

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

At the solemn High Mass, the congregation joins the choir in singing or saying certain parts of the Mass in Hebrew, Greek and Latin. Every Alleluia and Amen are from the Hebrew. The Kyrie Eleison is in Greek. The Gloria, Sanctus, Agnus Dei, and Paternoster are sung in Latin to Gregorian Chant. Why do we use ancient languages in worship?

First, I should point out that there is nothing particularly sacred about Hebrew, Greek or Latin *per se*. There are many languages that traditional worshippers in various religions and denominations consider to be special or even sacred. Conservative Evangelical Protestants, for example, venerate the King James Version of the Bible and speak in "thees" and "thous" and add "eth" to the end of verbs. Conservative Anglicans love the seventeenth century language of Cranmer's prayer book. Russian Orthodox believers venerate Old Slavonic. Copts use Coptic, Georgian Orthodox Old Georgian. The examples could be multiplied in other religions too. Some sects of Buddhism use the "sacred" language of Pali. Zoroastrianism- Avestan. Hinduism - Old Tamil or Sanskrit.

So Hebrew, Latin and Greek are not intrinsically sacred any more than Avestan, Old Tamil, Old Slavonic or seventeenth century English. So then, why use Hebrew, Latin and Greek in the liturgy? Doesn't it make more sense to use language everybody understands? When we use the ancient languages of the church, we immerse ourselves more fully into the antiquity and deep roots of our faith. We use the words our ancestors used and join with them in a common tongue. This helps us to transcend our ordinary, daily lives. Furthermore, the ancient languages have a nobility and dignity to them that helps us transcend the vulgarity of our everyday speech.

There is another aspect to consider: what happens when you use another language? When I speak French or Spanish or German, I experience another culture, another world and I see my own world and my life from a fresh perspective. To learn another language is therefore a way to transcend my world--to open up to a new way of seeing and a new way of being. This is a subtle thing, but a powerful experience nonetheless.

This use of a different language takes me beyond the ordinary straightforward meaning of the words. In using a language, I "don't understand" I understand it more deeply. I understand it with the heart not just the head. An analogy is attending an opera in Italian. I don't understand what the fat lady is singing word for word literally, but it's ok. I know the basic story. I know she has been betrayed by her lover and her heart is broken. I connect with the story at a deeper level than simply understanding the literal word for word lyrics, and when music and words combine (as they do in opera and the liturgy) the effect in the mind and heart is subtle and powerful.

Finally, the three languages used on the inscription: Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews which Pilate placed over Our Lord's head on the cross were written in Hebrew, Latin and Greek. The use of these three languages therefore helps to echo the fact that every Mass is a re-presentation of the death of Our Lord.

All of this is packed into the simple use of ancient languages in worship and oh, I forgot the other thing: To use ancient languages in worship is totally Vatican 2. The Vatican 2 document on worship--*Sacrosanctum Concilium* directs us to use Latin as the primary language of the Mass. If you want to learn what the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council really taught about liturgy go online to read *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.

Your Pastor,
Fr. Longenecker