

LATIN—THE ECCLESIASTICAL LANGUAGE

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HE world of linguistics is in the throes of dissension. We have on the one hand a steady increase in the ranks of those who favor an international, auxiliary language, of which movement the latest and most definite step was the acceptance of Esperanto as a world-language by a group of correspondents gathered at the Hague recently. On the other hand, there is a fast growing enthusiasm toward the renaissance of older national tongues, long since in disuse as everyday speech. Gaelic, Hebrew, Lithuanian, Catalanian and Bohemian, for centuries dead and entombed officially and politically, have been or are being successfully revived. Whether the spread of an international language is naturally inimical to the life of national idioms is a much mooted question and one difficult of solution. It does not concern us vitally, but its agitation has been the occasion of bringing to the fore linguistic matters of every sort.

Not the least interesting of these is the consideration of the position of Latin as a metier of communication in matters ecclesiastical, and the quasi-universality which it enjoyed during the Mediaeval times. Latin is commonly termed a "dead" language. In reality, it is an immortal one. Its history has been inextricably bound up with the annals of Western civilization since those far times when the forests of Britain "witnessed the stately march of the Roman soldiery" and the plains of Persia felt the stamp of the Roman war-horse. Then, it was the language of the conqueror. Thirteen hundred years later it was the language of the scholar and it had reached a second zenith, for Latin was the sole mediaeval literature that was bred in the purple. And its assignation as the official language of the Catholic Church warrants the assumption that it will never be completely forgotten.

The beginnings of "Christian" Latin, as the ecclesiastical development of Latin has been properly called, hark back to the period following the great plague of 106, A. D. which, sweeping from Persia to the Rhine and Gaul, carried away approximately one half of the population and was especially rigorous among the

cultured class. These were the heirs of the classical pagan scholarship, and in the irresistible sundering of the Empire were too few and by far too weak to check the decay which set in. Even literature and art were stagnant. A wave of Hellenism swept over the Empire at about the same time that Northern barbarians and Oriental adventurers were pouring into Rome. It was the zero hour of the Latin language. The gap between the days of its supremacy and the oblivion which threatened it, was bridged by the works of the Fathers and writers of the Latin Church. They had cast off the artificiality and complexity of the pagan classics and had infused into the drooping frame a simplicity and directness of speech which gave their writings a charm all their own. Ambrose and Jerome in Italy, Augustine and Lactantius in Africa, Prudentius in Spain, and in Gaul, Severus, Apollinaris and the two Hilaries—these were the men who gave the old Roman tongue a new lease on life and paved the way for its acceptance as the official language of Christendom.

Had it not been for these men and, later on, for the schools of the bishops and of the Benedictine monks, there could have been no revival of learning under Charlemagne, nor would the world have seen the advance of science in the twelfth century and the rise of Scholasticism, at whose apogee stands St. Thomas Aquinas. As it was, the language of classical days had become less a creature of fashion and more an instrument of utility, a vehicle for the expression of solid doctrine. The brilliant but short-lived idiom of the Golden Age had never been the language of the great mass of Roman people. The workaday Roman world spoke an unpolished plebeian or rustic tongue, which even before the breakup of the Empire had begun to run off into the group of dialects which flowered in the Romance languages.

There were certain excellencies and merits in the Latin language which must have recommended it to the attention of the early Christian savants. It possessed a richness, a grace, a precision and a variety which rendered it equally apposite for purposes of history, oratory, military chronicles, poetry of all shades from epic to didactic, and what is most important—for Philosophy. That study, embodying as it does a host of abstractions and subtleties, requires in the medium of its expression a mobility, accuracy and amplitude for which few languages are as well adapted as Latin. Such nominal suffixes as "tas," "tudo,"

etc., bespeak an ideal instrument for conveying the abstruse distinctions in which the Scholastic theory abounds.

But with all its suppleness and broadness, Latin was still wanting in numerous words and compounds which were required to express the doctrine of Christianity. Many ideas which the Fathers wished to convey postulated the invention of new words and phrases, and when these were incorporated into the language, it assumed a character quite different from that of the Ciceronian diction. It is true that it was not as beautiful as the Latin of the Golden Age, and the charms of Virgil and the eloquence of Tully would not have been possible with the Latin of the fifth and sixth centuries, but it is equally true that whereas the Fathers had found it a bloodless thing, they left it a living means of expression. The barbarism of the later Scholastics and their so-called sins against grammar were not so much a torsion and perversion of the language as they were an infusion of solidity and precision which resulted from their literal translation of Aristotle's clean-cut and clipped Greek. And if they must offer any apology for their action, they may plead that such a course was necessary to attain the peerless accuracy and unparalleled correctness which they acquired in metaphysics.

The use of Latin permeated every branch of learning during these centuries for the world was Christianized, and Christianity's language was Latinized. The vernaculars did not attain any prominence until the time of Dante, and even at that late date the conviction that Latin was destined to maintain its supremacy was deeply rooted, as Plutarch's disquisition on this point attests. Latin was the language of the universities, of the court, of the drama. To whatever path of scholarship a man chose to turn he must needs acquire a knowledge of Latin grammar as a preliminary. Even lay clerks and lawyers received their training in Latin, for the former's text-books were antique works and commentaries and most of the law was Roman legislation. The pagan classical literature which had been endorsed and used by the early Fathers, particularly Sts. Ambrose, Augustine and Jerome, was deservedly cherished and admired during this recrudescence. It was a literature as broad as humanity, as was its Greek predecessor, and its range of interests was full enough to make a universal appeal. The churchman saw in it an introduction to the study of Scripture and the means to a better ap-

prehension of it; the laic esteemed it a fount of delight and instruction.

There is a heavenwide difference between the admiration for these pagan masterpieces in the Scholastic era and that unhealthy passion for them which fretted the Humanists three or four centuries later. That this latter was a pedantic activity and was carried to an absurd degree may be gathered from various works of that epoch. The author of an English grammar in 1553 protests that the men of learning do "so Latin their tongues, that the simple folk cannot but wonder at their talk, and think surely that they speak by some revelation." More biting and with all the force of a "true word spoken in jest" is the quip in Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, "Away with him, away with him! He speaks Latin!" The eclipse of Latinity had begun and it proceeded with gradual but steady pace, until, in our own day, the man who can claim a modest acquaintance with the language need not fear to call himself a scholar.

As the language of Church liturgy, Latin came into general use in the West about the fourth century, supplanting Greek which had obtained almost exclusively until the time of Tertullian—about 200 A. D. In the East, Greek remained the ecclesiastical vernacular, a supremacy which has been maintained until present times with some concessions to Latin in a few districts and some Oriental tongues in others. The gradual adoption of the Roman idiom in Western Christendom was due to the preponderant influence which the works of the Fathers and the activities of the Roman missionaries exerted. These forces, coupled with the difficulty of forming a vernacular liturgy, and when such a liturgy was formed, of insuring it against the fluctuation and change which are at work in current speech, were the circumstances which brought about the Latinization of ecclesiastical literature and diction. Some attempts were made to introduce vernacular liturgies but they were unsuccessful. There was no crying need for such liturgies in the Middle Ages because of the widespread knowledge of Latin among the educated, and the less learned were rendered conversant with the character of the Mass and other religious functions through instruction in their own languages and through translations of the formulae of the ceremonies. Nor does any need exist in our own day, for the same reasons.

Besides the service which the employment of Latin has rendered in preserving uniformity in doctrine and ceremonial observances of that Church one of whose essential marks is Unity, a real benefit has been bestowed upon the world of letters through this practice. Prof. Saintsbury of the University of Edinburgh declares that "the influence of form which the best Latin hymns of the Middle Ages exercised in poetry and the influence in vocabulary and in logical arrangement which scholasticism exercised in prose, are beyond dispute: and even those who will not pardon literature . . . for being something less than masterly in itself, will find it difficult to maintain the exclusion of *Cur Deus Homo*, and impossible to refuse admission to the *Dies Irae*." As much might be said of the hymns to the Blessed Sacrament of St. Thomas Aquinas, especially the *Pange Lingua* and *Adoro Te*, those splendid combinations of solid theology and charming poetry which have earned the Angelic Doctor a place among the few who united metaphysics and poetry with marked success. S. T. Coleridge is our best English representative.

As a sort of natural corollary to any composition on the history or use of Latin is attached the question of its cultivation by the students of our present day secondary schools and colleges. It appears undeniable that very few students are disposed "to spend their leisure time luxuriating in the literary beauties of *Livy* and *Horace*." If this were the purpose of the study, it would be unwarranted. But it is not so. Latin has the three-fold office of providing something craggy for the youthful mind to break upon, of imparting a general culture through contact with the best works of Roman authors, and of aiding and abetting the student's knowledge of English by making him familiar with one of the greatest sources of our vocabulary, indeed the only source at the present day worthy of consideration. Anti-Latinists aver that the first of these advantages can be supplied by many a language which is not as antiquated as Latin, Armenian or Russian for example; the second they affirm is a dubious benefit at best, and in any case we need not go to Latin for it but may read the works in our own tongue; the final service, the utility for the student of English, may be obtained by an intense application to a dictionary. All very true, but what they do not and cannot assert is that there is any one study which can impart these three advantages at once and the same time.

That Latin is distasteful to many of the students who are forced to pursue it for a year or more in high schools is entirely beside the question. The likes and dislikes of the pupil have never been the criterion of the value of a study or of the propriety of placing it among the non-electives. Nor is there any reason to believe that Armenian or whatever is to be substituted for Latin would be studied *con amore*. In a word, though less useful by far than it has been in centuries past, Latin is still too beneficial to the average scholar to be discarded. To the future priest, and in some measure to every Catholic student, it is a necessity, because it is the official language of the Catholic world, the vernacular of Christianity. It is an enduring monument to the antiquity of the one Church whose chronicle goes back to the era when the world, having beheld the decay of "the glory that was Greece," watched breathlessly the crumbling of "the grandeur that was Rome."

