

Accessit Latinitas: Urbanite Hymnody in the Context of Renaissance Classicism

The Renaissance was a time of return to Classical models, including Classical models of language and poetry composition. At the same time that artists looked to Greco-Roman models for inspiration, humanist scholars began to eschew various lexical and grammatical features that had been introduced into the Latin of some Medieval Christian writers and instead to turn to pre-Christian Rome. This popular attitude had implications for the liturgical life of the Roman Catholic Church, whose liturgies, always celebrated in Latin, included elements dating from the Late Antique period through the Middle Ages.

In 1623, Maffeo Barberini was elected pope and took the name Urban VIII. Himself a classical scholar by training, he was troubled that liturgical hymns did not always follow ancient rules of grammar or poetry composition. Accordingly, he set a group of Jesuit Latin scholars to the task of rewriting the hymns of the Roman Breviary. He intended for these hymns to be revised in such a way that they would follow various rules, or perceived rules, of Classical verse composition. The Jesuits who undertook the revision of these hymns were also given some constraints, among them the direction that they were not to change the hymns in such a way that it would affect the melodies these hymns were sung to. Many of these changes were motivated by metrical considerations, but some were motivated by a desire to return to Classical usage and grammar, and other changes are rather difficult to explain (McGrath 1939, 17). When the work was completed, Pope Urban VIII gave it his official approval and promulgated the revised hymns with the papal bull *Divinam Psalmodyam* on January 25, 1632.

Immediately, there was resistance. Some of these hymns were over a millennium old, written by such eminent people as St Ambrose and Pope St Gregory the Great, and some Catholics perceived these changes as tampering with ancient hymns that they had long held

sacred. Nevertheless, despite the discontent of some, all diocesan clergy in regions that used the Roman Breviary were required to pray the Divine Office with Urban VIII's revised hymns rather than the ancient versions they had been used to.

Breviaries other than the Roman were, at least in theory, unaffected by Urban VIII's reforms. Although the Roman Breviary was and continues to be by far the most widely used breviary in the Latin Church by, quite a few other breviaries were and continue to be in use. At the time, many monasteries used either the Monastic Breviary or another breviary specific to their own monastic order. Although distinct from the Roman Breviary, these other breviaries had the same hymnodic patrimony. When Urban VIII initially promulgated the revised hymns, these revisions were so unpopular that not a single monastic community that did not use the Roman Breviary chose to adopt them. Over the centuries, many monastic communities abandoned their own breviaries in favor of the Roman Breviary, but others, such as the Carthusians, have to this day retained the pre-Urbanite hymns.

The passage of time served to make Urban VIII's revisions only less popular. Msgr. Pierre Batiffol even goes so far as to claim, "That these Jesuits outran their commission, and, under pretext of restoring the language of the hymns in accordance with the rules of metre and good grammar, deformed the works of Christian antiquity, is a thing now universally acknowledged" (Batiffol 1912, 221). However, even the greatest critics of the Urbanite reforms have conceded that Urban VIII did improve the Latinity of the hymns. The general attitude towards Urbanite hymnody is perhaps best summed up in the oft-quoted phrase, "*accessit Latinitas, recessit pietas*" (Latinity entered, piety withdrew). This paper will use the controversy over the revision of the hymns of the Roman Breviary as a case study through which to examine

the relationship between Medieval and Classical Latin in the Catholic Church in the wake of the Renaissance.

Bibliography

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