Tridentine Community News

August 15, 2010

Capitalization in the Propers

You may have noticed some quirky issues of grammar and typography ("orthography" is the more appropriate term) in our Latin/English Propers handouts. With the exception of the occasional typo, these are intentional. They reflect customs in liturgical Latin, the Douay-Rheims English Bible, and Douay-like translations of Orations and Antiphons that are quite different from modern English. In the course of preparing the handouts over the years, it has become increasingly apparent what those customs actually are. We have also been able to detect the occasional typo in the Latin or English in a given missal, due to the deviation from usual standards.

Capitalization is the first issue. In English it is customary to capitalize the titles "Saint", "Martyr", Confessor", "Angel", and so forth, even if the corresponding Latin is not capitalized.

Pronouns referring to God generally, or any member of the Blessed Trinity individually, are capitalized in English but not (always) in Latin. "Name" is always capitalized when it refers to the Holy Name of our Lord Jesus Christ; it is not (always) capitalized when it refers to the name of God generally, as in the Old Testament.

There can be confusion and inconsistency about whether to capitalize certain words. For example, many Postcommunion Collects contain clauses such as the following: "We who have been fed with Thy heavenly Gifts…". If "gift" is meant generically, it can remain lower case. However, if the word refers to the Eucharist, as it arguably does in a Postcommunion, it is deserving of capitalization. Modern hand missals such as the Baronius Press typically do capitalize these sorts of words. Older missals often do not, but tend to undercapitalize in general, e.g.: "…Thy martyrs Ss. Vitus, Modestus…" "Martyrs" should be capitalized, as it is in the original Latin.

Sometimes the first letter of a word following a question mark is not capitalized, as though a question mark separates clauses like a semicolon, rather than always completing a sentence. This occurs in both Latin and English text.

Punctuation

In Latin, colons are often used to separate clauses. In the English, missals use a mixture of colons and semicolons for the same purpose.

It can be tempting to correct especially the English in accord with current usage. For example, on June 15, we commemorate Ss. Vitus, Modestus, and Crescentia. The second comma, after "Modestus", is omitted in many English translations. We don't believe that is a matter of dated orthography, but rather a simple oversight in typesetting the text. Correcting it also helps the celebrant to pace the reading of the English Epistle and Gospel.

As a rule, we do not correct punctuation in the Latin text unless it is glaringly obvious, such as a missing period between sentences.

J or I?

Classical Latin and some liturgical books use "I" in place of "J", e.g.: "Iesus Christus". There are conflicting stories as to who was responsible for the introduction of "J". Usage seems to have started somewhere between 1500-1790. It seems to be a matter of custom, not unlike "U" having evolved to take the place of "V" when a vowel is needed. We use "J" for clarity's sake. If we adhered to the older custom, things could get quite confusing. Quick: Which is easier to pronounce, "Julius" or "Ivlivs"?

Accent Marks

In most official Latin liturgical books, only words with three or more syllables employ accented vowels. A few books, most notably the *Liber Usuális*, which our cantors use to chant the Propers, *do* accent vowels in words that have only two syllables. In keeping with the more prevalent custom, we only employ accent marks when there are three or more syllables.

As we have noted in previous columns, the lack of accent marks can be frustrating. Some recently published Vatican books omit them entirely, which can create some challenges – and habits of pronouncing words improperly – in those who are not familiar with those words from other sources.

Ligatures and Accented Ligatures

A ligature is a single character that takes the place of two adjacent vowels that are pronounced without a syllabic pause. The most notable are "œ" to take the place of "oe", and "æ" to take the place of "ae". Capitalized ligatures in some fonts can look unattractive, so we occasionally revert to using separate vowels.

Few fonts contain accented ligatures. Therefore, for occasions where one is needed, such as in "quæsumus", Michel Ozorak devised a way to kern two separate vowels close together so that they look like a ligature. Likewise, many liturgical books do not print accented capital vowels, but we do, for example: "Áccipe".

One drawback to ligatures and accented vowels is that they can make it hard to search documents. Fortunately, Google compensates for that and will find, for example, an "ae" when you search for an "æ". The search functions in Microsoft Word, Excel, and Internet Explorer, however, will not.

Some Latin books use "œ" in place of æ" in certain words. One that comes to mind is "cæli", sometimes spelled "cœli". Google won't help with that.

Is There a Good Latin Dictionary for Word?

A call to our readers: Does anyone know of a trustworthy and comprehensive liturgical Latin dictionary for Microsoft Word? We have searched, but are not aware of one. It would help catch typos. Thanks are due to Peter Gulewich, by the way, for proofreading our handouts and ensuring their accuracy.