2007

The Way It Was

As an altar boy—only boys then—I struggled to learn the Latin prayers and not to mumble unintelligibly as I responded to the priest celebrant. Depending on how careful Father was with his Latin enunciation, Mass without a sermon could last anywhere from 15 minutes to a half-hour.

In the seminary, each day began with Latin Mass, which on special feasts was sung. Two hundred male voices at 6:30 a.m., still early-morning raspy and rough, did not exactly challenge the angelic choirs, but the Sunday solemn Mass at 10 a.m. was splendid. First came the entrance procession, with all the seminarians, the subdeacon, the deacon and at the end the celebrant; then the polyphonic entrance antiphon sung by the choir; then the Kyrie and Gloria, and the other parts of the Mass in chant or polyphony. There was, however, a peculiarity in liturgical practice. We did not receive Holy Communion, because this was our second Mass of the day. We had already received at the 6:30 a.m. silent Mass.

During the first years of my priesthood (I was ordained in 1956), I knew and celebrated only the Latin Mass. Since the congregational singing was not especially notable and since the priest had his back to the people, the only way to gauge how deeply they were involved was to listen for the rustle of missal pages being turned. One accepted the self-contradictory ritual of proclaiming the Epistle and Gospel in Latin toward the back wall and then going to the pulpit to read the Gospel again, this time in English. The same

readings were repeated each year, instead of following today's three-year cycle that presents so much more of the Bible. The quality of music, some Gregorian chant, some English hymns with different degrees of theological and aesthetic value, varied from parish to parish. In some, the experience was inspiring, in others, just plain awful. A good test for music directors was the Dies Irae, the long lament at funeral Masses. Too often, the standard that really counted was how quickly it could be sung, especially if another funeral was to follow.

'New Life'

For many years, there had been agitation for reform of the liturgy. Some called for Mass in the vernacular, but more attention was usually directed to encouraging choirs and parishes to participate more fully by improving the singing of Gregorian chant. The Benedictine monasteries at Solesmes in France and St. Benoit du Lac in Canada were the models to be imitated. A monk named Pius Parsch was writing about his efforts to give new life to the liturgy in his small chapel in Austria.

From 1961 to 1963, during my studies in Washington, D.C., and from 1963 to 1965 in Rome, we student priests celebrated Mass without a congregation, with a priest partner. We served each other in turn at one altar in a long row of altars separated from one another by flimsy partitions. Having a concelebrated Mass when a number of priests were present, instead of individual Masses, was just becoming a possibility (bolstered by a doctoral dissertation on the practice written by a nun at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.). On Sundays in Rome, a small group of us chose to concelebrate. But the rector of the residence for priests in graduate studies thought concelebration was an aberration. We had the unusual experience of moving our Mass from room to room each Sunday to elude the one searching for us—not a Communist persecutor but a defender of what he believed to be proper liturgy.

I returned to teach at our seminary in 1965 and stepped into the stream of gradual liturgical change. I admit it seemed to me incongruous when I first saw seminarians vested in cassocks and surplices playing guitars in our magnificent, soaring chapel.

When Mass in English arrived (in hindsight, perhaps with insufficient preparation), reports of liturgical abuse followed—that, for example, some of the “new breed” of priests were celebrating with Pepsi and pizza instead of bread and wine. Despite all the talk, I never met anyone who had actually been at such a “mass.” No doubt there were abuses; but most priests and congregations were doing their best to learn how to celebrate, how to write music for a different kind of liturgy, how to help people to be active participants in the action taking place, not just at the altar but in their lives, through the Eucharist.

In 1967, the same year that the Beatles brought us “Sgt. Pepper,” another priest and I, along with three seminarians, spent a summer conducting a renewal program in one of our parishes. We visited homes and organized study groups; and for the first time, our bishop permitted home Masses, which we celebrated every evening. These simple

liturgies, each with a few families, were another eye-opening experience of how people could be touched by the Eucharist when it was brought closer to them.

By the time I became pastor of a large suburban parish in 1979, Latin had pretty much disappeared, except for some hymns. Our parish, however, had the custom of a Latin Mass one Sunday a month. Because it was prime time, the 10:30 a.m. Mass was designated, with the full parish choir assisting. During the summer, because of vacations and other priests filling in, we suspended the Latin Mass. After one of those breaks, I suggested to the other priests an experiment: in the fall, we would not reintroduce it unless people asked for it. The months came and went without a word of interest. So the Latin Mass simply stopped.

Getting It Right

As we weigh the Mass in English, my experience is that the vast majority of people find that it enriches their understanding and participation.

The first translation of the Latin Mass prayers, the ones we use now, was put together very quickly. It surely needed revision to recover in some places dignity of language and depth of meaning. The [International Commission on English in the Liturgy](#) is working on this, along with the national bishops' conferences. The process has not been easy. Some translations proposed by ICEL, preserving very literally the grammatical structure of Latin with its luxuriant growth of complex clauses and modifiers, sound more like attempts to teach Latin grammar in English dress rather than prayers that people could actually use to worship God. ICEL is open to comments, however, and as the revision process goes on, some prayers have become more "prayable."

It must be acknowledged that there are still priests who look upon the Mass as a showplace for their dubious creative talents rather than as the shared worship of the community of which they are a part. I find such do-it-yourself liturgies very off-putting. There are still music directors who believe that their own compositions are exactly and only what is needed for good worship. Trying to participate in those parishes calls for special dedication, because one encounters music known only to the local parishioners and to God. It has never been and never will be the case that all music used in churches makes the theological and musical grade.

As for the Latin Mass today, two pertinent articles, both by young women, struck me. One author, writing in *Time* magazine (7/30), seemed to be disturbed mainly by some sermons she had heard. The thrust was that if the Mass is celebrated in a language nobody understands and the priest has his back to people, then she won't have to listen to sermons on social issues with which she disagrees or the presentation of which bothers her. The Mass itself would be a kind of mantra, a reassuring background for her personal thoughts about God and other things. Not much of a reason for the Latin Mass, especially since not every bishop, priest or deacon will always be an inspiring preacher—regardless of the language spoken.

The other author, in the Brooklyn diocesan weekly, [The Tablet](#) (7/21), seems to favor Latin because of, quoting Pope Benedict XVI, “arbitrary deformations of the liturgy.” One gets the impression that to her every Mass in English is by definition a “deformation.” She also loves to have the priest with his back to the congregation, facing the east, the direction from which Christ will some day return. Does it count for nothing that at the Mass Christ is with us then and there? When I imagine celebrating again toward the back wall, even an eastern wall, I remember how deeply moved I was the first time I was able to celebrate facing the congregation, whose faith and life I shared.

The same author loves the Mass in Latin, even though she understands little of it. As she writes, “That’s what the missal is for.” I certainly cannot dictate for anyone what brings them more deeply into the Eucharist. But I can only shake my head in puzzlement when I hear people talk of how good it is to celebrate Mass in a language they do not understand, while I continue my struggle to learn Spanish so that members of a different congregation can celebrate Mass in a language they do understand.

I appreciate Pope Benedict’s deep pastoral concern to invite back into unity with Rome groups of people who have separated themselves and have made the issue of the Latin Mass the centerpiece of their dissatisfaction. May God make the initiative fruitful. The pope knows the people he is trying to reach. Over the years, though, my experience with a few members of these splinter groups has convinced me that the Latin Mass is at most a rallying point, a handy focus. The real issues go much deeper, into faith, the meaning of church and God’s salvific will.

For those who want Latin because of its sense of mystery or the feeling of stepping away from the mundane, it seems to me that pondering the mystery of God in one’s own thought structures and vocabulary provides enough mystery without celebrating our most precious liturgical act in a language not understood by most. And the mundane? God thought enough of it that he sent his only Son to enter its realm to the fullest, even to using the language of his time and place.

The Most Rev. Emil A. Wcela retired recently (June 2007) as auxiliary bishop of the Diocese of Rockville Centre, N.Y.