The Historical Legacy of the Roman Mass

In the first part of this series, I demonstrated how the Catholic Faith has been especially maintained, promoted and defended through the traditional Roman Mass, and thereby how this particular rite is a byword for doctrinal purity.

In continuing to explain the vast significance of the Roman Mass—and thereby advocate this proper title above all others—we will now turn to its historical legacy.

As explained by Dr. Adrian Fortescue in his scholarly work, *The Mass: A Study of the Roman Liturgy*, the Roman Mass is the most ancient and venerable rite of the Holy Sacrifice:

> "Our Mass goes back, without essential change, to the age when it first developed out of the oldest liturgy of all. It is still redolent of the liturgy, of the days when Caesar ruled the world and thought he could stamp out the faith of Christ, when our fathers met together before the dawn and sang a hymn to Christ as to God. The final result of our inquiry is that, in spite of unsolved problems, in spite of later changes, there is not in Christendom another rite so venerable as ours. The prejudice that imagines that everything Eastern must be old is a mistake. Eastern rites have been modified later too; some of them quite late. No Eastern Rite now used is as archaic as the Roman Mass."

The oldest and most essential parts of the Roman Mass are enshrined in its Canon, a Latin word for "a rule of order" or "list" of prayers to be followed,[1] that is, from the *Te igitur* inclusive to the *Per ipsum*. The Church has always taught that parts of the Roman Canon are of both Divine and Apostolic origin.

For example, the actual words of Christ are used in the consecration formula, while the words used by St. Peter in offering Mass are contained within the prayers of the Canon (though these are less identifiable due to their recasting from the original Greek into Latin). Similarly, St. Paul's expression "*mysterium fidei*" (1 Tim. 3:9) is said during the consecration of the Precious Blood. Thus, the Roman Mass is not merely of Apostolic origin in a general sense, but bears a distinct connection to the two holy Patrons of Rome, the First Pope and the Apostle of the Gentiles.

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In addition to its status as the mother and derivative of the other Latin Rites (even having primacy over all other rites in both the West and East), the Roman Mass has also been the most proliferate rite throughout the Universal Church. But perhaps the most understated distinction of the Roman Mass is the inseparable connection with its namesake city of Rome, the Eternal City—a point that deserves some attention and explanation.

Rome's Role in God's Plan

In His providence, God specifically used the apparatus of the Roman Empire as an instrument of redemption. For example, it was the census decree of Emperor Augustus that caused St. Joseph to return to his home of birth for registration (cf. Luke 2:1-7), thus fulfilling the ancient prophecy that Christ would be born in Bethlehem (cf. Mic. 5:2; Matt. 2:1-6). Likewise, the manner of Christ's death by crucifixion—also prophesied centuries earlier (cf. Ps. 21[22]:17-19)—was a particular Roman practice reserved for foreigners, which became the emblematic sign of Christ's victory over sin and death.

The Roman Empire also enabled the rapid spread of Christianity during the Apostolic age, primarily through its hard-won period of *Pax Romana*, which continued until about 180 AD. This tranquil era, coupled with highly developed Roman roads and sailing networks, provided relatively easy access to the known world (and thus the origin of the axiom "all roads lead to Rome").

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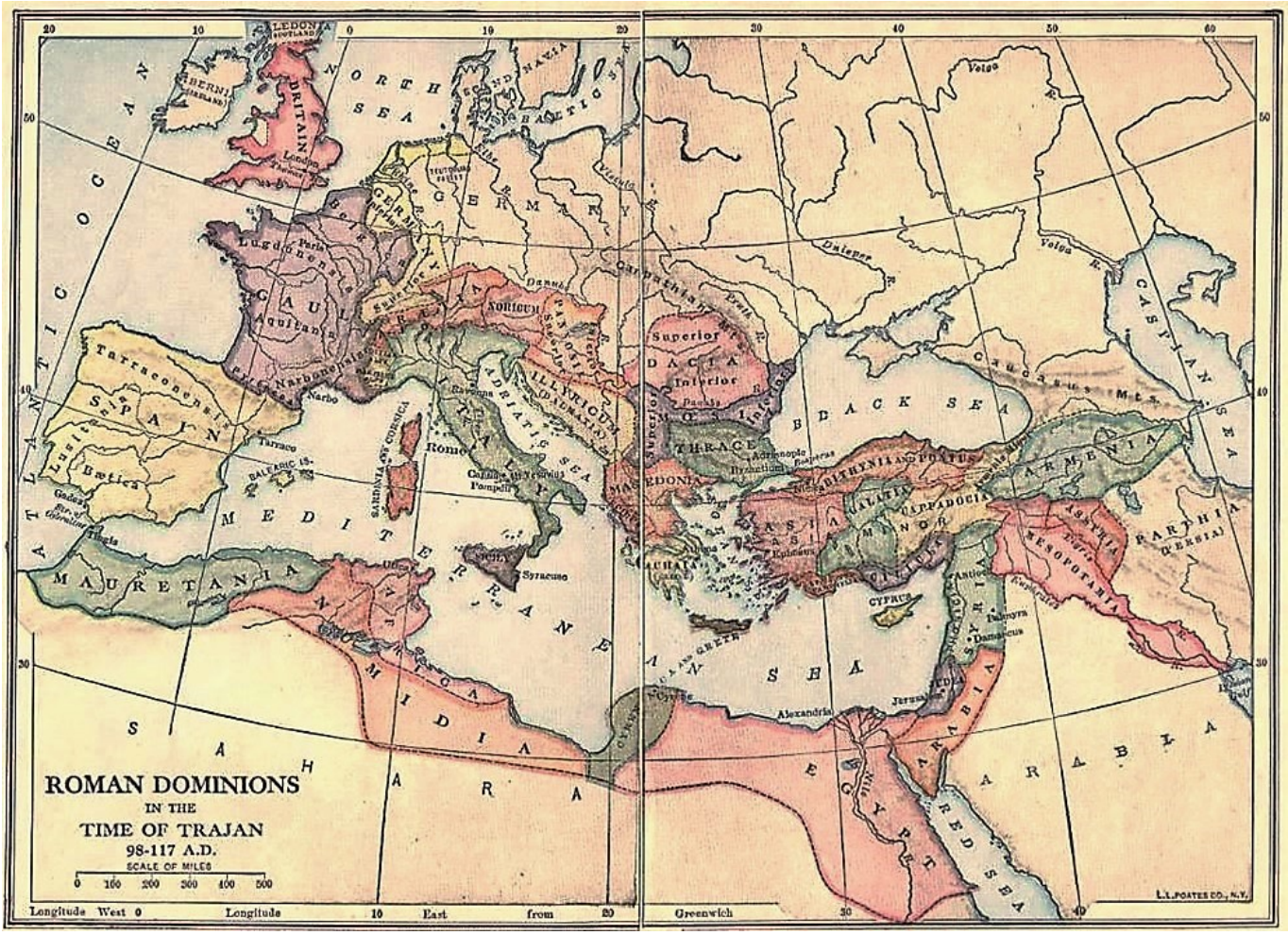

The ease of travel afforded by the Roman Empire, as well as its central role in matters of authority, also led to St. Peter establishing his Holy See—or Petrine Chair—in the City of Rome, while St. Paul, a Roman citizen (cf. Acts 22:25-29), was transported there as a prisoner on account of his appeal to Caesar (cf. Acts 25:9-12). And likewise in their martyrdoms—which occurred on the same day—Roman law dictated the manner of their executions. St. Peter was crucified as a non-Roman citizen, thus fulfilling Our Lord's prophecy about his death (cf. John 21:18-19), while St. Paul was beheaded as a citizen of the Empire. In this way, the Holy Apostles sanctified the City of the Seven Hills with their blood.

Romanitas, An Essential Component of Catholicism

Beyond the more practical aspects of God's providential use of Rome, we must also briefly explore the character of *romanitas* (i.e., to be Roman) that was bequeathed as an essential component of the Catholic Church. Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre magnificently summarizes this point about *romanitas* in his classic testament of Faith, *Spiritual Journey* (available from

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Angelus Press):

> "All must be restored *in Christo Domino*—'in Christ the Lord,' in Rome as elsewhere.
>
> Let us love to see how the ways of Divine Providence and Wisdom pass by Rome. We will conclude that one cannot be Catholic without being Roman. This applies also to Catholics who have neither the Latin language nor the Roman liturgy. If they remain Catholic, it is because they remain Roman like the Maronites, for example, by the ties to the Catholic and Roman French culture which formed them.
>
> It is, moreover, an error to speak of Roman culture as Western. The converts from Judaism brought with them from the Orient all that was Christian, all that which in the Old Testament was preparation and could be a component of Christianity, all that which Our Lord had assumed and that the Holy Ghost had inspired the Apostles to adopt. How many times do the epistles of St. Paul teach us on this subject!
>
> God willed that Christianity, cast in a certain way in the Roman mold, receive from it a vigorous and exceptional expansion. All is grace in the divine plan and Our Divine Savior disposes all as the Romans are said to act, that is, '*cum consilio et patientia*' or '*suaviter et fortiter*'—'with counsel and patience, sweetly and mightily' (Wis. 8:1).
>
> Ours is the duty to guard this Roman Tradition desired by Our Lord, as He wished us to have Mary as our Mother."

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Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre (1905-1991), right, during his time as Pope Pius XII's Apostolic Delegate to French-speaking Africa.

There are several important characteristics of *romanitas*, namely: logic, practicality, a preoccupation with law and duty, and a willingness to incorporate foreign practices and recast them in a Roman mold. The Roman Liturgy wonderfully embodies all of these characteristics and thus one could say it represents the highest expression of *romanitas*.

As an example, the Roman Mass is renowned for its sense of logic (its rules and practices make sense), practicality (the rites are carried out in a practical, simple and terse manner), juridical character (with an emphasis on carrying out the rites in an official and exact manner), and having absorbed and remolded practices from other liturgical rites (e.g., of Eastern or Gallican origin). The spirit of *romanitas*, integral to the Mass of Rome, was summarized by the great English liturgical historian Edmund Bishop in his book, *The Genius of the Roman Rite*:[2]

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> "…the genius of the native Roman rite is marked by simplicity, practicality, a great sobriety and self-control, gravity and dignity…"

In connection with *romanitas*, it is important to note that the sacred liturgy not only fulfills the supernatural and divine sphere as an act of religion and vehicle of grace, but also plays a role in the natural and human sphere as a means of preserving and transmitting culture.

For example in the Roman Rite, the most noble elements of Latin's literary culture are embodied and preserved, as seen in the use of the hieratic form of *Itala Vetus* in the Roman Canon[3] and of the Vulgate[4] for the Scriptural texts. The famed terse composition of Latinists has also been retained throughout various prayers (particularly in the ancient Sunday Collects), while their prose style can be found in the Sequences and hymns of the Divine Office (which are also mixed with vocabulary from the so-called Classical form). Indeed, the patrimony of the Latin language was not only maintained by the Roman Church, but even continued to be developed throughout the centuries, resulting in an ecclesiastical form, and even the liturgical pronunciation of *more romano*.[5]

Romanitas Helped Build Christendom

We can also see throughout history how the practice of *romanitas*—particularly through the sacred liturgy—contributed to the spread of Christianity and helped to establish a unified Christendom in Western Europe. In practical matters, it is well known how the "barbarians" to the north adopted Roman culture, customs, architecture and engineering. Perhaps lesser known is the fact that the Frankish kings (and later, the Holy Roman Emperors) sought to have the liturgy as offered by the Pope imitated in their own kingdom as a means of uniting the clergy and faithful.

During this fledgling period of Christendom, the now-defunct Gallican Rite held sway in the Frankish kingdom, along with many local variations. King Pepin (and his son, Charlemagne, after him) had the vision of uniting the various northern kingdoms as the Roman Empire had once united many regions. To this end, and desiring a great unity with the Bishop of Rome, the Sovereign Pontiff, the Frankish kings imposed the Roman Mass upon their clergy. A copy of the Roman Sacramentary (the predecessor of the Roman Missal) was requested from Rome and in 785, Pope Hadrian I sent a copy to Charlemagne (known today as the Gregorian Sacramentary).

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Image: The Coronation of Charlemagne by Friedrich Kaulbach, c. 1861

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Copies of this sacramentary were made and dispersed throughout the Frankish kingdom; however, since the local clergy were loath to depart from all of their Gallican practices, some were incorporated, thereby creating a Frankish-Roman sacramentary. Eventually, copies of these revised sacramentaries made their way back to Rome, resulting in certain Gallican additions—for example, incensing the altar before the Introit and some of the Offertory prayers—being adopted by the Apostolic See itself, thus demonstrating that willingness to incorporate foreign practices and recast them in a Roman mold which is so characteristic of *romanitas*.

Missionary Power of the Roman Mass

Going forward into the Age of Exploration in 15th century, the Roman Mass was “exported” by missionaries to North and South America, as well as Africa and Asia, thereby making this

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rite even more prevalent and influential throughout the world by continuing to spread the culture of *romanitas*. What is interesting to note is that, while the Eastern Rites tended to stay focused within their cultural boundaries, Rome, on the other hand—via the Roman Mass—continued to project its influence outwards.[6]

As a final interesting point about the relevance and importance of *romanitas* for today, the famed Jesuit author, Fr. Vincent Miceli, made the observation in a conference about his book, *The Antichrist*, that when the last remnants of Roman culture have been swept away, the time will then be ready for the coming of the Antichrist.[7] As we witness the erosion of Christianity everywhere (particularly through the rejection of morals, including the Natural Law), we are perhaps drawing nearer to this time. Nevertheless, let us always have hope and not fear for the future, because the final victory of Christ is already assured, as expressed with this conclusion uttered by the priest in every Mass: "*per omnia saecula saeculorum. Amen.*"

In my next installment, I will be explaining the significance of the name "Roman" in regard to the traditional Mass.

Part 3: What's In a Name?

Notes

[1] The Canon itself is divided into two parts with Greek names, the first is the *anaphora* (or "offering) and the second is *anamnesis* (or "remembrance"), which themselves are separated (or rather, connected) by the consecration prayers.

[2] This book, currently out of print, can be read in full at Archive.org.

[3] As explained by Prof. Christine Mohrmann in her book, *Liturgical Latin: Its Origins and Character*, the *Itala Vetus* was not the vernacular used by everyday Romans, but rather a very stylized form reserved for official occasions.

[4] The term "Vulgate" refers to the "vulgar" or common tongue spoken by the Romans, particularly during the time of St. Jerome, that is, the 4th century.

[5] That is, to pronounce the Latin liturgical texts "as the Romans". This pronunciation method was desired by Pope St. Pius X and his successors to be used by all in liturgical functions. Further details can be found on the Server's Mass Response Card offered by Romanitas Press.

[6] For more on subject of *romanitas*, I recommend the January-February 2015 edition of

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The Angelus magazine, which coincidentally featured articles from two of the speakers at the 2018 *Catholic Family News* Conference, Bishop Bernard Tissier de Mallerais and Prof. Roberto de Mattei.

[7] The CD's title is "Antichrist: Revisited and Updated" and is available from Keep the Faith.

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