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## **A Reader Asks: How Did Latin Become the Official Language of the Church?**

Dear Fathers:

How did Latin become the official language of the Church, and why are our prayers most pleasing to God when they are in Latin?

### **The Fathers Reply.**

Latin was the official language of the Church from the first century. Formerly, the misconception abounded that the Church, even in Rome and Italy, used a Greek vernacular exclusively for the first two or three centuries, then changed to a vernacular Latin. Until recently, this had been the common scholarly opinion. More recent evidence, however, in the form of a Latin inscription from A.D. 79, discovered in 1862 at Pompeii, indicates already the liturgical use of Latin.

We know from the Acts of the Apostles (28:13) that St. Paul visited the nearby city of Puteoli for seven days, where there already existed a community of Latin-speaking Christians. Of the 1800 inscriptions cataloged in that city, all appear in Latin, none in Greek. There also exists a body of correspondence, in Latin, between St. Paul and the Roman philosopher Seneca, which modern scholars tend to accept as genuine. On the basis of a scholarly analysis of this evidence, it has been demonstrated that **"the language of the Christian ritual at Rome, from the ground-line of its existence, was Latin and not Greek.... The language that mattered in the Apostolic Age was not Greek, but Latin."**

It is regarded as highly unlikely that a Roman would participate in a Christian ritual celebrated in Greek. Even the Greek of the Kyrie Eleison was not officially added to the liturgy until the close of the fifth century. The chanting of the Latin hymn *Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus* can be traced to a time before the papacy of Pope St. Clement (91-100), and a Christianized Latin, harkening back to a formal, classical Latin, was already beginning to be reserved for religious and sacred use. When Sts. Peter & Paul were martyred in Rome in the first century, Rome, the seat of the secular empire, also became the seat of the Church. The Romans did not permit any language other than Latin in official business. Once, when an Eastern ambassador began to address the Roman senate in Greek, the emperor Tiberius prevented him from proceeding.

The reasons for using Latin in worship and eschewing the vulgar tongues are many and have been repeated by popes and councils over the centuries. One of the best summary of the arguments is of that of Pope John XXIII in his 1962 Apostolic Constitution on the subject, *Veterum sapientia*. For further information, click on [LATNECES.TXT: The Necessity of Latin for the Roman Catholic Church, From the Writings of Roman Catholic](#)

[Saints, Popes, and Theologians](#) in the TRADITIO Network's Library of Files (FAQs and Traditional Apologetics).