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By Robert Keim

It is a weakness of human language that words tend to lose their force over time. As the world grows ever older and cultural ancestors are ever more distant, the prospect would appear to be a dire one—what would become of our lives if language ceased to move us and delight us, to elevate the imagination, to enlighten the intellect? It is Providential, then, that words hold within themselves the means of their own renewal; here I speak of etymology. And it is again Providential that language has always been—and *Deo volente*, will always be—bound to an art form that reverses the process of decay through its mysticality and eloquent verbal craftsmanship; here I speak of poetry.

One word that is currently in an endangered state, while also being crucial to the survival of our civilization, is *tradition*. As its usage multiplies, its significance wanes; as its connotations shift, its true meaning dissipates; as its contemporary associations become fixed in our consciousness, its vast historical horizon fades from our view. We must, first of all, recall the Latin seed from which our notion of tradition has grown: *tradere*, a verb meaning, inter alia, "to hand down (to posterity)." Next, let us nourish our minds and soften our hearts with a few lines of poetry, from Shakespeare's *Richard III* in this case, before continuing:[i]

> And let their heirs, God, if Thy will be so,
> Enrich the time to come with smooth-faced peace,
> With smiling plenty and fair prosperous days.
> Abate the edge of traitors, gracious Lord,
> That would reduce these bloody days again
> And make poor England weep in streams of blood.
> Let them not live to taste this land's increase,
> That would with treason wound this fair land's peace.
>
> *Act V, Scene V*

The concept of *tradere* as "to hand down" suggests action, process, relationship. What it does *not* suggest is origin. Etymology reminds us that tradition is rooted in the concept of antiquity, that is, of "time immemorial," an ancient past that is beyond the reach of memory and record—or as the venerable English legal phrase styles it, "time out of mind." We ought not reduce our notion of tradition to "that which existed before" a particular event or a specified century. Our beliefs and practices are eminently traditional when we seek a

starting point and find instead a seemingly endless cycle of reception, purification, enrichment, and bequest that recedes into the mist and shadows of history. To better understand our traditions—and therefore to better understand ourselves—we must trace them back as far as our knowledge and imagination can take us. When the traditions in question are those of western European Christianity, this means tracing them back to Romanitas.

Another definition of *tradere* is "to entrust," and with this we return to Richard III, who in Shakespeare's play is a scheming, murderous usurper—that is to say, a violator of tradition: he scorned and assaulted that which was entrusted to him. The lines quoted above, spoken by Richmond after Richard's well-deserved death in the Battle of Bosworth, invoke the power of God against those who thus betray their land and people. But here the subtleties of language assert themselves and open our minds anew to things we long have known. "Abate the edge of traitors, gracious Lord": ignore the spelling, and that word "traitor" seems rather like *tradere*—and with good reason, for *tradere* also means "to hand over, deliver, give (someone) up" and is thus the source of English "traitor," "treason," "betray." What grave and urgent things are circulating deep within the word "tradition"! We should look upon our tradition as that which is handed down and entrusted to us, and which we either honor and preserve by handing it down in turn, or betray by handing it *over*—to museums, where it will be seen and studied as it withers and dies, or to the neglected margins of life, where it will soon be forgotten and replaced with something new.

What Is Romanitas?

"Romanitas," literally meaning "Romanness" and used to denote the defining ideals and mores of classical Roman culture, is recent terminology for an ancient concept. Tertullian employed the word, without its weighty modern significance, in his satirical treatise *De pallio*. Otherwise, "Romanitas" gained currency in the cultural discourse of the twentieth century, serving as a means of concisely referring to the virtues, social values, idealized character, and collective identity of the ancient city and western European civilization that we call Rome.

The capital of Antiquity's dominant empire, the wellspring of Latin arts and letters, the geographical center of the Mediterranean world—this was Rome. Here Romanitas was growing, nourished by the deep roots of prehistoric Italic peoples, of whom we know little, and by the rich soil of myths and legends, of which we know much. Through political, social, and cultural institutions that extended far to the north and west of Italy, Romanitas diffused into Europe and, while gradually being Christianized, into the liturgy and spirituality of the

western Church.

The influence of Rome and Romanitas extended well beyond the city's tenure as the usual residence of the emperors, which ended in the early third century. It was still, in the words of the sixth-century scholar Cassiodorus, "everyone's country, the fruitful mother of eloquence, the wide temple of all virtues."[ii] As the classicist J. W. Mackail (d. 1945) explained, drawing upon the writings of the fourth-century historian Ammianus Marcellinus,

The name of Rome remained magical. It was known through the world as the Eternal City: and the name became even more prevalent after the transference of the centre of government to Milan and the foundation of the New Rome of Constantine. Rome was *domina et regina, urbs venerabilis, caput mundi, victura cum seculis, urbs sacratissima, templum mundi totius* [mistress and queen, venerable city, head of the world, destined to endure through the centuries, most sacred city, temple of all the world].[iii]

The Sources of Romanitas

Romanitas cannot be officially and comprehensively defined, because ancient writings to this effect do not exist. No one in ancient Rome wrote (as far as we know) a complete and authoritative treatise entitled “On the Ideal Life and Character of a Roman.” Nevertheless, we can paint a clear and reliable picture of Romanitas by gathering and synthesizing knowledge from various sources.

The strongest link between Romanitas and a well-documented system of principles and beliefs is found in Stoicism. Indeed, the stereotypical traits of the Stoic—equanimity, longanimity, austerity, detached rationality—are in large part the stereotypical traits of the ancient Roman; this association, as one scholar has observed, dates back to the

Renaissance: "The decade of the fifteen-nineties, when [Shakespeare's] *Julius Caesar* was written, marks the rise of Neo-Stoicism in England…. For the Elizabethans, Neo-Stoicism resuscitated a distinctly Roman ethos; to be a Stoic meant, in effect, to be a Roman."[iv] To identify Stoicism with Romanitas is not wholly inaccurate, but it is misleading, for we might begin to think of Stoicism as a quintessentially Roman school of philosophy. It actually originated in Greece, around 300 BC, and its various ethical, epistemological, and cosmological doctrines do not, when viewed all together, appear nearly so "Roman" as some of the isolated features that are emphasized in modern culture. There is no doubt that Stoicism was highly influential in Rome, but Stoic principles had been adapted, notably by Panaetius of Rhodes (d. 109 BC), to pre-existing Roman ideals. In Greece, Stoicism counseled passive virtues: indifference to suffering, calm benevolence, impassive wisdom. In Rome, Stoicism became more active: The virtuous man was bene*ficent* (*doing* good things) rather than bene*volent* (peacefully *willing* good things). He was magnanimous and self-possessed, exerting his moral strength against the flights of passion and the whims of fortune, and he was a man of integrity who renounced self-indulgence and placed the interests of the fatherland above his own. Roman Stoicism was exactly that: a fusion of Stoicism and Roman values that reinforced and enriched earlier forms of Romanitas. This is why the classicist Martin Clarke could affirm that the Romans were Stoics long before they knew what Stoicism was.[v]

From philosophy we turn to the annals of historical legend, wherein we find the stalwart patrician Cincinnatus, who had retired from political life to the rural labors of his small farm. The year was 458 BC, and a crisis had descended upon Rome. The army was besieged by the Aequi, and the citizens of the Republic needed decisive leadership. They found it in Cincinnatus, who was destined to become an embodiment of Romanitas. Called away from his plow and his land, he was appointed dictator and defeated the Aequi in short order. He then celebrated a triumph, relinquished his power, and returned to his plow. Whether or not the events are factual does not concern us here; the story, if taken seriously, is deeply moving and serves as a compelling exemplum of Roman ideals: austerity, simplicity, valor, respect for agricultural labors, unhesitating fulfillment of duty, selfless devotion to the common good.

Finally, we turn from legend to literature. If we had only one text from which to form an image of Romanitas, it would be Virgil's *Aeneid*, an epic poem from the first century BC that recounts the mythical origins of Rome. And if we must choose one man to be the living paradigm of Romanitas, that man would be Virgil's hero Aeneas—Trojan nobleman, mighty warrior, child of a goddess, and patriarch of the Roman people. Aeneas spared fair Helen, when Troy faced ruin; he carried his aged father Anchises upon his shoulders, that both might escape from the city and its flames; he parted with his beloved Dido, in obedience to

the divine messenger; he was moved by mercy and compelled by justice when he vanquished King Turnus in single combat; and with filial devotion he descended to the land of the dead after Anchises—*pater optimus* and *carus genitor*, "best of fathers" and "beloved sire"—had died, despite the famous warning of the Sibyl:[vi]

> The gates of hell are open night and day;
> Smooth the descent, and easy is the way:
> But to return, and view the cheerful skies,
> In this the task and mighty labor lies.
>
> *Aeneid, Book VI, lines 126–129 in the original. The translation given here is that of John Dryden (1697).*

What the *Aeneid* shows us is that the essence of Romanitas is not stoical impassivity, austere wisdom, or cold rationality. It is *pietas*.

The Virtues and Ideals of Romanitas

All English translations of the *Aeneid* are destined to fall short, if only for the words *pius* and *pietas*, which are central to the poem and have no concise English equivalent. In his 2016 translation, the distinguished classicist Barry Powell included *pius* and *pietas* in square brackets next to the English rendering, so that readers will more fully understand what Virgil is actually trying to convey. Roman *pietas* is much more than "piety" in the narrow, modern sense associated with those who conscientiously practice their religion. Powell glosses Latin *pietas* as "sense of duty," "religious behavior," "loyalty," "devotion," and the meaning extends also into sincere affection for one's parents or homeland. If we had to choose a one-word English translation for *pius*, the best choice would probably be "dutiful," understood broadly as "nobly and faithfully fulfilling one's duties to friends, family, countrymen, and God." (*Pietas* thus subsumes the related Roman virtue of *religio*, which suggests dutiful devotion to, and reverential fear of, the gods.) Virgil leaves no doubt that his hero is an exemplar of *pietas*; not only are his actions a vivid lesson in how to practice this virtue, but in the introductory invocation to the Muse, just ten lines into Book One, he is described as "renowned" for *pietas*,[vii] and the word *pius* even functions as his epithet—later in Book One he is identified as *pius Aeneas*, and the phrase recurs throughout the poem.[viii]

> *Tum pius Aeneas umeris abscindere vestem,*

> *auxilioque vocare deos, et tendere palmas:*
> *"Iuppiter omnipotens…*
>
> Then good Aeneas rends his robes, and calls
> Upon the gods for aid, with outstretched hands:—
> "O Jove Omnipotent, if thou our race
> Not yet dost altogether hate; if now
> Thy pity, shown of old, on human woes
> Still looks with tenderness, then save our fleet
> From the devouring flames! Now, father, snatch
> The Trojans' slender fortunes from this death.
> Or, if I so deserve, with thy right hand
> Blast with thy thunders all that yet remains."
>
> *Book V; the passage quoted in the translation of Christopher Pearse Cranch (1872) corresponds to lines 685–692 in the original.*

If we imagine Romanitas as a triumphal arch of moral strength and honorable conduct, *pietas* is the keystone.

The list below summarizes other virtues that figured prominently in Romanitas. Some of these are a natural precondition or result of habitually practicing *pietas*, and the list in general indicates that personal and social ideals were influenced by Rome's political and military culture.

- *firmitas* or *constantia*: steadfastness, endurance, perseverance
- *frugalitas*: moderation, temperance, judicious use of wealth; opposed to luxury and avarice
- *gravitas*: dignity, weight, seriousness, which have kinship with austerity and respect for tradition
- *prudentia*: prudence, good sense, discretion
- *honestas*: integrity, respectability; opposed to *turpitudo*, i.e., baseness, disgrace
- *auctoritas*: personal authority, the capacity for leadership and influence associated with one's reputation
- *humanitas*: kindness, politeness, refinement in behavior and speech

And there is one more that must be mentioned: *virtus*. The fact that the Latin word for "virtue" has the fundamental meanings of "strength" and "courage" says a great deal about Romanitas. If we return to the metaphor of the triumphal arch, *virtus* is the rough, granitic rock from which all the individual stones are made.

Romanitas in Catholic Spirituality and Liturgy

The Faith faces grave dangers, some of which are more easily overlooked than others. Among this latter group is sentimentality, which is the sort of enemy that smiles and flatters while it erodes and undermines. When spirituality is afflicted by excessive sentimentality, ideas of holiness easily become distorted: to be holy is to work oneself up into a charismatic fervor, or frequently weep during prayer, or write effusive love letters to God, or receive emotionally charged visitations from saints and angels. Holiness is not fundamentally, and not even primarily, about these things. They are, *at best*, the fruit of holiness, which is simply this: the resolute and heroic practice of the Christian virtues, which above all are faith, hope, and charity (the theological virtues) and fortitude, prudence, temperance, and justice (the cardinal virtues). The theological virtues are conspicuously lacking in ancient Roman culture, as we would expect—it was a pagan and pre-Christian culture whose admirable qualities coexisted with the religious deformities and moral outrages that invariably accompanied paganism. The cardinal virtues, however, are little more than a synthesis and purification of Romanitas: fortitude is *virtus* and *firmitas*, prudence is *prudentia*, temperance is *frugalitas*, and justice is *pietas*.[ix]

In addition to recognizing this somewhat theoretical consonance between Roman and Christian virtues, we can also relate Romanitas to our social and literary encounters with holiness as a lived experience. The saints of the Church, especially those belonging to the Western spiritual tradition, often impress upon us their grave and austere demeanor blended with unpretentious kindness, their aura of personal authority, their remarkable asceticism and strength of will, their practical wisdom and ironclad sense of duty and steely determination to obey the precepts of the Gospel. The western Church did not paint this masterpiece of Christian holiness from a blank canvas. Its hues and contours were inherited from the ideals of the Romans.

And finally we come to history's most magnificent and captivating and culturally transformative manifestation of Romanitas: the traditional Eucharistic liturgy of western Christendom, also known as the Latin Mass.

The Mass has been called the central artistic achievement of Christian culture…. [The French playwright and essayist] Paul Claudel, after the initial impressions which culminated in his conversion, was thrilled by the sacred drama unfolded at Notre Dame in Paris. "It was the most profound and grandiose poetry, enhanced by the most august gestures ever

confided to human beings."[x]

Notice the words that Claudel chooses: "poetry," "profound," "grandiose," "august"; these are the aesthetics of *gravitas*, *honestas*, *auctoritas*, *humanitas*. And in this he echoes what so many others have said, and what so many of us continue to say: beautiful, contemplative, impressive, solemn, majestic—these are the adjectives that follow the classical Roman Mass wherever it goes. These are Roman virtues, enriched by grace and perfected in Truth, that have been translated into light and shadow, prayer and song, posture and vesture, proportion and movement.

Let us marvel, then, at the grandeur and immensity of Catholic tradition. The Old Rite is an invaluable and irreplaceable liturgical inheritance, which deserves, until the end of time, all the respect and affection and artistic adornment that human society can offer it. It is the reification and sublimation of cultural traditions that reach back beyond the 1962 Missal, beyond St. Pius V, beyond St. Gregory the Great—even beyond *pius Aeneas*, who did not leave his timeworn father to die amidst the flames, but dutifully lifted him onto his back, and lovingly carried him into newness of life.[xi]

> "Come then, dear father! On my shoulders I
> Will bear thee, nor will think the task severe.
> Whatever lot awaits us, there shall be
> One danger and one safety for us both."
>
> *Aeneid, Book II, lines 707–710 (Cranch's translation).*

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[i]. Act V, scene 5.

[ii]. Cassiodorus, *Variae*, Book I, § 39.

[iii]. J. W. Mackail, "Ammianus Marcellinus." *Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. 10 (1920), p. 109.

[iv]. John Anson, "*Julius Caesar*: The Politics of the Hardened Heart." *Shakespeare Studies*,

vol. 2 (1966), p. 13.

[v]. Martin Lowther Clarke, *The Roman Mind*. W. W. Norton (1968), p. 32.

[vi]. *Aeneid*, Book VI, lines 126–129 in the original. The translation given here is that of John Dryden (1697).

[vii]. "Musa, mihi causas memora, quo numine laeso, / quidve dolens, regina deum tot volvere casus / **insignem pietate virum**."

[viii]. Book V; the passage quoted in the translation of Christopher Pearse Cranch (1872) corresponds to lines 685–692 in the original.

[ix]. The notion of faithfully giving others what they deserve is integral to *pietas*. Latin *justitia* is not the closest equivalent to "justice" when the latter is understood narrowly as "rendering to each his due," because *justitia* in Roman culture was an expansive concept that, like "righteousness" or even "saintliness" in modern English, encompassed a wide range of admirable characteristics: "This sentiment, assigning each his own and maintaining with generosity and equity that human solidarity …, is termed Justice; connected with it are dutiful affection, kindness, liberality, good will, courtesy, and the other graces of the same kind" (Cicero, *De finibus bonorum et malorum*,Book V, § 65).

[x]. Josef Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development*, vol. 1, translated by Francis A. Brunner. Christian Classics (1992), pp. 3–4.

[xi]. *Aeneid*, Book II, lines 707–710 (Cranch's translation).

