

*A truly international life of the mind  
requires more than  
the translation of a few books and articles.*

## Catholic universalism and the language question

*By Thomas Storck*

■ We Catholics are inclined, I think, to take the universality of the Church for granted. We look to a foreign city, Rome, for doctrinal and disciplinary authority and guidance. We habitually and naturally make use of the work of scholars and writers from throughout the Catholic world. We are aware of ecclesiastical events in many different countries, and we realize their importance for us. They are not just something occurring in some foreign nation; they are part of the life of our own Church and often affect us immediately and markedly. And it is good that we take this universality for granted, in the sense that it is an accepted and essential part of the Catholic atmosphere, what Ronald Knox called "the air Catholics breathe." But there is another sense of taking for granted which is not so good. For although there will always be a certain minimum of universality in Christ's Church (for the Church is catholic by the will of her Di-

vine Founder), yet this universality, as it is manifested and as it is actually experienced by Catholics, is affected by external factors which can both promote and hinder it. It is with one of these external factors, namely language, that I am concerned in this article. But before proceeding to discuss the language question in detail, I want to give a precise definition of universalism as it concerns us here.

Universalism is an intellectual habit or attitude by which one is conscious of and seriously takes account of that which is other than one's own in both space and time. This is to be distinguished from a mere dilettantish cosmopolitanism, for universalism above all has regard for truth, and disregards spatial and temporal barriers only for the sake of truth. Cosmopolitanism seeks only novelty, either to relieve boredom or to be different, because it wants to despise and feel superior to others. It usually has little real interest in

what it discovers, and flits easily from Chinese cookery to Greek pottery. Universalism seeks to move habitually and naturally in an intellectual world which does not take account of national, linguistic, or temporal boundaries, but it always respects the boundary between truth and falsehood. It knows, though, that each nation and age has intellectual fashions of its own, and that if one knows only the thought, and makes use of only the methodology, of one's own place and time, one will most probably become insular and one-sided in grasping and communicating truth. This can clearly be seen in history, including Church history. The errors of Gallicanism in the 17th and 18th centuries and of Americanism in the 19th and 20th were so named from their identification with the thought of particular nations, and it has frequently been pointed out that the desire, whether explicit or not, to form an American Catholic Church separate from Rome stems in large part from an uncritical acceptance of American life and thought, untempered by the experience of other nations or times.

#### **Rome is the center of unity**

Rome itself, moreover, is the center of unity in the Church not to impose local Roman methods as somehow better than local German or local Irish. Rome qua merely a city in Italy is not the focus of the Catholic world; it is rather Rome qua universal city, as receiving, containing, and evaluating all the traditions of all the local churches, which she does by virtue of her divine mandate as Peter's See. Only in this way does Rome become truly the universal city, able to minister to the entire Church and the entire world. In the deepest sense, then, Catholic Rome is Italian only in its geographical aspect. It is ob-

viously ludicrous to deny the Italian atmosphere and culture of the city of Rome. What I mean is something different, namely, that in spite of the human tendency of Roman officials throughout the ages to take only a local Roman and Italian view of things, and to impose local Roman and Italian solutions, the catholicity that is guaranteed to the Church by her Founder has always operated to prevent this from going too far. Christ wills that Rome be universal for the sake of the Church's universality. So on the one hand our Lord prevents Rome from becoming merely Roman, in the sense of just a city in Italy, by feeding her with the life and thought of the whole Catholic world, and then Rome in turn feeds each local church, thus also protecting each from any tendency to become merely local and particular and lose the meaning of the name Catholic. For the degree of contact with Rome required to juridically maintain ecclesiastical unity insures the minimum of catholicity required for membership in the Universal Church.

Catholic universalism, then, is a good thing because it aids one in transcending the intellectual particularism of one's own place and time, a particularism caused by many factors, including no doubt cultural and academic traditions, geography, ethnic characteristics, etc. I said above that, despite the certain minimum of universalism that will always exist within the Church because of her Founder's protecting care, the manifestation and experience of universalism can be greater or lesser at different times and places. This is because of external factors. If a province of a Church were separated by distance and difficulty of travel from all contact with Rome, yet without any formal break of ecclesiastical communion with the Holy See, it would only be with extreme difficulty

that peculiar customs and erroneous theological and philosophical tendencies would be prevented from arising and affecting the life of that church. This is an extreme example and one unlikely to happen in this age, though it may have been what occurred in the case of the churches founded by the Apostle Thomas in India. Yet there are other factors that affect to a great extent universality within the Church, and are as important today as in the past. One of them, of course, is the question of language.

The fact that language, when mutually understood, is a means of communication, and when not mutually understood is a barrier to communication, seems to be widely recognized. We commonly use expressions such "the language barrier." But exactly what is the role of language as a facilitator and inhibitor of universalism?

#### Language barriers exist

Everyone learns his own native tongue when he is young, and before any conscious and sustained efforts have to be put forward to learn reading and writing or grammar and spelling, most of us have already acquired a good foundation in speaking our own language. Some children are fortunate enough to learn two or more languages in this effortless way while young, but for most of us the learning of another language, whether difficult or easy, must be a conscious, sustained, and systematic undertaking. As a result, most people cannot speak and read and write another tongue as easily as they can their own. Yet obviously one's intellectual life is considerably restricted if one cannot understand what is written or spoken in foreign tongues. Ah, but translations exist. So they do, and undoubtedly translations, though imperfect, play a large role in

promoting temporal universalism. For the importance of most of the great works of the past has been recognized sufficiently that translations have been made of them into the principal modern languages. Not always good translations. But usually good enough. Thus an individual can overcome much of the provincialism of his own *time* without knowing another language. And of course, one can read works written in one's own language for several centuries past without much special linguistic knowledge.

But universalism is not only temporal but also spatial. Dead authors cannot take part in the give and take of argument. For this one needs immediate and regular contact with people trained in different outlooks and with different traditions and habits. People who employ different methodologies and ask different questions. Only thus can a truly universal intellectual life be led. And, of course, here the language question is a major factor, for one of the things that prevents or hinders such contacts is the widespread inability to speak a common language. Consider only a few facts: At the synods of bishops participants are broken down into language groups for discussions. In West Africa there exist two regional episcopal conferences, divided not by geography, but by language. One for the French-speaking nations, the other for the English-speaking nations. The "international Catholic review" *Communio* is published in nearly ten language editions, with differing contents. None of this speaks well for the thriving of universalism among Catholics today.

I have refrained from mentioning the largest factor in promoting universalism in the Church, especially in the past. This is the Latin language. Everyone is aware of the part Latin played in the past and still plays to some extent.<sup>1</sup> Then, par-

ticipants in gatherings, such as ecumenical councils, were expected to be able to debate and discuss, with facility, in Latin. Seminary and university lectures were often in Latin. Dissertations, books, learned articles, were in Latin. Since this language was taught and understood throughout the Catholic world, the ideas in these publications were readily available for discussion in every nation, and no language barrier hindered their diffusion and their criticism from many points of view. Latin as both a spoken and a written language was a major element promoting universalism of both space and time, and one who had mastered the venerable tradition of Latin theology and philosophy was in possession of one of the chief intellectual treasures of the human race. Today, of course, this Latin tradition is in disarray, to say the least. With a few exceptions, Latin as the effective means of universal communication within the Church has been abandoned. What interest there is in Latin seems centered on restoring the Latin liturgy, a worthy project to be sure, but no substitute for the use of Latin as a medium for the Catholic intellectual life.

#### **Latin liturgy is not enough**

The situation, then, is this. The furthering of universalism within the Church is a good thing. In the past Latin was a principal factor in promoting and making effective this universalism. Today universalism is impeded by lack of a common tongue. What is to be done?

First, we must stop ignoring the problem. For the most part we seem to be content with our own provincialism, and do not see the anomaly of publications and conferences divided by language. One of the reasons that I think we would like to ignore the problem is that no solution is



*Mr. Thomas Storck has his M.L.S. from Louisiana State University and his M.A. from St. John's College in Santa Fe. Formerly librarian and instructor of history at Christendom College in Front Royal, Va., he is currently librarian at Mount De Sales Academy in Catonsville, Md. He has published articles in several Catholic periodicals. His last article in HPR appeared in the January 1986 issue.*

---

easy and no solution is perfect. But if we believe the problem to be serious enough we will find a workable solution, even though not perfect nor to everyone's liking. What are the possibilities?

Before giving what I consider the feasible solutions, I want to define the problem a little more exactly and specify just what we are aiming for. Universalism is supported not just by being able to read the most important books or articles written in other languages, but by the more immediate exchange of ideas that numerous periodical publications,<sup>2</sup> lectures, conferences and seminars, and other personal contacts make possible. Important books are usually translated, if one waits long enough, but for the formation of a truly universal mind, a catholic and Catholic



mind, more than this is necessary. Criticism of research in progress, immediate comment on new theories, exposure to differing methodologies and procedures, in short a truly international life of the mind—all this requires more than the translation of a few books and articles. It requires the ability to communicate with facility with scholars in more than just one or a few countries or languages. It requires the existence of some medium of communication which transcends national and linguistic boundaries.

The obvious solution, and the only one that I am sure many would consider, is a revival of the use of Latin. If it could be done, this would undoubtedly be the best solution. Latin is still widely known in the Church; it is still the language of official documents; there is a vast body of important literature in it, not only theological and philosophical, but political, historical, social, not to mention belles-lettres, both pagan and Christian. And the barriers to its revival are probably not insuperable. The Zionist movement has shown us the example of the successful revival of an ancient tongue, a difficult one at that. *If* men saw the necessity for a common

tongue for a real Catholic intellectual life, Latin could be revived. Even as a spoken language. But proposals for its revival or wider use have been made again and again in this century without any results.<sup>3</sup> Now that the Latin liturgy is largely gone there seems even less of a chance than formerly, since there is no longer widespread acquaintance with Latin as spoken. Still, it *could* be done, but only if enough of us are convinced that it is both desirable and possible. One thing, however, that hinders such a restoration is the Ciceronianism foisted on Latin at the Renaissance and still with us today. Medieval Latin was a simple and flexible tongue, adapted to the practical intellectual needs of the times. The slavish imitation of the ancient classics that characterized the Renaissance made Latin too ornate and too rigid and contributed to its decline as a spoken language. This evil is still with us, and official documents have generally been written in a Latin that is beautiful but too classical.<sup>4</sup> If Latin is to be revived it must be freed from this constricting classicalism that makes learning and using it unnecessarily hard.

After discussing Latin is there really any other solution to the problem worth taking seriously? I think there is. I believe there are at least two other possibilities that bear serious consideration.

#### **We should adopt Esperanto**

The first of these is to adopt the international language Esperanto as the new medium of Catholic intellectual life. Now there are legitimate objections against Esperanto and there are also many prejudices. The prejudices, I think, are generally based on ignorance of what Esperanto

continued on page 43

## CATHOLIC UNIVERSALISM

continued from page 32

is and what is hoped for by its adherents. Briefly then, Esperanto is a planned language, devised by Dr. Ludwig Zamenhof, a Polish Jewish physician, in the 1880s. It was designed to become an international auxiliary language and not to replace existing national languages. Because it is planned it is entirely regular in construction and thus easier to learn than the more complex national tongues. How successful is Esperanto? It has speakers on every continent; it is regularly used in radio broadcasts around the world, including Vatican Radio; its literature includes thousands of books and over a hundred periodicals, some existing continuously since the beginning of this century; several international scientific conferences have used Esperanto as their working language. Though no doubt many of its promoters often seem to be faddists or cranks, Esperanto is a legitimate language, and for its purposes entirely adequate. As an international second language, designed mainly for educational, diplomatic and scientific work, it makes no difference that Esperanto was not molded by the patient action of millions of individual speakers over time nor that as a living tongue it is only ninety-nine years old.

Now what of legitimate objections to Esperanto as the Catholic language? Esperanto has few Catholic associations, there is no large body of theology and philosophy in it, it has not gained much popular acceptance even outside the Church as the international tongue. Readers of Robert Hugh Benson's novel, *Lord of the World*, will recall that Esperanto is there portrayed as a kind of anti-Latin, the linguistic vehicle for world unification of the

forces of naturalism. Despite this imaginative and effective fictional account, Esperanto is not inherently anti-Catholic. A Catholic Esperanto society with its journal, *Espero Katholika*, has existed since the first decade of this century. Several popes, including St. Pius X, Benedict XV and Pius XII, have encouraged Esperanto. A body of Catholic literature has already been translated into Esperanto, including the Bible, the *Imitation of Christ*, Msgr. Escriva de Balaguer's *The Way*, in addition to some ancient classical philosophy and numerous modern novels, drama and poetry, both original and translated. It is true that much of Esperanto literature and many in the Esperanto movement are not especially friendly to the Church or to Christian civilization. But then Latin was the language of many of the first persecutors of our Faith, and the merits of the language exist apart from the views of its speakers. Moreover, since Esperanto borrows heavily from the Romance languages for its vocabulary and grammar, its traditional European and Catholic associations are not as remote as one might think. The objection that Esperanto is but little used outside the Church as an international tongue is likewise not fatal, and is more an indication of the world's unwillingness to face up to its linguistic fragmentation and deal with it, than evidence of something lacking in Esperanto.

### Latin is better than Esperanto

I spend so much time on Esperanto not because I think it is a better choice than Latin, but because I think there is a widespread tendency not to take it seriously. There are no decisive objections to Esperanto, except that Latin would be a better choice. But if Latin is not revived, the language problem still remains, and not to do

*Before we can decide on a remedy we must first recognize that there is a problem and that it is grave . . . various solutions can be weighed. Latin would be best, but will that come? Because neither Esperanto nor Spanish are perfect solutions will we do nothing?*

---

anything because we will have Latin or nothing is to ignore the harm being done in the Church by the present divisions into regional-linguistic blocs.

The last solution that I think merits attention is to select one modern language, already prominent in the Church, and adopt it as the international medium for Catholic use. Within the Church the obvious choice is Spanish, though perhaps a case could be made for French. Spanish is spoken by many more Catholics than is English and has much more of a tradition of Catholic use. Moreover, it is easier to learn than English. Again, objections to it are obvious. Why should one culture's language be considered suitable for an international and inter-cultural intellectual life? Would not there be a risk of the Hispanic point of view and intellectual traditions becoming dominant? Would not some resent carrying on intellectual tasks in someone else's tongue, when they consider their own just as good? Yes, these are all reasonable objections. But, again, none is insuperable. Widespread use in many nations would go far to lessen the possibility of a Hispanization of Catholic intellectual life. A little humility and objective consideration of the situation would go a

long way toward removing resentments and jealousies. Indeed, the most weighty objection against using Spanish or any other modern language is the effect on the language itself if it is widely adopted by persons not acquainted with its genius and traditions. I can imagine nothing more likely to weaken and debase a living tongue.

But before we can decide on a remedy we must first recognize that there is a problem and that it is grave. Without that nothing will or can be done. Then various solutions can be weighed. Certainly Latin would be the best one. But is it likely to come about? Because neither Esperanto nor Spanish are perfect solutions will we do nothing? Perhaps there is some other means for solving the problem not mentioned here. But that there is a problem, and that some solution must be sought, I will maintain. If we are serious, if we really want to, we can solve the problem. But it must be acknowledged, prudently considered, and the best overall solution selected. Then this solution must be pursued diligently and single-mindedly. Only then can we have hope of uniting again the scattered Catholic intellect and making more manifest the Church's catholicity. ■

<sup>1</sup> A very interesting account of the historical fortunes of Latin, with some perceptive comments on its place in the Church of his time, can be found in George E. Ganss, "A Historical Sketch of the Teaching of Latin," an appendix in his book, *Saint Ignatius' Idea of a Jesuit University* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 1956) pp. 218-258, especially pp. 234-258.

<sup>2</sup> Periodicals, such as *Theology Digest*, that contain articles selected and translated from around the world, fulfill to some extent this need. But more than this is necessary.

<sup>3</sup> Hilaire Belloc made one such interesting proposal in an essay published in 1931. See his "The Revival of Latin" in *Essays of a Catholic Layman in England* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1931) p. 259-264.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ganss, "A Historical Sketch of the Teaching of Latin," p. 251, for comment on the situation a few years before Vatican II.