

## THE LANGUAGE/S OF THE MASS, PART 1

*Continuing our series on the Mass, the next entry from the question box reads: "How many people know when St. Boniface had our first Mass in English from the Latin Mass?" Find the answer (to when the Mass was, not to how many people know it) next week, right here in **From the Pastor's Desk!***

We have become quite accustomed to celebrating Mass in English, but that was not always the case. The original language of the Mass was . . . (any guesses?) . . . No, not Latin. It was Aramaic. This was the common language spoken among Palestinian Jews of Jesus' time, and so it is most likely the language that Jesus, a Jew, spoke at the Last Supper when he instituted the Eucharist and that the first disciples, also Jews, probably spoke when they gathered later on for the Breaking of the Bread. Once Christians were expelled from the synagogues and they joined the readings from Scripture (what we call the Old Testament) to the Breaking of the Bread, Hebrew would also have been incorporated into the Mass. We find a remnant of Hebrew in the Mass even today in the hymn we sing to greet the Gospel reading, the "Alleluia," which comes from the Hebrew word meaning "Praise God."

As Christianity grew beyond its Jewish roots, spreading far beyond Palestine and welcoming more and more non-Jews, Aramaic ceased to be the common language of the community. Thanks to the earlier conquests of Alexander the Great, a Greek from Macedonia, and his efforts to unify his empire with a common language and culture, Greek was the common language of the Mediterranean at that time, and so it became the language of the Mass for the next few centuries. We find several remnants of this era of Christianity in our Mass today, including primarily the "Kyrie eleison," a Greek expression which we translate as "Lord have mercy" in the Penitential Rite.

While Greek remained the common culture and language of the Mass in the Eastern Mediterranean, its prominence gradually faded in the West, replaced by the rising influence of Roman culture, including the language of Rome, Latin. As the language of the people, this became the language of the Mass in the Western Roman Empire around the fourth century, and liturgical books and texts were written in Latin. This is important because, in the fifth and sixth centuries, the Western Roman Empire fell apart, divided up by illiterate barbarian kingdoms. For the most part, the only written documents, including liturgical books, available then were in Latin, and so Latin remained the language of the Mass, even when it was no longer the language of the people. Efforts by popes and bishops to unify the Church in this chaotic time included efforts to make the celebration of the Mass more uniform and to curb local abuses, and so, even when the Germanic languages of the various European peoples were finally committed to writing, Latin remained the official language of the Mass.

*Tune in next week for the exciting conclusion to **THE LANGUAGE/S OF THE MASS!***