

LITURGICAL LATIN:
ITS ORIGINS AND CHARACTER

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Three Lectures

by

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Preface

IN THE THREE lectures which it was my privilege to deliver at the Catholic University of America in the spring of 1957 and which are now, thanks to its Monsignor George A. Dougherty Foundation, appearing in print, I attempted to characterize Liturgical Latin as a hieratic, sacral language, and to throw some light upon its relationship to Early Christian Latin. The significance of Liturgical Latin is twofold. As a sacral, uniform language, it elevates the official prayer of the Church above the changeability and multiformity of the national languages of communication, and it serves as a link, and a direct link, with the first centuries of Christianity and the heritage of the Early Christian Fathers.

The study of Liturgical Latin is thus of necessity bound up with that of Early Christian Latin, from which it proceeds. In the short space of three lectures, it was impossible for me to go more deeply into the fascinating phenomenon of the "Christianization" of the language of Rome, a process completed during the first centuries of our era and one which transformed the Latin language into an adequate instrument for the expression of Christian life and thought. I was, however, able to deal more fully with this "prehistory" of Liturgical Latin in a series of lectures given during the summer of 1956 at the

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University of Notre Dame. A résumé of these lectures will, I hope, soon appear in printed form.

For further information on the development of Early Christian Latin as the group language of the early Christians, may I refer to the publications of the "School of Nijmegen" appearing in the series *Latinitas Christianorum Primaeva*, and to the pertinent articles published in the journal *Vigiliae Christianae*.

The renewed interest in the life of the Early Church which is becoming increasingly evident, and which is closely bound up with the revival of a liturgical consciousness, justifies the hope that this modest work may also find a public outside the narrow circle of specialists. May it be instrumental in assuring that the true value of this precious heritage, the Latin prayer language of the Church, may be appreciated in still wider circles. This heritage, as I said above, is a link which binds us with our Early Christian past and ensures our present unity-in-prayer—*vinculum unitatis*—in a double sense.

I should like to express an especial word of thanks to Professor Martin R. P. McGuire, who was the moving spirit behind these lectures and their publication. I should like also to thank both him and his colleague, Professor Bernard M. Peebles, for preparing the manuscript for the printer.

CHRISTINE MOHRMANN

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I

Sacred and Hieratic Languages

IF ONE WISHES to study the phenomenon of sacred and hieratic languages, one must first rid oneself of the still widespread conception that the only function of human language is that of communication; in other words, that language only serves to make known, as clearly and efficiently as possible, that which the speaker wishes to convey to his hearer. The so-called social school of linguistics dealt especially with this concrete and practical function of language in human society, and laid far too much emphasis upon it. As a result, the value of language was assessed too much in terms of its efficiency as a means of intercourse between human beings and as an instrument of communication.¹ From this one might conclude that the most perfect language would be a linguistic system which, with the help of the fewest possible words and other linguistic aids, would provide the clearest possible means of communication. It is an established fact that, usually, the greater the number of people using a particular language as a medium of communication, the simpler this language becomes and the fewer linguistic elements it requires. Its grammar and morphology become less complicated, its