Latin from the Roman Canon

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1. Introduction: the notion of style

The aim here is to conduct a stylistic analysis of the Roman canon in order to identify its unique genius. By "style" we mean the third of the five parts of oratory, which the Ancients called *elocutio*, that is, the choice of words and the actual drafting of the speech[2] . As for the first and second parts of rhetoric, *inventio* and *dispositio* (finding what to say in terms of ideas and in what order), there is a certain general conformity between the Eucharistic prayers used in the various areas of Christendom, with similarities in detail. Jungmann thus recalls the links between the Roman Canon and the Alexandrian tradition. There is also no need to mention the last two parts: *actio* and *memoria* (oratory action and memory), since the former is codified in rubrics and the celebrant has a book at his disposal. But *elocutio* is of paramount importance in the eyes of the ancients, as it is through this that speech acquires its unique character. In his treatise *Orator*, Cicero indicates that *elocutio* is, literally, what constitutes *eloquentia*, that "eloquence" which is the excellence of the orator and his speech.

2. "Solemn" prose (Jungmann)

If there is eloquence in the Roman canon, it is undoubtedly not characteristic of a single author. It is a text that has emerged from literary history and is therefore undoubtedly the work of several authors. We know that the section *Hanc igitur* "was only given its current form by Gregory the Great"[3] . However, this intervention blends into a whole that presents a tone and colour of remarkable unity: a unity that is therefore not personal, and which Jungmann attributes to a general tradition of teaching rhetoric: "It must be remembered," he writes, "that the solemn prose that characterises the Roman canon is the style that was practised in the schools of rhetoric at the end of the empire."[4]

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[2] Cf. Cicero, *Orator*, XIX, 61.

[3] Joseph-André JUNGMANN, *Missarum solemnia. Genetic explanation of the Roman Mass*, vol. 3, Aubier-Montaigne, ("Theology", 21), Paris, 1954, p. 94.

[4] *Op. cit.*, p. 55.

It should also be remembered that the purpose of rhetoric schools, even in an empire that had become Christian, was undoubtedly different from that of theology schools. Jungmann's remark seems to us to raise an important question concerning the relevance of using techniques that developed outside the biblical tradition to write a prayer to the God of Israel.

3. The question of Christian eloquence

This question is undoubtedly one of our century. It arises from the discomfort felt by some in the face of rhetoric that is considered pompous in its indiscreet deference to a God who engages us in a relationship of charity, that is to say, of friendship, commanding greater simplicity. Moreover, these "solemn" features are all the more noticeable in the renewed liturgy, since the canon is recited aloud. For many, even more than the greater length of the1stEucharistic Prayer, they are responsible for its practical abandonment today in favour of the2ndand3rdPrayers, a preference justified by their simplicity, which is considered more biblical.

But these reasons for the current disuse of the Roman canon should not be dismissed out of hand as peculiar to our modern doctrinaires. The debates that are raging today concerning the simplicity of a biblical style abandoned by a later tradition first arose in antiquity. Just as some of the Fathers of Nicaea were impatient with the introduction into the Christian creed of a *homoousios* drawing on extra-scriptural philosophical resources, so Revelation would immediately strike as vain the overly human research of scholars and dismiss from the outset the art of rhetoricians, when the Lord himself has spoken. Now, the God who alone speaks well of Himself in Scripture is also the one who teaches us to pray, in the book of Psalms and the Lord's Prayer; so that the idea seems to impose itself that divine authority commands contempt for all those artifices of language by which humans usually try to secure the audience of their fellow men.

> Let us therefore love, Christians, the simplicity of Jesus; let us love the Gospel with its humility; let us love Paul in his rough style [...] Let us become so accustomed to loving Jesus Christ alone in the natural purity of his holy truths that we may still see reigning in the Church that first simplicity which made the divine Apostle say: "*Cum infirmor, tum potens sum*: I am powerful because I am weak"; my words are strong because they are simple; it is their innocent simplicity that has confounded human wisdom.[5]

These lines by Bossuet, in his Panegyric on Saint Paul, date from 1657. But in 1661, in his Sermon on the Word of God, point[1], he significantly qualified this doctrine. After referring once

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[5] Jacques-Bénigne BOSSUET, "Panegyric of Saint Paul," first point; in *Œuvres*, Philippe SELLIER ed., Paris, Larousse, 1975, p. 29.

again to Saint Paul, who "teaches preachers that they must strive not to make themselves famous through eloquence but to make themselves commendable to the conscience of men through the manifestation of truth", since, while "the ears are flattered by the cadence and arrangement of words " – by which, as we shall see, our Roman canon is distinguished – "the imagination is delighted by the delicacy of thoughts, the mind is sometimes persuaded by the plausibility of reasoning: the conscience wants the truth"[6] ; Bossuet, however, adds further on:

> If you now wish to know what part eloquence can play in Christian discourse, Saint Augustine will tell you that it is only permitted to appear in the wake of wisdom.[7]

Bossuet refers here to Book[IV], Chapter 10 of *De doctrina christiana*, from which he quotes the Latin as follows: "Realise that Wisdom advances from her dwelling place, which is the heart of the wise man, and that eloquence follows her, like her inseparable servant, even without being called upon."[8]

4. Reading the Roman Canon in the light of *De doctrina christiana*

I propose that this [fourth]book of *De doctrina christiana* serve as our guide for the stylistic analysis of the Roman canon. In doing so, we take the liberty of assuming that the two texts are probably contemporary, and that it is common knowledge that Augustine's first job was to teach eloquence, so that he had thus taken his place among the masters of those schools of rhetoric to which the origin of this prayer is attributed.

One objection to this view, however, could be drawn from the fact that the Roman Canon is a prayer, words that a man addresses to God on behalf of the Church, whereas *De doctrina christiana*, having studied in the first three books how to interpret Scripture, goes on to consider in the fourth book Christian preaching and teaching[9] : that is, the words that a man addresses to humans on behalf of God. With regard to *inventio*, the first part of rhetoric consisting in finding the ideas that the orator will propose to express to his audience, Christian eloquence is that which yields to Holy Scripture, so that "the poorer he finds himself in his words, the more he must enrich himself with those of Scripture"[10] . But as for *elocutio*, the dominant part of eloquence according to Cicero,

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[6] In *Œuvres*, Philippe SELLIER ed., Paris, Larousse, 1975, p. 82.

[7] *Ibid*., p. 83.

[8] *Ibid*.; translation by Philippe SELLIER.

[9] Cf., *De doctrina christiana*, Book IV, IV, 6, beginning. Consulted in SAINT AUGUSTINE, *La doctrine chrétienne*, in Œuvres, vol. 11 / 2, Paris, Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, ("Bibliothèque augustinienne"), 1997, p. 326.

[10] *Ibid.*, V, 8, beginning, p. 330.

"he strives to express [these 'right, good and holy' ideas] in such a way as to be heard, to please, and to be followed"[11] . Here we recognise, in order, the three tasks that rhetoric assigns to the orator before his audience: *docere*, *delectare*, *movere*: "to instruct, to please, to move", where the first two tend towards *movere*, whereby the audience is carried along to where it is led.

However, Christian discourse is primarily aimed at conversion. Conversion, however, does not arise directly from such discourse, but is the work of God through, or even on the occasion of, such discourse. Augustine continues:

> Let [the Christian orator] know well that, if he can convert and as much as he can, he will owe it to the fervour of his prayer rather than to his oratory skills, so that, praying for himself and for those to whom he will speak, he may be a man of prayer before being a man of eloquence.[12]

Sit orator antequam dictor: in the very course of his exposition, Saint Augustine strikingly expresses this precedence of prayer over all rhetorical art, since the term *orator*, which until then had referred to a 'speaker'[13] , loses this meaning here in favour of 'man of prayer', prayer being the secret of Christian eloquence.

As prayer, the Roman Canon is therefore central to the very soul of Christian preaching, which it directly manifests. We also know that it pleased the Lord to give the prayer of his faithful and his Church "the dignity of causality"[14] , as Pascal says, when he commanded: *Ask, and it shall be given you* (Mt 7:7). God knows what his Church needs; and yet, He does not intend to give her anything that she has not asked of Him.

Every Eucharistic prayer thus envelops the account of the Institution, where God's gift to his Church is accomplished, *ex opere operato*. As a narrative rather than a discourse, and as effective rather than persuasive, it does not belong to the rhetorical order. But it is the place where the gift is immediate upon the request for the gift, which is marked in the *Quam oblationem*, where the priest asks *expressis verbis* for the conversion of the species into the body and blood of Christ.

Moreover, the dignity of causality conferred by God Himself on prayer is what grounds its place in the rhetorical order. Of course, the person who prays cannot flatter himself that he can influence God's will, just as the orator, through rhetorical *movere*, strives to rally his audience to his

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[11] *Ibid.*, XV, 32, p. 366: *agit ergo quantum potest cum ista dicit, ut intellegenter, ut libenter, ut oboedienter audiatur.*

[12] *Ibid.*: *And if this is possible, if he can and to the extent that he can, he should not hesitate to use the power of prayer rather than the power of orators, so that in praying for himself and for those to whom he is addressing, he may be an orator before he is a speaker*.

[13] Cf. VI, 10, p. 334: *cum oratoribus gentilium*; VII, 21, p. 350: *in oratorum invenirentur ingeniis*.

[14] Pascal, *Pensées*, Philippe SELLIER ed., Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2011, 757, p. 611.

sentiments. However, the ways he practises before God are materially analogous to those used by someone pleading before his fellow men and are therefore subject to rhetorical analysis.

5. Presence of Holy Scripture

We have seen, according to Augustine, that the hallmark of Christian eloquence is to be informed by Scripture. Therefore, with the exception of the account of the Institution, of which prayer is the setting, this prayer itself incorporates scriptural elements in direct allusions.

Thus, in the *Memento* of the Living, we find, in order, *sacrifícium laudis*, followed by *tibíque reddunt vota sua*. This is a variation on Psalm 49, v. 14: *Immola Deo sacrifícium laudis, et redde Altissímo vota tua.* However, Psalm 49, here, is not strictly speaking a prayer, but a commandment that God addresses to man. The Church appropriates this divine word, which becomes man's word to God, in response to his commandment and in obedience that is fulfilled in liturgical action.

Then the Roman Canon relates the sacrifice of the Church, insofar as it is external and visible, to the sacrifices of Abel, Abraham, and finally Melchizedek, whose offering is materially consistent with the species of bread that has just been consecrated.

We should also note the impressive angel of the Apocalypse (8:3-5), who appears at the breaking of the seventh seal. His mention signifies that the sacrifice of the Mass, manifested here in time, points to that of the end of time.

The first part of the canon is therefore under the patronage of the psalter, while the second part spans Genesis and Revelation, with the Gospel at the centre, in the Narrative. The canon's reverence for Holy Scripture, which authenticates its eloquence as Christian, is not measured by the extent and number of quotations, but by their symbolic weight, which is particularly remarkable here.

6. Presence of rhetorical ornamentation

Since prayer addresses God to ask for the fulfilment of his promises, it naturally includes a reminder of those promises, which is a matter of rhetorical *docere*, while the act and manner of asking belong to *movere.* But what place does the rhetoric of the Roman canon assign to *delectare*, whereby eloquence disposes the hearts of listeners by flattering their ears and their imagination? Do such artifices not become vain when used before Him who is Spirit?

But did He Himself not bless them, allowing them to be scattered throughout Holy Scripture? *De doctrina christiana* offers a very different reading of Paul's Letters than Bossuet.

While the latter highlights the harshness of the Apostle's style, St Augustine is struck, on the contrary, by its ornamentation and figures of speech. In chapter VII of book IV, he thus endeavours to demonstrate that it is indeed a very polished prose. Quoting Romans 3:3-5:

> "*We glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces patience, patience produces proven virtue, proven virtue produces hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us*."
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> […] Here, Augustine continues, we recognise the figure known in Greek as *climax* (ladder) and in Latin as *gradatio* (gradation) by some who did not want to say *scala* (ladder), a figure in which words and thoughts are linked to one another […] We recognise yet another ornament here, since, after a few propositions detached one by one by intonation, propositions that we call *membra* (members) and *cæsa* (caesuras), and the Greeks *coma* and *comata*, there is a circular movement (*ambitus sive circuitus*), which the Greeks call *periodon*, whose members are held in suspense by the voice of the speaker until the moment when this period ends.[15]

What Augustine praises here is therefore the combination of a rhythm in which the voice falls at the caesuras, with a periodic style, uniting as in a circle (*circuitus*) the protasis and apodosis, which meet at the peak of the period, so named because the voice is effectively suspended there. Augustine refers to this as a "very beautiful variety", *decentissima varietate*[16] .

Now, this is what we find everywhere in the Roman canon, where the harmony of periods fully dominates the phenomena of caesura, because the latter manifest themselves within the movements of the periods.

These periods are themselves generally structured according to the so-called major mode, in which the members follow one another in increasing order.

Let us take the example of the section *Te igitur.* This is a period whose conjunction *uti* marks the climax, introducing the complementary clause.

This period is perfectly harmonious or rounded, since the protasis and apodosis are practically symmetrical in number of syllables (36 and 32 respectively). This symmetry is reinforced by that of the pair of subordinate verbs corresponding to the pair of main verbs, both of which are placed exactly around the climax of the period. It is even more so, since the respective

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[15] Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, Book IV, VII, 11; *op. cit*., trans. Isabelle BOCHET and Goulven MADEC, pp. 335 and 337.

[16] *Ibid*., VII, 12, p. 338.

centres of the protasis and apodosis are occupied by a set of three members: the title of Christ, in the *per* clause, and the offerings, in the subordinate verbs. Finally, it is reinforced by the length of the last member of the protasis and the apodosis (11 and 12), following a set of short members (5, 5, 5 in the protasis, 3 and 4 in the apodosis). The protasis reveals a major cadence effect, while the apodosis, whose members also increase in length, also presents an effect of internal symmetry between the first and last members, which are of comparable length (13 and 12).

Te ígitur,(4)
clementissimum Pater, (6)
per Jesum Christum, (5)
Filium tuum, (5)
Dóminum nostrum, (5)
we humbly pray and beseech you (11)//
that you may accept and bless (13)
these gifts, (3)
these gifts, (4)
these holy sacrifices, unblemished (12)

In Book IV of *De doctrina christiana*, Augustine expresses regret that Latin translations of the Bible lack "rhythmic clauses", *clausulæ* numerosæ[17] , admitting that he has no way of confirming their presence in the original Hebrew or Greek. These clauses, common in Ciceronian rhetoric, consist of introducing poetic metres at the end of a sentence, determined by a certain succession of long and short syllables. However, the Roman canon is no stranger to these embellishments. The end of the protasis of *Te ígitur* is thus marked by the succession of two iambs and a tribrach: *rŏgā|mŭs āc| pĕtĭmŭs*; that of the apodosis by the symmetry of a spondee and a tribrach: *fĭdĕ|ī cūl|tŏrĭbŭs*

The missals used by the faithful generally differ (Féder, Dom Lefebvre) from altar missals in that they present *the In primis quæ tibi offérimus* in a separate paragraph. This indicates that the period we have studied can be seen as a whole, which would receive a new impetus here, so that the early period is integrated into a new harmony. It is not an independent or main clause, but a clause subordinate to the previous one, so that altar missals are justified in typographically integrating *the*

[17] Cf. *Ibid.*, XIX, 40, p. 376.

In primis into the *Te ígitur*. However, the phenomenon illustrates the flexibility of the prosody specific to the Roman canon, within a perfectly unified whole whose wording highlights the internal connections, particularly in the repetition *of Hanc oblatiónem/Quam oblatiónem*. It is worth noting here the preference in this wording for the use of the relative conjunction (*Qui prídie*, *Unde et memores*, *Supra quæ*, *Per quem hæc omnia*), which, by avoiding the coordinating conjunctions with which Latin likes to strongly mark the beginnings of sentences, makes the prayer a whole that continuously unites the various sections, transposing on a large scale the figure of *the climax* or ladder that Augustine distinguishes in the Letter to the Romans.

The prosody of this piece is anything but mechanical. While within very rounded periods, the members usually gain momentum by following one another in major cadences, the *Quam oblationem* section is presented as an asymmetrical period, with fairly short members on either side of the climax. Cardinal Newman was sensitive to this, as was Paul Claudel, who translated the extract from *Loss and Gains*:

> Words are necessary, but as means, not ends; they are not mere appeals to the throne of Grace, they are the instruments of sacrifice. They press forward, as if impatient to fulfil their mission.[18]

What is said here about the words of consecration also applies to what precedes them, even if, at the end, the rhythm slows down significantly and hangs over the broad phrase: *dilectíssimi Fílii tui Dómini nostri Jesu Christi*.

The figure of variation, which Augustine says contributes to the beauty of speech, is evident not only in the rhythm, but also in the synonyms, generally triadic, presenting the same thought from different angles, and characteristic of the Roman canon: *hæc dona, hæc múnera, hæc sacrificía*; *pacificáre, custodíre, adunáre et régere*; *ætérno, vivo et vero*, etc.

The techniques of rhetorical *delectare* even extended to the words of the Institution, in glosses that reveal devotion to this mystery. This indicates a familiarity with Scripture, which means that there is no fear of weaving its very fabric, in order to highlight its profound unity, by interspersing the account composed according to the Synoptics with a passage taken from St John (17:1): *elevátis óculis in cælum*, which precedes the Priestly Prayer. The sacrament is thus related to

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[18] Jacques Rivière and Paul Claudel, *Correspondance. 1907-1914*, Paris, Plon, 1926, p.70.

the charity that the Lord declared to his disciples in the Upper Room, reflected in his charity for his Father; it is thus designated as the sacrament of charity[19] .

However, we have not yet answered the question underlying our discussion. If, according to Augustine, Scripture does indeed present these rhetorical embellishments, why should Christian prayer follow it in this richness, and even amplify it, rather than follow it in its simplicity?

7. *The* rhetorical *ethos* of the Roman canon

It is worth introducing here an element that Latin rhetorical doctrine has rarely addressed, unlike the Greek tradition. This is the concept *of ethos* or 'character', which Aristotle discusses in *Rhetoric*[20] . The term refers to the moral image that the speaker intends to present to the audience in order to win them over to his views.

It seems to us that Augustine refers indirectly to this notion of character when he speaks of Christian eloquence: "Everything we say is great," he writes[21] . This greatness stems from what is at stake: eternal salvation, as stated in the Roman canon in justification of prayer: *ab ætérna damnatióne nos éripi, et in electórum tuórum júbeas grege numerári*. But this greatness lies first and foremost in the sovereign Being to whom we address ourselves and who is the author of salvation.

Now, to consider God in this way, we mean, according to his greatness, commands on the part of the Church addressing him through the voice of the minister, a properly religious attitude, formally distinct from the charity that regards God, not primarily according to his greatness, but according to the friendship he has chosen to establish with man.

This religious attitude is reflected in the Church's work as sacrificial, related to Christ's sacrifice. We want to guard against forgetting our condition as creatures and humble ourselves before our Creator, for this is right, religion being nothing other than justice done to God. It is also right to confess to having angered Him, in a sacrifice intended to appease Him: *ut placátus accípias*. Jungmann thus relates the variation *benedíctam, adscríptam, ratam, rationábilem acceptabilémque* to a legalism emphasising the suitability of an offering motivated by placatio[22] . The *Supra quæ*

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[19] However, we note this trait, of Jesus raising his eyes to heaven, in places that also shed light on the decision taken by the Roman canon tradition to relate it to the mystery of the Eucharist. Thus, in Mark 6:41, Christ is said to have *raised his eyes to heaven* as he blessed the loaves he was multiplying. Similarly, in John 11:41, before Lazarus' tomb, the trait occurs, as in the Upper Room, before Christ's prayer to his Father, and after he said to Martha: *if you believe, you will see the glory of God*.

[20] Book I, 1356 a; 1366 b.

[21] *De doctrina christiana*, Book IV, XVIII, 35, pp. 372-374.

[22] *Op. cit.*, p. 104.

testifies to the Church's humility before her God, where, not daring to identify her offering with the offering of Jesus that has just been manifested, she begs God to nevertheless accept it as pleasing. It does not even dare to claim the merits of Jesus Christ, preferring to recall, in the Old Testament, the sacrifices of Abel and Abraham. It also cites the offering of Melchizedek, because of its material conformity with the one it brings, which it does not flatter itself to be able to relate to the sacrifice of the cross.

God is thus envisaged as the one whose greatness recommends the practice of religion in the sacrifice offered to his majesty: *in conspéctu divínæ majestátis tuæ*: a metonymy indicating that God is nothing but greatness, in response to another metonymy, symmetrical to the account of the Institution, namely: *servitútis nostræ*: "our servitude", that is to say: "we who are servants, even slaves", whereby man declares himself to be, on the contrary, utterly lowly. *Servitútis* is extended in *famíliæ*, which in Latin refers not to what we call "family", but to "domesticity" as a group of *fámuli*.

The rhetorical *ethos* on which the Roman canon is based lies, it seems to us, in the tension between this wholly religious humbling of man before the majesty of God, which gives this prayer its characteristic tone, and the brief but all the more remarkable and significant notes that reveal, among the Christian people and those who speak on their behalf, the certainty that he is a son, without daring to declare this condition directly except through these kinds of traits; just as the prodigal son meditates on saying: *Father, I am not worthy to be called your son*, and yet knows, deep down, that he is a son, indignant to himself that his father's workers have a more favourable fate than his own.

Likewise, the *Te ígitur, dilectíssime Pater* at the beginning of the Roman canon makes an impression that is not erased by what follows, where the man in prayer humbles himself and declares himself a sinner: *Nobis quoque peccatóribus*. One does not implore the clemency of the angry deities of paganism, but that of a "most merciful Father", the only form of superlative along with, precisely, *dilectíssimi Fílii tui.*

This charity, which is evident between the Father and the Son, extends beyond their communion alone, leading the speaker to declare himself a member of a *plebs sancta*. This holiness is the very condition of God thus communicated to humanity. This communication is revealed through the light of faith, which enables the holy people to distinguish Christ's Passion as "blessed", *beátæ passiónis*, according to a very remarkable combination of words. "Happy Passion" as the effective source of the happiness of the elect; but also "happy" in this view for Jesus Christ himself, even though he was surrounded by torments in his body and soul.

Thus, however lowly the Church may be before God in the person of her minister, she stands upright in his presence and offers him a prayer whose style does not breathe any lowliness: it is an extremely elaborate prose, filled with the ornaments that rhetoric recommends to charm the ears of human listeners with the variety and harmony of its cadences. In the absence of such words here, it is therefore an offering presented to God, made possible by the certainty of his paternal charity, so much so that the feeling of his immense majesty would otherwise be enough to close his mouth and render him speechless.