

## THE LANGUAGE/S OF THE MASS, PART 2

*We conclude our reflection on the language of the Mass this week and finally answer the question that started it all, "How many people know when St. Boniface had our first Mass in English from the Latin Mass?"*

After the fall of the Roman Empire in Europe around the fifth century and the rise in its place of illiterate barbarian kingdoms, the predominant written language remained the language of Rome – Latin. This was also true of the Mass. Even when the languages of these new European kingdoms were finally put to writing, efforts to unify the Church through a more uniform celebration of the Mass led to the retention of Latin as the language of liturgical texts during the centuries often referred to as the Middle Ages.

Throughout this time, local efforts periodically emerged to translate the Mass into the vernacular, the language of the people. However, as these efforts were often undertaken by heretical movements, they were suppressed by Church authorities. It was not until the sixteenth century that Church authorities would seriously consider the possibility of allowing Mass to be celebrated in the vernacular. This was in response to the greatest threat to Church unity up to that time, the Protestant Reformation. The Protestant reformers ultimately rejected many Church teachings and practices, the use of Latin as the language of worship being among them. The leaders of the Catholic Church, gathering in the ecumenical council of Trent, fiercely debated how best to respond to this threat. Some bishops believed translating the Mass into the vernacular would benefit the people, while other bishops believed such a move would only further divide the Church. The latter group prevailed, and Trent retained Latin as the official, and only, language of the Mass.

The animosity between Catholics and Protestants that dominated Europe prevented any further consideration of the use of the vernacular at Mass by the Catholic Church until the twentieth century when the ecumenical movement began to thaw Catholic-Protestant relations and the liturgical renewal movement began reemphasizing the participation of the people at Mass. Eventually, these renewal efforts would coalesce at the second Vatican ecumenical council, or Vatican II, and the first decree of that council, the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, promulgated by Pope Paul VI on December 4, 1963. Contrary to popular belief, Vatican II did not require that the Mass be celebrated in English. In fact, quite the opposite, Vatican II mandated that the use of Latin be preserved, and even today, all official liturgical texts are first published in Latin. What Vatican II did do was to allow extensive use of the vernacular in the liturgy, depending upon the judgment of the governing body of bishops in a given area. These governing bodies, now called episcopal conferences, were given permission to prepare vernacular translations, which then had to be approved by Rome before they could be used in worship. The first English translation of the Mass for use in the United States was approved by Rome in May 1964, and its use began the first Sunday of Advent, November 29, 1964. This was not an "English" Mass, however. Many parts were still in Latin. The first complete English translation of the Mass would not appear until after the Mass itself was revised by Pope Paul VI in 1969, with the English translation of that Mass being approved by Rome on February 4, 1973.