**LATIN**

The timeless resonance of Latin has been part of the life of the Catholic Church for almost two thousand years. But the language itself is much older than that.

**History of Latin**

Latin is a member of the Italic sub-family of the Indo-European family of languages, which spread across Europe and as far as India about 15,000 years ago. Its major linguistic groups included Indic, Iranian, Greek, Celtic, Germanic, Baltic and Slavonic. Other branches of Indo-European – such as Armenian – stem from the original parent speech, which is now lost. Of all today’s European languages, only Basque, Hungarian and Finnish are not of Indo-European origin.

The Latin language was brought into the Italian peninsula by the Italic peoples, who migrated from the north about 1200 years before the birth of Christ. At that time, Rome was an insignificant settlement on the banks of the River Tiber in Latium, central Italy. But by 250 BC, Latin had become the dominant tongue in Italy. As the military, political and cultural power of Rome spread, its soldiers and citizens took their Latin language with them. By the time of Christ, Latin was the common tongue of Western Europe. By the second century after Christ, the Romans dominated all of Europe, western Asia and North Africa, and Latin was spoken in almost every part of the known ancient world. Only Greece, southern Italy and the Near East retained Greek as their primary language until the Arab conquest of 700 AD. Greek survived as the official language of the Byzantine Empire until the Turks captured Constantinople in 1453, but in the rest of the empire, Latin prevailed.

Like most languages, Latin was both written and spoken. The colloquial speech of cultured Romans was characterised by a freedom of syntax, by numerous interjections and by the regular use of Greek words. The language of the uneducated classes, known as Vulgar Latin, fostered the Romance languages, spoken today in Spain, France, Italy, Portugal and Romania.

Latin literature began with the early plays of Roman Comedy in rustic style, dating from about 240BC. The golden age of written Latin, from 70 BC until about AD 14, is famous for the prose works of Julius Caesar, Livy and Cicero, as well as for the poetry of Catullus, Lucretius, Virgil, Horace and Ovid. During the late Latin period, from the second to the sixth century, many Church Fathers wrote down their teachings in Latin. By this time, the Roman Empire was weakening in the face of barbarian assaults, and the Latin language was being affected by foreign forms and idioms.

However, even when the Roman Empire eventually fell, Latin survived and remained an important means of written and spoken communication for another thousand years. As the centuries passed, Latin continued as the international means of communication for educated men and women. Latin remained the official language of the Catholic Church and, at the end of the Middle Ages, interest started to grow in classical Latin as a means of artistic and literary expression. This period (from about 1200 to 1400 AD) was known as the Renaissance, the *rebirth* of the ancient world and at the same time a transition to the modern world.

New Latin (also called modern Latin) came into existence in the 15th and 16th centuries. Almost all books of scientific, philosophical and religious importance were written in Latin at this time, and Latin remained the common language for European diplomats. Even during the 18th and 19th centuries, Latin remained the language of classical scholarship. The writers Pope, TS Eliot and Milton are examples of authors who were influenced by Latin literature or even wrote in Latin. Although the use of Latin is much more limited in the 21st century, there’s even a radio station in Finland which broadcasts news in Latin, and a CD has been released of Elvis songs in Latin.

**Liturgical development**

Throughout the ages, one of the most common uses of Latin has been to unite people of different races, cultures and languages. Even at the time of Christ, the variety of tongues spoken by citizens of the Roman Empire caused problems for those attempting to spread the new faith. The Acts of the Apostles tell us that, at the time of the first Pentecost, the Apostles preached to crowds of Parthians, Medes and Elamites, and to pilgrims from many countries.

Despite the fact that the Apostles would have preached in Aramaic, their words were understood by everyone because the Holy Ghost gave them the gift of tongues. But, after the death of the Apostles, it was still necessary to ensure that catechumens and the baptised faithful should understand and appreciate the teachings and prayers of the Mass, the most important outward manifestation of the new faith and the Church’s central act of worship.

The liturgy might have developed in two ways. It could have been translated into local languages, or it could be celebrated in the same language everywhere. There is plenty of historical precedent for a single, special liturgical language. The Jews of the Holy Land used Hebrew in the synagogue, even though their daily language was Aramaic. The Babylonians used ancient Sumerian as their sacred language, while Hindus used Sanskrit. Later, other religions also came to see the value of a universal religious language. Islam, for example, uses Arabic in the Koran, and the Orthodox Church uses old Slavonic in its liturgy.

The difficulty about using local, living languages is that linguistic development and imprecision can cause misunderstanding or incorrect transmission of complicated and precise doctrines. Language, being a living thing, can change, so that words come to have a different meaning after a period of time. The use of liturgies in a variety of languages can also detract from that unity of the Church and its members for which its Founder prayed.

Historically, the first liturgies were in the local languages of the Church’s founder and early leaders: Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. (Even today, there are echoes of those ancient languages in the Mass – in the Greek of the Kyrie, for example, and the Hebrew of the Amen, the Hosanna **and the Good Friday reproaches**.)

Until the middle of the third century, most Christians in Rome were Greek-speaking. The liturgy was celebrated in Greek and theologians wrote in Greek until the death of St Hippolytus in 235 AD. But in Africa, most of the faithful spoke Latin, and it was there that the Scriptures were first translated into Latin within 200 years of Christ’s death. The Church in Africa was also the first to use Latin in the liturgy in the middle of the third century, while the Church in Rome continued to use Greek for another hundred years.

Scholars such as Tertullian introduced into the Latin language Greek words such as *baptisma, charisma, prophetia* and *martyr*. St Jerome added around 350 new words to the growing vocabulary of Church Latin. The liturgical precision of Latin allowed the development of such theological terms as *transsubstantiatio, forma, materia* and *accidens*, which couldn’t be as precisely represented in the vernacular.

By the fourth century, four parent rites had developed from the earliest Christian liturgy. These rites were based on the three patriarchal cities of Alexandria, Antioch and Rome and on the liturgy celebrated in Gaul in north-western Europe. The rites of Alexandria and Antioch provided the nucleus for the rites used in the eastern Churches today. The Roman rite, with Gallican additions, is the basis for the rite used today in the Catholic Church in the west.

In the fifth century, when Christianity eventually became the official religion of the Roman Empire, the use of Latin in the liturgy became even more widespread in the West. From the seventh century onwards, although local languages were used for popular preaching, Latin had become the exclusive language of liturgy and theology in the west.

Most of the western Catholic Churches used the Roman rite from about the sixth century onwards. At the start of the ninth century, Charlemagne insisted that all clergy in the Holy Roman Empire should use only the Roman Sacramentary, as used by Pope Adrian I. Only in a few places, such as Toledo in Spain and Milan in Italy, did the Eucharist continue to be celebrated in a form of the old Gallican rite.

Minor local differences continued to exist in the liturgy throughout Europe, in places such as Sarum and York in England, Paris and Lyons in France and Cologne in Germany – but the modifications didn’t relate to any fundamental liturgical or doctrinal matters. Essentially, all the liturgies and the order of Mass in the West were identical.

But by the Middle Ages, Rome became concerned that local variations in the liturgy could mislead or confuse Catholics. Major cities had developed their own variations and many religious orders adopted distinct liturgical customs.

In the mid-sixteenth century, the Council of Trent confronted this growing confusion and ordered that Mass should be celebrated in the same way everywhere. In 1570, Pope St Pius V ordered that the Missal – which contains the prayers of the Mass – should be restored to its pure, ancient form and thereafter the same liturgy should be used throughout the Western Church. That liturgy, which is still celebrated today, dates back essentially unchanged to the time of St Gregory in the sixth century.

The restored liturgy took its name from the Council of Trent and came to be known as the Tridentine Mass. In a Papal Bull entitled *Quo Primum*, the Pope granted priests the right to use the Tridentine rite forever, without scruple of conscience or fear of penalty.

But the Mass was not arbitrarily imposed on all Catholics in the West. Pope St Pius V allowed the continued use of the rites of religious orders, as well as any other liturgical rite more than 200 years old. Even at the opening of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, other rites were still being celebrated in the Western Church – the Ambrosian rite of Milan, the Mozarabic rite of Toledo, the rite of Braga and the liturgies of the religious orders – the Carthusians, the Carmelites and the Dominican rite. Even after the introduction of the new Missal of Pope Paul VI in 1970, permission was still given for the use of the old rites.

**The Popes and Latin**

In 1922, for example, Pius XI, in his document *Officiorum Omnium*, said “The Church – precisely because it embraces all nations and is destined to endure until the end of time – of its very nature requires a language which is universal, immutable and non-vernacular.”

Quarter of a century later, his successor Pope Pius XII said in *Mediator Dei*: “The use of the Latin language affords at once an imposing sign of unity and an effective safeguard against the corruption of true doctrine.”

In 1962, the father of Vatican Two, Pope John XXIII, issued his encyclical *Veterum Sapientia*. The Pope spoke of the special value of Latin which had proved so admirable a means for the spreading of Christianity and which had proved to be a bond of unity for the Christian peoples of Europe.

He continued: “Of its very nature, Latin is most suitable for promoting every form of culture among peoples. It gives rise to no jealousies. It does not favour any one nation, but presents itself with equal impartiality to all and is equally acceptable to all. Nor must we overlook the characteristic nobility of Latin’s formal structure. Its concise, varied and harmonious style, full of majesty and dignity makes for singular clarity and impressiveness of expression.

“For these reasons the Apostolic See has always been at pains to preserve Latin, deeming it worthy of being used in the exercise of her teaching authority as the splendid vesture of her heavenly doctrine and sacred laws. She further requires her sacred ministers to use it, for by so doing they are the better able, wherever they may be, to acquaint themselves with the mind of the Holy See on any matter, and communicate the more easily with Rome and with one another...

“Modern languages are liable to change, and no single language is superior to the others in authority. Thus, if the truths of the Catholic Church were entrusted to an unspecified number of them, the meaning of these truths would not be manifested to everyone with sufficient clarity and precision. There would also be no language which could serve as a common and constant norm by which to gauge the exact meaning of other renderings...

“Finally, the Catholic Church has a dignity far surpassing that of every merely human society, for it was founded by Christ the Lord. It is altogether fitting, therefore, that the language it uses should be noble, majestic and non-vernacular.

“In addition, the Latin language can be called truly catholic. It is a general passport to the proper understanding of the Christian writers of antiquity and the documents of the Church’s teaching. It is also a most effective bond, binding the Church of today with that of the past and of the future in wonderful continuity.”

In 1966, a mere four years after publication of Pope John’s encyclical, Pope Paul VI, who presided over much of the Second Vatican Council, issued his own encyclical *Sacrificium Laudis*,saying: “The Latin language is assuredly worthy of being defended with great care instead of being scorned; for the Latin Church it is the most abundant source of Christian civilisation and the richest treasury of piety. We must not hold in low esteem these traditions of our fathers which were our glory for centuries.”

Pope Saint John Paul II, in his 1980 letter on the mystery and worship of the Eucharist, praised Latin as an expression of the unity of the Church which, through its dignified character, elicited a profound sense of the Eucharistic mystery. He said it was necessary to show understanding and full respect towards those Catholics who missed the use of the old Latin liturgy, and to accommodate their desires as far as possible. He said the Roman Church has special obligations towards Latin and she *must* manifest them whenever the occasion presents itself.

In 1998, Cardinal Ratzinger, the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (and later Pope Benedict XVI), addressing 3,000 traditional Catholics in Rome, pointed out that the Council only ordered the revision of the liturgical books, and did not prohibit the former books. He recalled the observation of Cardinal John Henry Newman (the founder of UCD) that the Church, throughout her history, had never abolished nor forbidden orthodox liturgical forms.

Cardinal Ratzinger said there was now a disenchantment with “banal rationalism”, and he discerned a return to mystery, adoration and the sacred.

And at the start of the new millennium, Pope Saint John Paul told an international group of pilgrims in Rome: “We strongly encourage you all that, by diligent study and effective teaching, you may pass on like a torch the understanding, love and use of this immortal language in your own countries.”  
  
**Since Vatican II**

Much of the change has been blamed on the Second Vatican Council but, despite claims to the contrary, the Council did not ban the use of Latin. In fact, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy specifically ordered that the use of the Latin language was to be *preserved* in the Latin rites. The document says that the vernacular or mother tongue *may* be used in a suitable place in public Masses, but steps *should* be taken so that the faithful can also say or sing in Latin those parts of the Mass which relate to them.

The ordinary form of the Mass officially changed on the first Sunday of Advent of 1969. But elderly priests, like the founder of Opus Dei, Saint Jose-Maria Escriva, and Padre Pio, were given permission to continue celebrating Mass in the old rite. The head of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, Cardinal Heenan of Westminster, obtained special permission for his priests to continue celebrating the Tridentine Mass.

In 1984, the Vatican’s Congregation for Divine Worship granted a wider permission for the public celebration of the Tridentine Mass. In 1988, Pope Saint John Paul II decreed that respect must be shown everywhere for the feelings of all those attached to the old Latin tradition by wide and generous permission for celebration of the old rite.

In July 2007, Pope Benedict XVI issued his *motu proprio Summorum Pontificum* saying that “not a few of the faithful continued to be attached with such love and affection to the earlier liturgical forms which had deeply shaped their culture and spirit”. He decreed that, while the missal promulgated by Pope Paul VI would constitute the ordinary form of the Mass, the missal promulgated by Saint Pius V was to be considered the extraordinary form of the Mass “and duly honoured for its venerable and ancient usage”.

He confirmed that the missal promulgated by Blessed John XXIII in 1962 had never been abrogated, and any priest or religious could use the old Latin form without the necessity of seeking permission.

Where a group of the faithful attached to the earlier liturgical tradition existed “stably” in a parish, “the parish priest should willingly accede to their requests to celebrate Holy Mass according to the rite of the 1962 Roman Missal”, as well as in “special circumstances”, such as baptism, penance, marriage, anointing of the sick, funerals or pilgrimages.

Today, more than a billion members of the Catholic Church live in every country of the world and speak hundreds of languages and dialects. Yet Latin continues to unite them all.