

Chapter I

Pronunciation and Grammar

Firstly, then, a few words about pronunciation. The easiest way to learn this is to go regularly to a Latin Mass, in which case you will pick it up without any effort at all. Regrettably however, most people in this country have only limited opportunities to hear a Latin Mass, either in the Old or the New Rite. Fortunately, the standard pronunciation of liturgical Latin is not at all difficult to familiarise yourself with even if you seldom get the chance to hear it spoken.

The pronunciation of liturgical Latin is very similar to modern Italian. In fact, if you are familiar with modern Italian pronunciation, you can probably skip the next bit altogether.

Most consonants are pronounced in exactly the same way as in English. The exceptions are c, g, j and t. C and g are pronounced as “ch” and “j” where they occur before e or i, otherwise as in English “cat” and “got”. So “principio” is pronounced “princhipio” and “gentes” is pronounced “jentes”. J is always pronounced as “y”. So “Judas” and “judica” are pronounced “Yudas” and “yudica” respectively. T is normally pronounced as in English but becomes “ts” before “ia”, “io” and “iu”. So “licentia” is pronounced “lichentsia” and “initium” is pronounced “initsium”. That is really all there is to it.

The vowels are a little more tricky, because they have long and short forms. The latter are easier because with the exception of u they are all pronounced as in English, “fat”, “met”, “bit” and “hot”. The short form of u however is pronounced as in “pull”, not as in “cut”. The long forms of the vowels a, e, i, o and u are pronounced respectively “ar” as in “father”, “ay” as in “day”, “ee” as in “queen”, “ow” as in “show” and “oo” as in “room”.

Y and Z are not really Latin letters at all. They are rare and occur only in words borrowed from Greek, like “mysterium” and “baptizo”. Y is pronounced as a short “i”, in other words exactly as in the English word “mystery”. Z is usually pronounced as “ds”, i.e. “baptidso”. Strictly I think it should always be pronounced this way, but you will sometimes hear it pronounced as a straight “z” when it is the first letter in a word, e.g. “Zacharias”.

Vowels occurring together are usually pronounced separately. So “Deus” is “dayoos” and “eadem” is “ayadem”. There are however a few diphthongs, “ae” pronounced “ay”, “au” pronounced “ow” as in “cow” and “eu” pronounced “yew”. “Ae” is by far the most common of these. “Oe”, which is pronounced “oi” is occasionally found in words borrowed from Greek, but you will hardly ever see it apart from the word “poena”, meaning pain or punishment. If you have a very old missal however you may find the words “caelum” (heaven) and “penitentia” (repentance) misspelled as “coelum” and “poenitentia”, but these spellings, though at one time quite common, are not correct.

Here is the beginning of the Creed, with phonetic pronunciation alongside to illustrate the above rules;

Credo in unum Deum,
Patrem omnipotentem,

Craydow in oonum Dayum,
Partrem omneepowtentem,

Factorem caeli et terrae,
Visibilium omnium et invisibilium;
Et in unum Dominum Jesum Christum,
Filiium Dei unigenitum,
Et ex Patre natum ante omnia saecula;
Deum de Deo, lumen de lumine,
Deum verum de Deo vero,
Genitum non factum,
Consubstantialem Patri
Per quem omnia facta sunt.

factorem chaylee et terray,
Veeseebileeoom omneeoom et inveeseebileeoom;
et in oonum Dominum Yaysum Cristum,
feeleeum Dayee oonijenitum,
et ex Partray nartum antay omneear saycoolar;
Dayum day Dayow, loomen day loomeenay,
Dayum verum day Dayow verow,
jenitum non factum,
Consubstantseearlem Partree,
per quem omneear factar sunt.

You will note from the above that Latin, unlike modern English, does not have a silent “e” as the final syllable of any word. “Lumine” is a three syllable, not a two syllable word.

The stress accent in Latin is most often found on the last syllable but one (penultimate) of a word containing more than one syllable, though it quite often falls on the last but two (pre-penultimate), especially where the penultimate contains the letter “i” (e.g. “Te ígitur clementíssime Pater, per Jesum Christum Dóminum nostrum” at the beginning of the Canon). However in most missals the stress accent is marked when the word in question contains more than two syllables, (though I would emphasise that this is done for convenience of pronunciation only, since the Latin language does not have accents). I will follow this practice.

So much for pronunciation and stress, now for some comments on the nature of the language itself.

Probably the most important difference between Latin and English, and the one which causes most difficulty to the student, is that Latin is an inflected language, whereas modern English is not. Most words in Latin contain two parts; the first part of the word gives us its meaning, the second part the role which the word plays in the grammar of the sentence. In English, on the other hand, the role that a word plays in the sentence which contains it is indicated by its position in that sentence.

Take the simple sentence “dog bites man”. In Latin, keeping the same word order as in English, this would be “canis mordet hóminem”. If we reverse the word order in English to “man bites dog” we change the meaning completely. It is the man, not the dog, who is now the aggressor. In Latin, however, so long as we do not change the word endings, we can change the order of the words as much as we like; the sentence will still mean the same. So “canis hóminem mordet”, “hóminem mordet canis”, “mordet hóminem canis”, “mordet canis hóminem” and “hóminem canis mordet” all mean “dog bites man”. If we want to say “man bites dog” in Latin we must change the endings of the relevant words. “Homo mordet canem” means “man bites dog”, and so do “canem mordet homo”, “mordet homo canem”, “mordet canem homo”, etc. In these sentences the “can-” and the “hom-” parts of the words give the meaning “dog” and “man” respectively. In our first sentence (“dog bites man”) the ending “-is” in the case of the dog and “-em” in that of the man establish that these words are the subject and object of the sentence respectively. Likewise in our second sentence (“man bites dog”) the ending “-o” in the case of the man and “-em” in the case of the dog establish that these words are respectively the subject and object of that sentence. This means that in reading Latin we must look very carefully at the ending of the words if we are to understand the sentence in question. This is something which we are not very much used to doing, which

is why it is, at first, difficult for a modern English speaker. However, back in Anglo-Saxon times English was an inflected language, and there is still a trace of this in our personal pronouns. “I” and “me” are respectively nominative (subject) and accusative (object), as are “she” and “her”, “he” and “him”, “we” and “us”, “they” and “them” and “who” and “whom”. “Whose”, “his”, “her”, “its”, “our” and “their” are all genitives, meaning respectively “of whom”, “of him”, “of her”, “of it”, “of us” and “of them”. (Unfortunately most English speaking people don’t seem to understand this, which is why we keep coming across solecisms like “between you and I”, “it’s” and “who’s”.) We also still vary some of our verb endings to indicate person and tense (e.g. “I sing”, “she sings”, “we sang”).

I said that in Latin a sentence would still mean the same whatever the order of the words. This does not however mean that the words in a Latin sentence can be arranged in any sort of random order. The order of words in Latin determines among other things the emphasis which each word carries. But in English the order of words determines the grammar and we have to use other devices for emphasis, such as the tone of our voice or, on the printed page, the use of italics, underlining or exclamation marks. In Latin, the most emphatic position in any sentence is the beginning and the second most emphatic position is the end. Normally the subject of any sentence (what the sentence is about) is what we want to emphasise most and the verb (what the subject does) is the next, so in Latin we usually find that the subject is at or near the beginning of the sentence and the verb is at the end. The normal way to translate “dog bites man” into Latin would therefore be “canis hóminem mordet”. But “man bites dog” is such an extraordinary event that we would probably want to emphasise that it was the dog, not the man, who got bitten, so we might well put the dog first and translate “canem mordet homo”, which emphasises first that it is the dog who is at the receiving end of this particular bite and secondly that it is the man who is administering it.

The word order in Latin may also be varied for other reasons, of which the most important is style. Varying the word order can impart a rhythm and resonance, particularly in the spoken language, to what is being said. This is of particular importance in the liturgy, which, we should remember, was originally designed to be sung or spoken and not read, in an age when the majority of the congregation would have found reading difficult or impossible. And Roman poets varied their word order in order to accommodate the expression of their thoughts and feelings to the demands of the diverse rhythmic schemes in which Latin poetry of the classical period was written (rhyme as distinct from rhythm is never used in poetry of the classical period and its appearance in liturgical hymns is an indication of later composition). All this makes Latin a more flexible language than English but it also presents a difficulty for the learner since we often find words in places where we do not expect them, particularly in liturgical hymns. However, in narrative passages such as the readings from the Old and New Testament, which are taken from St. Jerome’s translation known as the Vulgate, the word order is generally much closer to that with which English speakers are familiar than is that found in the classical Roman prose writers, and these passages are correspondingly easier to read.

Going back to our specimen Latin sentence, another important point should be noted. Latin has no definite or indefinite articles (unlike Greek which has a definite but no indefinite article, or English which has both). So “canis hóminem mordet” can in theory mean “the dog bites the man”, “a dog bites the man”, “the dog bites a man” or “a dog bites a man”. This sounds very confusing, but in practice it is almost always clear from the context which article is required when translating from Latin into English. There are three articles in the Hail Mary, for example, but nobody would dream of translating “Dominus tecum” as “*a* Lord is

with thee”, “*benedictus fructus ventris tui*” as “blessed is *a* fruit of thy womb” or “*nunc et in hora mortis nostrae*” as “now and at *an* hour of our death”. We would know instinctively that “the” is the correct translation in all three instances, even if we were unfamiliar with the prayer.

“*Homo*” and “*canis*” are in what we call the “nominative case” and “*hóminem*” and “*canem*” in the “accusative case”. The subject of a Latin sentence is always in the nominative and the object is usually in the accusative. There are also other cases, for instance the possessive case known as the genitive. Latin has no word for “of”, possession being indicated by changing the ending of the word for the possessor. So for example in the sentence “*introíbo ad altáre Dei*”, meaning “I will go to the altar of God” the word *Dei*, which is the genitive case of *Deus*, means “of God”. Note also that Latin has only one word for “I will go”, namely “*introíbo*”, since the future of a verb is indicated by changing the ending, in this case of the verb “*introíre*”, and the ending also makes clear whether the subject is “I”, “you”, “he/she”, “we” or “they”. This makes Latin, by contrast to English, a very economical language.

There are two other cases which you need to know about, the dative and the ablative. Dative means “giving” and the dative case is used for exactly that. For example, prayers in which we are asking for some grace or blessing usually start with some such expression as “*Da nobis, quáesumus, Dómine...*”, meaning “Give to us, we ask, O Lord...”. *Nobis*” here is the dative case of “*nos*”, the Latin for “us”. Just as there is no word in Latin for “of”, so there is no word for “to”; the use of the genitive or the dative case says it all. We must however be careful to distinguish the act of giving from that of moving. In English we say “I give money to beggars” and “I will go to the altar of God”, using the same preposition “to” for both actions, though they are logically quite distinct. We are not giving anything to the altar of God, but moving towards it, and in Latin we do not use the dative case, but the accusative, preceded by the preposition “*ad*”. But in “*Glória Patri et Fílio et Spíritui Sancto*”, for example, we are giving glory to the three Persons of the Blessed Trinity, so they are all in the dative case.

The ablative case is normally used after a preposition such as “*cum*”, “*ab*”, “*de*”, “*in*”, “*ex*” or “*pro*” meaning respectively “with”, “by”, “from”, “in”, “out of” and “on behalf of”. So in the phrase “*Spera in Deo*” (“Hope in God”) the word “*Deo*” is the ablative of “*Deus*”. And in the prayer which the celebrant says at High Mass when blessing the incense, “*Ab illo benedicáris, in cuius honóre cremáberis*” (“By him may you be blessed, in whose honour you will be burned”) “*illo*” and “*honóre*” are both ablative, while “*cuius*” (“whose”) is genitive. Note also the extreme verbal economy of Latin, which expresses “may you be blessed” and “you will be burned” by a single word in each instance.

Unfortunately it is not always easy to tell from the ending of a noun which case it is in. It can vary depending on whether the noun is masculine, feminine or neuter, singular or plural. Nouns are also classified into groups (known to grammarians as declensions), and the case endings can vary with the group into which a particular noun falls. But the accusative case almost always ends in the letter “*m*” when the noun is singular, so looking out for words ending in “*m*” will identify most of the accusative singular nouns or adjectives in a passage. Most other words ending in “*m*” will be genitive plurals. For example, the Creed in Latin has 43 words ending in “*m*”, of which 35 are accusative singulars. Five of the remaining eight are genitive plurals (“*visibílium*”, “*ómnium*”, “*invisibílium*”, “*peccatórum*” and “*mortuórum*”). The three odd men out are “*étiam*”, “*íterum*” and “*secúndum*”, the first two of which are adverbs meaning “also” and “again” respectively and the third a preposition meaning “according to”. The only accusative singulars in the Creed which do not end in “*m*” are

“lumen” and “baptisma”, and the latter is abnormal anyway, being actually a latinised Greek word.

It is usually quite easy to distinguish between accusative singulars and genitive plurals, since the former will usually end in “-um”, “-am” or “-em”, whereas the latter end in “-orum” “-arum” or “-ium”. So in the prayer “Animae eorum et animae omnium fidelium defunctorum per misericordiam Dei requiescant in pace” (May their souls and the souls of all the faithful departed through the mercy of God rest in peace) the words “eorum” (“their” = “of them”), “omnium”, “fidelium” and “defunctorum” are all genitive plurals, “Dei” is genitive singular and “pace” is ablative singular following the preposition “in”. “Misericordiam” is accusative singular, because the preposition “per” (“through”), like “ad”, is always followed by the accusative case. Note too that the absence of any definite or indefinite article in Latin does not create any ambiguity in the meaning. And finally the pious wish that the souls of the faithful departed may rest in peace is expressed by changing the ending of the verb; “requiescunt” would mean “they are resting” and by changing it to “requiescant” we express the wish “may they rest”.

You may be wondering why, when I said that the preposition “in” was followed by the ablative case, when we come to the Creed we find it followed by the accusative (or rather a large number of accusatives!). The answer is really the same as that in the case of the word “to”, which as we saw can be followed in Latin either by a simple dative or by “ad” and the accusative, depending on exactly what we mean by “to” in any given sentence. Just like “to”, we use “in” in English in more than one sense. I live in Britain and I believe in God, but not in the same way. The former is a matter of location, the latter of faith. Latin uses “in” for both meanings, but distinguishes between them by using a different case. So “in Britain” would be “in Britannia” (ablative), but “in God” is “in Deum” (accusative).

Unfortunately the other cases are more difficult to recognise, because the word endings depend upon into which declension a given noun falls. However, almost all nouns or adjectives which end in “-ibus” will be dative or ablative plurals, and most nouns or adjectives ending in “-is” will be too. So in the phrase “pro omnibus fidelibus christianis vivis atque defunctis” (on behalf of all faithful Christians living and dead) all the words (except of course “pro” and “atque”) are in the ablative, following the preposition “pro”. There is however a group of words which end in “-is” in the nominative singular, so one has to be a bit careful in applying the latter principle.

I suggest that at this stage you read through the Creed in Latin. With a little help from the vocabulary you should now be able to understand it perfectly, though the phrase “qui ex Patre Filioque procedit” perhaps needs a little further explanation. We might have expected “qui ex Patre et Filio procedit”, and this would have been perfectly good Latin; indeed “qui cum Patre et Filio” occurs in the very next clause. However, an alternative way to express “and” in Latin is to add “-que” to the end of the *next* word. This sounds very odd to an English speaker but it is in fact quite common in Latin and is not too hard to spot once you get used to the idea. You will also have noticed from the prayer quoted in the last paragraph that Latin has another word for “and”, namely “atque”, though this does not occur in the Creed. Which one is used in any given instance is all a question of literary style.