

CARDINAL RITTER BIRTHPLACE FOUNDATION INC

A RITTER MOMENT

FROM LATIN TO ENGLISH

Latin became the language of the Catholic Mass in the fourth century and continued for the next sixteen-hundred years. That changed on November 29, 1964 when, here in the United States, the Liturgy of the Mass was read in the vernacular language of the people – English.

Cardinal Joseph Ritter was a major player in the decision, and was deeply involved in the transition from Latin to English in every Catholic Church in America. An excerpt from the *History of the Archdiocese of St. Louis* states: “On August 24, he [Cardinal Ritter] made history at the old Kiel Auditorium when he celebrated the world’s first authorized Mass in English.”

The change affected not only the people of America. One of the major decisions of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) to update the Church in the modern world was to approve the use of the vernacular language in every country around the globe.

On April 2, 1964, the U.S. Council of Bishops approved the initial translation that was confirmed by the Vatican on May 1. Then in August, the 25th Annual Liturgical Week Conference was held in St. Louis’ Kiel Auditorium. On the first day of the four-day event the celebrant for the first Mass in English was Rev. Frederic McManus, immediate past-president of the Liturgical



Conference. The recessional hymn was *Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow*, known to millions of Protestants as the *Doxology* or *Old Hundred*.¹ On day two, when Joseph Cardinal Ritter celebrated his first vernacular Mass, the entrance song was Martin Luther’s hymn, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*.² Nearly 12,000 bishops, priests, nuns and laity attended the Conference.

Joseph Cardinal Ritter, left, celebrated the new predominantly English Mass his first time yesterday, the feast day of St. Louis. The Rev. Gerald Sloyan assisted in the ceremony in St. Louis. Ritter predicted that in about five years Catholic masses will be entirely in English and other vernacular languages.

Associated Press Wirephoto and caption printed in a St. Louis Newspaper on Tuesday, August 24, 1964.

¹ The New York Times, August 25, 1964. p.2

² Ibid

From Latin to English was not an easy transition. Following the Liturgical Week Conference *Time Magazine* reported “the verdict of most liturgists was – *Needs work.*” Rev. McManus said at the time, “It’s purely experimental and provisional. The whole thing has to be done over.” Cardinal Ritter expressed the opinion that the text should be made “simpler and more meaningful.”

When asked in Rome, in early November 1964, if changes will continue, he responded, “The whole structure of the Mass is to be done over. Keep in mind in mind, though, why these changes are being made. They are made to make the liturgy more meaningful to our people.”³

All the changes and alterations came to fruition on the first Sunday of Advent, November 29, 1964. It took several years before all churches in America made the changed. “Only one other country – Australia – is believed to be ahead of the United States in implementation of the vernacular Mass.”⁴

The photo at right was published in the St. Louis Globe-Democrat with the following caption:

“PERVADING SPIRIT OF ST. LOUIS is dramatized by Associated Press photographer Fred Waters in this super-imposed picture of Joseph Cardinal Ritter celebrating his first Mass in English. After making the picture of the Mass for the feast of St. Louis...the photographer went out to Forest Park for a picture of the statue of France’s sainted King Louis IX. Assisting Cardinal Ritter are Msgr. Fenton Runge (left), his secretary, and Rev. Gerard S. Sloyan (right) chaplain of the Mass.



Written by Ray Day

Secretary, Cardinal Ritter Birthplace Foundation, Inc. 11/07/2020

³ St. Anthony Messenger, circa Nov. 1964

⁴ The New York Times, August 25, 1964. p.2