

POPE JOHN XXIII AND *VETERUM SAPIENTIA*

"[Latin] is a most effective training for the pliant minds of youth. It exercises, matures and perfects the principal faculties of mind and spirit. It sharpens the wits and gives keenness of judgment. It helps the young mind to grasp things accurately and develop a true sense of values. It is also a means for teaching highly intelligent thought and speech."

Bl. Pope John XXIII

We reproduce below the Apostolic Constitution *Veterum Sapientia*, On the Promotion of the Study of the Latin language, published by Pope John XXIII on 22nd February 1962. To put the document in its setting, we cite the remarks of Italian lay theologian, Romano Amerio, taken from his study of changes in the Catholic Church in the twentieth century.

"By *Veterum Sapientia* John XXIII wanted to bring about a return of the Church to its own principles, this return being necessary in his mind for the renewal of the Church in its own proper nature at the present *articulus temporum*.

"The Pope attributed a very special importance to the document, and the solemnities with which he surrounded its promulgation in St Peter's, in the presence of the cardinals and of the whole Roman clergy, are unique in the history of the present century. The outstanding importance of *Veterum Sapientia* is not destroyed by the oblivion to which it was immediately dispatched, nor by its historical lack of success; values are not values only when they are accepted. Its importance comes from its perfect conformity with the historic reality which is the Church.

"The [Apostolic Constitution] is above all an affirmation of continuity. The Church's culture is continuous with that of the Greco-Roman world, first and foremost because Christian literature has been since its beginnings Greek and Latin literature...

...

"The practical and disciplinary section of *Veterum Sapientia* is as crystal clear as its doctrine. It is the very precision of its requirements that led to its nullification, when it was not backed up by papal authority...

"The general collapse of the use of Latin, following as it did upon a project for its general restoration, provides a further proof of the paradoxical outcome of the [Second Vatican] Council. *Veterum Sapientia*, being concerned as it was with an historically essential facet of Catholicism, called for an outstanding effort on the part of the authorities issuing it, and an harmonious response on the part of those responsible for its implementation... The reform of ecclesiastical studies, however, was annihilated in very short order, having met opposition from many quarters for a variety of reasons, principally in Germany in a book by one Winninger, bearing a preface by the Bishop of Strasbourg. The Pope, having stood firm to start with, later gave orders that the implementation of the document should not be insisted on; those who would have had the duty of putting it into effect imitated this papal weakness, and *Veterum Sapientia*, which had been so loudly praised as useful and opportune, was completely wiped from memory, and is not cited in any conciliar document. Some biographies of John XXIII do not mention it at all, just as if it did not exist, and never had; while the more arrogant accounts mention it simply as an error. There is not, in the whole history of the Church, another instance of a

document's being so solemnly emphasised, and then being so unceremoniously cast out so soon afterwards..."¹

Veterum Sapientia

Apostolic Constitution of Pope John XXIII

On the Promotion of the Study of Latin

The wisdom of the ancient world, enshrined in Greek and Roman literature, and the truly memorable teaching of ancient peoples, served, surely, to herald the dawn of the Gospel which God's Son, "the judge and teacher of grace and truth, the light and guide of the human race,"² proclaimed on earth.

Such was the view of the Church Fathers and Doctors. In these outstanding literary monuments of antiquity, they recognised man's spiritual preparation for the supernatural riches which Jesus Christ communicated to mankind "to give history its fulfilment."³ Thus the inauguration of Christianity did not mean the obliteration of man's past achievements. Nothing was lost that was in any way true, just, noble and beautiful.

Venerable languages

The Church has ever held the literary evidences of this wisdom in the highest esteem. She values especially the Greek and Latin languages in which wisdom itself is cloaked, as it were, in a vesture of gold. She has likewise welcomed the use of other venerable languages, which flourished in the East. For these too have had no little influence on the progress of humanity and civilization. By their use in sacred liturgies and in versions of Holy Scripture, they have remained in force in certain regions even to the present day, bearing constant witness to the living voice of antiquity.

A primary place

But amid this variety of languages a primary place must surely be given to that language which had its origins in Latium, and later proved so admirable a means for the spreading of Christianity throughout the West.

And since in God's special Providence this language united so many nations together under the authority of the Roman Empire—and that for so many centuries—it also became the rightful language of the Apostolic See.⁴ Preserved for posterity, it proved to be a bond of unity for the Christian peoples of Europe.

¹ *Iota Unum*, A Study of Changes in the Catholic Church in the XXth Century, translated from the Second Italian Edition by Rev. Fr. John P Parsons, Kansas City (Sarto House), 1996, pp. 58-60.

² Tertullian, *Apol.* 21: Migne, FL 1, 294.

³ *Ephesians* 1, 10.

⁴ *Epist. S. Cong. Stud. Vehementer sane*, ad Ep. universos, July 1, 1908: *Ench. Cler.*, N. 820. Cf. also *Epist. Ap. Pius XI, Unigenitus Dei Filius*, Mar. 19, 1924: AAS 16 (1924), 141.

The nature of Latin

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 formal structure. Its “concise, varied and harmonious style, full of majesty and dignity”⁵ makes for singular clarity and impressiveness of expression.

Preservation of Latin by the Holy See

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.”⁶ 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.

Thus the “knowledge and use of this language,” so intimately bound up with the Church's life, “is important not so much on cultural or literary grounds, as for religious reasons.”⁷ These are the words of Our Predecessor Pius XI, who conducted a scientific inquiry into this whole subject, and indicated three qualities of the Latin language which harmonise to a remarkable degree with the Church's nature. “For the Church, precisely because it embraces all nations and is destined to endure to the end of time... of its very nature requires a language which is universal, immutable, and non-vernacular.”⁸

Universal

Since “every Church must assemble round the Roman Church,”⁹ and since the Supreme Pontiffs have “true episcopal power, ordinary and immediate, over each and every Church and each and every Pastor, as well as over the faithful”¹⁰ of every rite and language, it seems particularly desirable that the instrument of mutual communication be uniform and universal, especially between the Apostolic See and the Churches which use the same Latin rite.

When, therefore, the Roman Pontiffs wish to instruct the Catholic world, or when the Congregations of the Roman Curia handle matters or draw up decrees which concern the whole body of the faithful, they invariably make use of Latin, for this is a maternal voice acceptable to countless nations.

⁵ Pius XI, Epist. Ap. *Officiorum omnium*, Aug. 1, 1922: AAS 14 (1922), 452-453.

⁶ Pius XI, *Motu proprio Litterarum latinarum*, Oct. 20, 1924: AAS 16 (1924), 417.

⁷ Pius XI, Epist. Ap. *Officiorum omnium*, Aug. 1, 1922: AAS 14 (1922), 452.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Saint Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 3, 3, 2: Migne PG 7, 848.

¹⁰ Cf. *CIC*, canon 218, pars. 2.

Immutable

Furthermore, it is necessary that the language the Church employs be not only universal but immutable. [For if the truths of the Catholic Church were to be handed on via one or other of more recent and malleable languages, no one of which is superior to another]¹¹, the meaning of these truths, varied as they are, would not be manifest to everyone with sufficient clarity and precision. There would, moreover, be no language which could serve as a common and constant norm by which to gauge the exact meaning of other renderings.

But Latin is indeed such a language. It is set and unchanging¹². It has long since ceased to be affected by the alteration in meaning of words which is the inevitable concomitant of daily, popular use. Certain Latin words, it is true, acquired new meanings as Christian teaching developed and needed to be explained and defended, but these new meanings have long since become accepted and firmly established.

Non-vernacular

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.”¹³ It has been consecrated through constant use by the Apostolic See, the mother and teacher of all Churches, and must be esteemed “a treasure... of incomparable worth.”¹⁴ It is a general passport to the proper understanding of the Christian writers of antiquity and the documents of the Church’s teaching.¹⁵ It is also a most effective bond, binding the Church of today, of the past and of the future in a wonderful continuity.

Educational value of Latin

There can be no doubt as to the formative and educational value either of the language of the Romans or of great literature generally. It is a most effective training for the pliant minds of youth. It exercises, matures and perfects the principal faculties of mind and spirit. It sharpens the wits and gives keenness of judgment. It helps the young mind to grasp things accurately and develop a true sense of values. It is also a means for teaching highly intelligent thought and speech.

¹¹ The original Latin of this paragraph is rather convoluted and the translators have had a difficult job to render it in readable English. In this commentator’s view the original translation of the bracketed material is poor. It reads— “Modern languages are liable to change, and no single one of them is superior to another in authority. Thus, if the truths of the Catholic Church were entrusted to an unspecified number of them...”

¹² [*Fixa quidem censenda est et immobilis...*]

¹³ Cf. Pius XI, Epist. Ap. *Officiorum omnium*, Aug. 1, 1922: AAS 14 (1922), 453.

¹⁴ Pius XII, Al. *Magis quam*, Nov. 23, 1951: AAS 43 (1951), 737.

¹⁵ Leo XIII, Epist. Encycl. *Depuis le jour*, Sept. 8, 1899: Acta Leonis XIII, 19 (1899), 166.

A natural result

It will be quite clear from these considerations why the Roman Pontiffs have so often extolled the excellence and importance of Latin, and why they have prescribed its study and use by the secular and regular clergy, forecasting the dangers that would result from its neglect.

A resolve to uphold Latin

And We also, impelled by the weightiest of reasons—the same as those which prompted Our Predecessors and provincial synods¹⁶—are fully determined to restore this language to its position of honour, and to do all We can to promote its study and use. The employment of Latin has recently been contested in many quarters, and many are asking what the mind of the Apostolic See is in this matter. We have therefore decided to issue the timely directives contained in this document, so as to ensure that the ancient and uninterrupted use of Latin be maintained and, where necessary, restored.

We believe that We made Our own views on this subject sufficiently clear when We said to a number of eminent Latin scholars:

"It is a matter of regret that so many people, unaccountably dazzled by the marvellous progress of science, are taking it upon themselves to oust or restrict the study of Latin and other kindred subjects.... Yet, in spite of the urgent need for science, Our own view is that the very contrary policy should be followed. The greatest impression is made on the mind by those things which correspond more closely to man's nature and dignity. And therefore the greatest zeal should be shown in the acquisition of whatever educates and ennobles the mind. Otherwise poor mortal creatures may well become like the machines they build—cold, hard, and devoid of love."¹⁷

Provisions for the Promotion of Latin Studies

With the foregoing considerations in mind, to which We have given careful thought, We now, in the full consciousness of Our Office and in virtue of Our authority, decree and command the following:

Responsibility for enforcement

1. Bishops and superiors-general of religious orders shall take pains to ensure that in their seminaries and in their schools where adolescents are trained for the priesthood, all shall studiously observe the Apostolic See's decision in this matter and obey these Our prescriptions most carefully.

¹⁶ Cf. *Collectio Lacensis*, espec. vol. III, 1018s. (Cone. Prov. Westmonasteriense, a 1859); Vol. IV, 29 (Conc. Prov. Parisiense, a 1849); Vol. IV, 149, 153 (Cone. Prov. Rhemense, a 1849); Vol. IV, 359, 861 (Conc. Prov. Avenionense, a 1849); Vol. IV, 394, 396 (Cone. Prov. Burdigalense, a 1850); Vol. V, 61 (Cone. Strigoniense, a 1858); Vol. V, 664 (Conc. Prov. Colocense, a 1863); Vol. VI, 619 (Synod. Vicariatus Suchnensis, a 1803).

¹⁷ International Convention for the Promotion of Ciceronian Studies, Sept. 7, 1959, in *Discorsi Messaggi Colloqui del Santo Padre Giovanni XXIII*, I, pp. 234-235. [English translation in *TPS*, V, 421.] Cf. also Address to Roman Pilgrims of the Diocese of Piacenza, April 15, 1959, in *L'Osservatore Romano* April 16, 1959; Epist. *Pater misericordiarum*, Aug. 22, 1961, in *AAS* 53 (1961), 677; Address given on the occasion of the solemn inauguration of the College of the Philippine Islands at Rome, Oct. 7, 1961, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Oct. 9-10, 1961; Epist. *lucunda laudatio*, Dec. 8, 1961: *AAS* 53 (1961), 812 [English summary in *TPS*, VII, 367-8.]

2. In the exercise of their paternal care they shall be on their guard lest anyone under their jurisdiction, eager for revolutionary changes, writes against the use of Latin in the teaching of the higher sacred studies or in the Liturgy, or through prejudice makes light of the Holy See's will in this regard or interprets it falsely.

Study of Latin as a prerequisite

3. As is laid down in Canon Law (canon 1364) or commanded by Our Predecessors, before Church students begin their ecclesiastical studies proper they shall be given a sufficiently lengthy course of instruction in Latin by highly competent masters, following a method designed to teach them the language with the utmost accuracy. "And that too for this reason: lest later on, when they begin their major studies... they are unable by reason of their ignorance of the language to gain a full understanding of the doctrines or take part in those scholastic disputations which constitute so excellent an intellectual training for young men in the defence of the faith."¹⁸

We wish the same rule to apply to those whom God calls to the priesthood at a more advanced age, and whose classical studies have either been neglected or conducted too superficially. No one is to be admitted to the study of philosophy or theology except he be thoroughly grounded in this language and capable of using it.

Traditional curriculum to be restored

4. Wherever the study of Latin has suffered partial eclipse through the assimilation of the academic program to that which obtains in State public schools, with the result that the instruction given is no longer so thorough and well-grounded as formerly, there the traditional method of teaching this language shall be completely restored. Such is Our will, and there should be no doubt in anyone's mind about the necessity of keeping a strict watch over the course of studies followed by Church students; and that not only as regards the number and kinds of subjects they study, but also as regards the length of time devoted to the teaching of these subjects. Should circumstances of time and place demand the addition of other subjects to the curriculum besides the usual ones, then either the course of studies must be lengthened, or these additional subjects must be condensed or their study relegated to another time.

Sacred sciences to be taught in Latin

5. In accordance with numerous previous instructions, the major sacred sciences shall be taught in Latin, which, as we know from many centuries of use, "must be considered most suitable for explaining with the utmost facility and clarity the most difficult and profound ideas and concepts."¹⁹ For apart from the fact that it has long since been enriched with a vocabulary of appropriate and unequivocal terms, best calculated to safeguard the integrity of the Catholic faith, it also serves in no slight measure to prune away useless verbiage.

¹⁸ Pius XII, Epist. Ap. *Officiorum omnium*, Aug. 1, 1922: AAS 14 (1922), 453.

¹⁹ Epist. S. C. Stud., *Vehementer sane*, July 1, 1908: Ench. Cler., N. 821.

Hence professors of these sciences in universities or seminaries are required to speak Latin and to make use of textbooks written in Latin. If ignorance of Latin makes it difficult for some to obey these instructions, they shall gradually be replaced by professors who are suited to this task. Any difficulties that may be advanced by students or professors must be overcome by the patient insistence of the bishops or religious superiors, and the good will of the professors.

A Latin Academy

6. Since Latin is the Church's living language, it must be adequate to daily increasing linguistic requirements. It must be furnished with new words that are apt and suitable for expressing modern things, words that will be uniform and universal in their application, and constructed in conformity with the genius of the ancient Latin tongue. Such was the method followed by the sacred Fathers and the best writers among the scholastics.

To this end, therefore, We commission the Sacred Congregation of Seminaries and Universities to set up a Latin Academy staffed by an international body of Latin and Greek professors. The principal aim of this Academy—like the national academies founded to promote their respective languages—will be to superintend the proper development of Latin, augmenting the Latin lexicon where necessary with words which conform to the particular character and colour of the language.

It will also conduct schools for the study of Latin of every era, particularly the Christian one. The aim of these schools will be to impart a fuller understanding of Latin and the ability to use it and to write it with proper elegance. They will exist for those who are destined to teach Latin in seminaries and ecclesiastical colleges, or to write decrees and judgments or conduct correspondence in the ministries of the Holy See, diocesan curias, and the offices of religious orders.

The teaching of Greek

7. Latin is closely allied to Greek both in formal structure and in the importance of its extant writings. Hence—as Our Predecessors have frequently ordained—future ministers of the altar must be instructed in Greek in the lower and middle schools. Thus when they come to study the higher sciences—and especially if they are aiming for a degree in Sacred Scripture or theology—they will be enabled to follow the Greek sources of scholastic philosophy and understand them correctly; and not only these, but also the original texts of Sacred Scripture, the Liturgy, and the sacred Fathers.²⁰

A syllabus for the teaching of Latin

8. We further commission the Sacred Congregation of Seminaries and Universities to prepare a syllabus for the teaching of Latin which all shall faithfully observe. The

²⁰ Leo XIII. Lit. Encycli. *Providentissimus Deus*, Nov. 18, 1893: Acta Leonis XIII 13 (1893), 342; Epist. *Plane quidem intelligis*, May 20, 1885, Acta, 5, 63-64; Pius XII, Alloc. *Magis quam*, Sept. 23, 1951: AAS 43 (1951), 737.

syllabus will be designed to give those who follow it an adequate understanding of the language and its use. Episcopal boards may indeed rearrange this syllabus if circumstances warrant, but they must never curtail it or alter its nature. Ordinaries may not take it upon themselves to put their own proposals into effect until these have been examined and approved by the Sacred Congregation.

Finally, in virtue of Our apostolic authority, We will and command that all the decisions, decrees, proclamations and recommendations of this Our Constitution remain firmly established and ratified, notwithstanding anything to the contrary, however worthy of special note.

Given at Rome, at Saint Peter's, on the feast of Saint Peter's Throne on the 22nd day of February in the year 1962, the fourth of Our pontificate.
