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The Precedent for Vernacular and Multilingual Liturgies in the Catholic Church in Latin America

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Abstract: This paper examines the emergence of vernacular liturgies in Latin America, particularly through the incorporation of folk music in Nicaraguan Masses following the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II). In response to the Romanization of the Catholic liturgy in the nineteenth century, folk songs in local languages became a form of theological and cultural resistance, offering an alternative to the Latin-dominated liturgical tradition. Despite Vatican disapproval of certain Mass settings due to their non-traditional texts, these vernacular liturgies transcended their missionary origins, enriching both devotional practice and theological discourse. The study explores key Vatican II documents on liturgical participation, examines the role of liberation theology in framing vernacular and multilingual Masses as tools for social and religious transformation, as well as historical precedent as a lens for understanding the progression of change in the setting of the Mass, particularly in Latin America. Using the *Misa Campesina*, by Carlos Mejía Godoy, as a case study, the paper demonstrates how Nicaraguan folk Masses embody the intersections of ecclesial reform, cultural identity, and social justice within the broader context of Latin American liturgical innovation.

Keywords: Second Vatican Council; Vatican II; Nicaraguan masses; multilingualism; Latin American liturgical theology; Roman Catholic liturgy; liberation theology; Sacroanctum Concilium



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1. Introduction

In Latin America, vernacular liturgies began incorporating diverse musical styles, particularly in folk Masses in Nicaragua. In the years following Vatican II, folk songs associated with vernacular languages emerged as a counter to the Romanization of the Catholic liturgy that had taken place in the nineteenth century. Although many Mass settings created in Latin America during this period were deemed inappropriate by the Vatican because of their texts, the resulting liturgies transcended their initial missionary purpose by offering a deeper theological and cultural framework. This paper contributes to the field of liturgical studies by examining the missionary and devotional nature of vernacular liturgy in the Catholic Church through a theological and historical lens. It will explore instances of vernacular liturgy and their context, key documents from the Second Vatican Council regarding the importance of participation in the liturgy, and liberation theology as a lens for interpreting the multilingualism and vernacular Mass settings in Latin America. The paper will also demonstrate how specific vernacular and multilingual Masses in Nicaragua represent the intersections and culmination of these themes, particularly in the *Misa Campesina* by Carlos Mejía Godoy.

2. Theological Considerations

Culture is often seen as essential to expressing the Christian faith. The Church is said to “incarnate” itself through culture, preserving theological truths while allowing for diverse forms of expression. The very Incarnation of Christ as an Aramaic-speaking Jewish man speaks to the intentionality of his inception in the ancient world. The premise of Catholic theology is that God came to humankind to be with them in a particular time, teach them using their language and customs, and love them immeasurably only to succumb to mortality and be fully realized as God in his resurrection. Scripture points to this clearly in John 1:14, 1 Timothy 2:5, Colossians 2:9, Philippians 2:7, Hebrews 4:15, and Galatians 4:4.

At the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD, it was declared that Jesus Christ has two natures—one human and one divine—united in a single person, a concept known as the hypostatic union. This means Jesus is fully God and fully man, with both natures remaining distinct yet perfectly united. Anselm of Canterbury, a Benedictine philosopher and theologian, later emphasized the distinction between the divine (invisible) and human (visible) aspects of Christ, as follows:

Therefore the God-man, whom we require to be of a nature both human and Divine, cannot be produced by a change from one into the other, nor by an imperfect commingling of both in a third; since these things cannot be, or, if they could be, would avail nothing to our purpose. Moreover, if these two complete natures are said to be joined somehow, in such a way that one may be Divine while the other is human, and yet that which is God not be the same with that which is man, it is impossible for both to do the work necessary to be accomplished. For God will not do it, because he has no debt to pay; and man will not do it, because he cannot. Therefore, in order that the God-man may perform this, it is necessary that the same being should perfect God and perfect man, in order to make this atonement. For he cannot and ought not to do it, unless he be very God and very man. Since, then, it is necessary that the God-man preserve the completeness of each nature, it is no less necessary that these two natures be united entire in one person, just as a body and a reasonable soul exist together in every human being; for otherwise it is impossible that the same being should be very God and very man.

(Anselm of Canterbury 1926, p. 59)

The hypostatic union, the doctrine that Jesus is fully God and fully man, is a model for the Christological–Ecclesiological relationship, the invisible and visible relationship between Christ and the church. Therefore, as the church teaches its followers to be priests, the “People of God” (a phrase popularized by the Second Vatican Council in *Lumen gentium* to encompass both the clergy and laity) becomes sacramental to God’s existence. Humans cannot exist outside their lens of culture, and Jesus, being fully human, brings with him the culture of a Jewish man. Culture is the hallmark of being human. For this study, I will be using Kathryn Tanner’s following description of “culture”: “Human beings, because they lack biologically based blueprints for behavior, are formless and aimless, hardly human at all, without culture” (Tanner 1997, p. 26). Turner describes culture as essential to be human and, furthermore, relational. She writes, “The struggle over culture, whether and to whatever extent it produces true commonality of beliefs and sentiments, presumes culture as common stakes: all parties at least agree on the importance of the cultural items that they struggle to define and connect up with one another” (ibid, p. 57). Cultural items include music-making, vernacular, art, dance, etc., and the suppression of culture is, therefore, a suppression of humanity.

This does not mean, however, that humans are, by virtue of being human, sacramental in precisely the same way as Jesus. The Incarnation of Christ was a historical and non-repeatable event according to Christian tradition. However, as Anscar Chupungco has considered, “the incarnation is an historical event, but its mystery lives on whenever the Church assumes the social and cultural conditions of the people among whom she dwells. Adaptation is thus not an option, but a theological imperative arising from incarnational exigency” (Chupungco 2006, p. 59). The Church must, therefore, grow from within communities and culture and cannot possibly grow apart from them. *Ad gentes*, one of the documents promulgated at the Second Vatican Council, reads, “the Christian life will be adapted to the mentality and character of each culture, and local traditions together with the special qualities of each national family, illumined by the light of the gospel, will be taken up into a Catholic unity” (Second Vatican Council 1996b).

Ad Gentes, as a foundational document of Vatican II on the mission of the Church, offers a repudiation of the colonial history associated with the Catholic Church by emphasizing the respect for and incorporation of local customs and cultures rather than asserting dominance over them. The document frames the inculturation of missionary activity—that is, the proclamation of the Gospel to non-believers—within the context of the Trinitarian missions of the Son and the Spirit, both of whom are sent forth by the Father (Hahnenberg 2007, p. 135). Moreover, the inculturation of the liturgy is explicitly included within the Church’s missionary efforts in the initial sections of *Ad Gentes*, as follows: “The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father”.¹ Whereas pre-Vatican II missionary activity was predominantly focused on the preaching of the Gospel, the opening paragraphs of *Ad Gentes* present a broader vision of the Church’s mission and how it is to be accomplished, particularly in response to the growing secularization of Western Europe (Hahnenberg 2007, p. 134).

3. Developing Active Participation in the Liturgy

In the fourth century, the Catholic Church adopted Latin, the language of the Roman Empire, as its primary language. As the Roman military expanded its reach across conquered territories, Latin gradually replaced Greek, the original language of the Gospel writings. Over time, Latin became widespread, and the Vulgate, a Latin translation of the Bible by St. Jerome, was established as the official Bible of the Roman Catholic Church. Despite the Church’s continued use of Latin, however, its usage declined throughout Western Europe.

Although the Council of Trent reaffirmed Latin as the official language of the liturgy and council in 1545, early signs of a desire for the vernacular in religious practice emerged. Ferdinand I, the successor of Charles V, along with the French representatives at the council, expressed a preference for incorporating more vernacular language into the liturgy.² Specifically, Ferdinand I requested permission to use German psalms and hymns in religious services.

As Latin persisted over the centuries, its usage among the general population steadily declined, effectively turning the Roman Rite into a European export (McGreevy 2023). Parishioners increasingly attended Mass as passive spectators, and few priests were proficient enough to conduct the Latin Rite in a way that was comprehensible to the congregation. As Rita Ferrone observes, “there were no missals for the people to ‘follow along’ with what Father was doing, no translations of the Latin for use in the pew, such as existed in the church of the 1940s and 1950s... Many priests themselves were only minimally skilled in pronouncing the prayers, and would mumble or rush through the liturgical texts without any expectation that the people gathered could make head or tail of what was being said.

In any case, it was not considered necessary or desirable for them to do so. Attending to the words would be a ‘distraction’ from the individual’s prayer” (Ferrone 2007, p. 2).

The concept of “active participation” by the laity in the liturgy began to take root and gain traction during the Liturgical Movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This movement was notably influenced by figures such as Dom Prosper Guéranger of the Benedictine Abbey of Solesmes in France, who played a pioneering role in the liturgical revival. Guéranger sought to celebrate the liturgy according to a purely Roman model, drawing inspiration from the medieval period to address the diverse local liturgies that had developed across France (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2025). Simultaneously, in Germany, a patristic revival at the University of Tübingen further contributed to the academic study and development of liturgical practices (ibid, p. 6).

The liturgical revival was based on a “return to the sources” approach, though the objectives differed significantly across regions. Dom Prosper Guéranger emphasized unity through uniformity, aiming to address the diverse liturgical practices within France. In contrast, the revival in Germany highlighted the concept of the “mystical body of Christ”, which questioned the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church. Keith Pecklers, S. J., observes the following: “For his part, Guéranger lamented the fact that such liturgical diversity deprived the faithful of drinking deeply from the church’s wellspring and thus advocated a liturgical practice at Solesmes which adhered strictly to the Tridentine Roman Rite, basing much of his own research, however, on medieval foundations rather than patristic ones” (Pecklers 2012b, p. 320). It was particularly the patristic sources, which emphasized the Church as the “mystical body of Christ”, that had a lasting impact on the Second Vatican Council.

At the height of the Liturgical Movement, Pope Pius X published his 1903 document, *Tra le Sollecitudini*, which recognized the social dimensions of the liturgy, particularly in relation to participation and cultural representation. In the document, he states the following: “... Our people assemble for the purpose of acquiring the true Christian spirit from its first and indispensable source, namely, active participation in the most sacred mysteries and in the public and solemn prayer of the Church” (Pope Pius and Proprio 1903). While the goal of achieving active participation through the use of local languages, musical styles, and cultural integration had not yet been fully realized, raising awareness about the importance of lay involvement in the liturgy played a crucial role in shaping the evolution of liturgy and music in Latin America following Vatican II. This was particularly significant as the Liturgical Movement began as an educational exploration of the liturgy, which later developed into a broader movement focused on mission and evangelization (Ferrone 2007, p. 6).

Tra le Sollecitudini focused primarily on chant and polyphony. While considerably narrow in its inclusion of different musics compared to *Sacrosanctum Concilium* at the Second Vatican Council, the document is aware of the need for a unifying quality of liturgical music. It reads as follows:

Sacred music should consequently possess, in the highest degree, the qualities proper to the liturgy, and in particular sanctity and goodness of form, which will spontaneously produce the final quality of universality.

It must be holy, and must, therefore, exclude all profanity not only in itself, but in the manner in which it is presented by those who execute it.

It must be true art, for otherwise it will be impossible for it to exercise on the minds of those who listen to it that efficacy which the Church aims at obtaining in admitting into her liturgy the art of musical sounds.

But it must, at the same time, be universal in the sense that while every nation is permitted to admit into its ecclesiastical compositions those special forms which may be said to constitute its native music, still these forms must be subordinated in such a manner to the general characteristics of sacred music that nobody of any nation may receive an impression other than good on hearing them.³

The document references Roman polyphony and Gregorian chant as key examples that demonstrate his description of the qualities of sacred music. Within the broader history of liturgical music and its practices, this document can be understood as, at least in part, a historical response to the operatic and instrumental Mass settings that were popular in Western Europe at the close of the nineteenth century. This response is evident in section 11, which states the following: “In the hymns of the Church, the traditional form of the hymn is preserved. It is not lawful, therefore, to compose, for instance, a *Tantum ergo* in such a way that the first strophe presents a romanza, a cavatina, an adagio, and the *Genitori* an allegro”.⁴

Chant was seen as a way to mitigate the overexclusion of the congregation by the operatic choirs and instrumental music of the late nineteenth century Western European church. The communion procession, particularly, was an opportunity to make people aware of the corporate act, as Benedictine Patrick Cummins wrote the following:

Thanks to the reform of the communion-procession, which is reviving in many places, we begin to understand again one of the main aspects of the Communion: that it is the consummation of a corporate offering, and that the reception of the Sacrament is itself a corporate action. . . The liturgy uses for this, the communion-procession, no particular method, but the usual musical plan of all processions: an appropriate refrain, alternated with an appropriate psalm. The refrain, called an antiphon, is a text selected for its eucharistic meaning; it is sung again and again, so that its being repeated may help to reveal its spiritual implications.

(Cummins 1943)

The liturgical revival, while aiming to restore active participation through chant, ultimately resulted in a more homogenized, Romanized style of liturgical music. This emphasis on chant, particularly in Latin, still became problematic as the language was incomprehensible to the majority of the Catholic Church, diminishing the potential for congregational engagement. However, at the Second Vatican Council in 1962, the document *Sacrosanctum Concilium* permitted the use of the vernacular in the liturgy and urged the clergy to familiarize themselves with the cultural traditions of the diverse communities they were called to serve. This emphasis on local idioms in the Church’s mission is reflected both in *Ad Gentes* and *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, which share a common focus on cultural integration and liturgical inculturation. In *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC 119), it states the following:

In some places, in mission lands especially, there are people who have their own musical tradition, and this plays an important part in their religious and social life. For this reason their music should be held in due esteem and should be given a suitable role. Not only in forming their religious sense but also in adapting worship to their native genius. . . Therefore, in the musical training of missionaries, special care should be taken to ensure that they will be capable of encouraging the traditional music of those peoples both in the schools and in sacred services, as far as may be practicable.

(Second Vatican Council 1996a)

The permission for the inculturation of the liturgy at Vatican II, in effect, fulfilled the vision of Pope Pius X, who had emphasized participation of the laity. The permission to inculturate the liturgy built on Pius X's earlier initiatives by incorporating the vernacular and, eventually, cultural music as essential modes of active participation in the liturgy. By drawing on historical precedents in the liturgical movement and further back, Vatican II sought to renew the Catholic Church, integrating diverse cultural expressions while remaining faithful to its core teachings. This became known as *ressourcement*.

4. Ressourcement

The return to the early sources that had driven liturgical renewal also led to the reforms at the Second Vatican Council in what was known as *ressourcement*. AG and SC, particularly shared a lens for unity in the early church through diversity as Faggioli illuminates the following:

In those same decades in Europe, and especially among the Russian Orthodox theologian *émigrés* in France, *ressourcement* became the basis for the renewal of the Orthodox theology of the diaspora in the twentieth century. It was not an accident that the eucharistic ecclesiology of the post-Vatican II period retrieved many of its insights from Orthodox theology. Also, for Vatican II *ressourcement* was one of the most decisive keywords for twentieth-century theology: it embodied the need for theology to go back to the old sources of the undivided Church and the modern world, and between Christians and all of humankind.

(Faggioli 2012, p. 20)

The vision of the early undivided church, before the Catholic Church split from the Orthodox Church, would then appropriately celebrate diversity and unity within the church today, particularly in the Catholic liturgy. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 37 reads as follows: "Even in the liturgy the Church does not wish to impose a rigid uniformity in matters which do not involve the faith or the good of the whole community. Rather does she respect and foster the qualities and talents of the various races and nations".⁵ The liturgy, therefore, must be both universally comprehensible through simple and concise language and inculturated by its community to catechize more effectively. Historically, the liturgy has adapted to various languages from Greek to Latin to Slavonic, from Roman Rite to Byzantine Rite, and from early commonly held meal practices to formalized eucharistic rites, so it would be imperative to these points that the liturgy now be understood by the laity. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 10 reads as follows:

Nevertheless the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows. For the aim and object of apostolic works is that all who are made sons of God by faith and baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of His Church, to take part in the sacrifice, and to eat the Lord's supper.⁶

According to the passage, the rite of baptism enables and demands that the laity participate in the liturgy, as all activity of the Church flows from and to the liturgy. The invisible and visible, Christological and ecclesiological, come together with the Church as the sacrament, or visible sign of God's love and presence. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 5 reads as follows: "For it was from the side of Christ as he slept the sleep of death upon the cross that there came forth the wondrous sacrament of the whole Church".⁷ The whole Church is the laity, who are living sacraments of God's presence. The liturgy is viewed as an intersection between humankind and God in the action of Christ at Mass. As a mode of *ressourcement*, Ratzinger references Augustine's *Tractatus in Ioannem* to describe the event of Christ as follows: the paschal mystery "is not the action of a man, but an action of God... It

is precisely this ‘work of Jesus’ which is the real content of the Liturgy” (Ratzinger 2003). The past is made present, and the living sacrament of the Church encounters Christ in the real presence of the Eucharist.

The liturgy serves as an encounter between the invisible and the visible, with the inculturated liturgy representing the latter. The concept of “noble simplicity” within the liturgy is intended to ensure clarity and highlight the themes and words of the Mass without obstruction. Participation in the liturgy similarly occurs on the following two levels: internal and external. Internal participation involves understanding and contemplating the words spoken and presented at Mass, while external participation entails engaging with the dialogues, hymns, and movements of the liturgy. However, the external takes on a more communal dimension and awareness, as it also has the capacity to edify or dissolve the personhood and image of God present in one another. External participation is always participating in the mutual sanctification between members of the laity. The liturgy, therefore, is constantly in mission, with each weekly celebration transforming the faithful into Christ through the religious expressions and external participation of the laity rooted in the culture of the local community, something referred to in terms of the “New Evangelization” at Medellín, which is discussed later. The people, as a collective, are no longer only individuals but are united in Christ, not despite their cultural expressions but through them. In this way, they become a sacrament of the Church as a whole.

Pope Pius XII was also particularly influential in the liturgical movement up to Vatican II. Referring to Pius XII, Ferrone writes the following: “While he affirmed the idea of objective reality in worship, he criticized partisans of an ‘objective piety’ who sought to minimize subjective engagement in the liturgical action. He warmly approved of a ‘return to the sources’—the study of liturgical history—even though he condemned antiquarianism” (Ferrone 2007, p. 9). Objective piety often implies that there is a correct and incorrect way to practice piety, leading to a uniform standard for how it should appear. However, reducing piety to a uniform expression overlooks the diverse ways it is expressed across different peoples, cultures, and nations and how they are still united in Christ. The various modes of sanctification exist as external forms of participation among the laity. This is especially relevant to the liturgical movement as piety (internal and external) is also a mode of participation of the laity; it is how the laity responds to the liturgy and participates in it; the early church understood this in its missionary approach to spreading Christianity by inculturating the early liturgy.

The early Church recognized the importance of inculturation in its missionary efforts, adapting the liturgy to local languages and traditions to facilitate the spread of Christianity. More recently, this principle was evident in 1615 when Jesuit missionaries were granted permission to celebrate Mass in Chinese. Similarly, in 1631, full vernacular privileges were extended to Georgian and Armenian missionaries, allowing them to conduct the liturgy in their native languages. Across the Atlantic, Jesuit missionaries in the region of modern-day Montreal received authorization from the Holy See to incorporate the Iroquois language into the liturgy, further demonstrating the Church’s commitment to linguistic and cultural adaptation. This approach continued in the United States, where Bishop John Carroll, at the first Diocesan Synod of Baltimore, in 1791, permitted limited use of English in the liturgy. The Gospel was read in the vernacular on Sundays and feast days, followed by a sermon in English, and vernacular hymns and prayers were encouraged. Expanding upon these efforts, Bishop John England of Charleston edited the first American edition of the Roman Missal in English in 1822, further solidifying the role of the vernacular in worship (Pecklers 2012a, p. 168). These instances illustrate the Catholic Church’s longstanding engagement with vernacular languages as a means of fostering both communal worship and missionary outreach.

By the time of the Second Vatican Council, the missionary spirit of the church was going to act in continuation with what the early church had begun since it was no longer dependent on the disciples journeying around the world to spread the gospel. Hahnenberg writes the following: “Following Vatican II, the older paradigm of missionary work that saw the European church ‘sending’ and the rest of the world ‘receiving’ gave way to the following new paradigm: a vision of the whole worldwide church sharing together in the one mission of evangelizing the world. While in many ways AG was shaped by the concerns of the first paradigm, it anticipates the second” (Hahnenberg 2007, p. 139). The second paradigm became known as the “New Evangelization”, which was a term first used at the Medellín Council in 1968 and then popularized by Pope John Paul II.

5. The Medellín Council and the New Evangelization

The Council of Medellín, Colombia, met in 1968 to discuss how the Second Vatican Council would implement its changes within the Latin American context. The topics covered included poverty, peace, and justice, with liberation theology underpinning many discussions. When Pope Paul VI came to the conference, his speech seemed to echo past denunciations of liberation theology by condemning the violence that might ensue, implying to many that peace would be achieved by accepting their lot in life without complaint. David Abalos writes the following:

It is clear that they want to forge new relationships with the people; when they speak of poverty, justice, peace, and youth, therefore, they are not asking simply for a redistribution of land or other needed reforms, but for a radical transformation of the whole economic, social and political system. Ignorance and destitution are no longer seen as “natural” conditions of existence, but have become issues to be creatively transformed.

(Abalos 1969)

There was an awareness of one’s situation, similar to the “woke” movements in the United States in recent years, where its citizens engaged in mass protests against injustice, such as wealthy inequality, racism, and sexism. This was known as *conscientización* in Latin America. *Conscientización* is the awareness of one’s condition in life, not as a matter of fate but as one decided upon for the benefit of the dominant class. Maritza Montero writes the following: “It conveys the idea of developing, strengthening, and changing consciousness. It was created in the field of education, specifically of adult education, in the early 1960s, producing at the same time a new conception of consciousness” (Montero 2014). Poverty in Latin America was no longer tolerated as the norm, and education was believed to play a defining role in fighting systemic poverty, not just individually in the course of one’s choices in life but in the realm of economics and social justice.

Paulo Freire (1921–1997) was a Brazilian philosopher–educator whose ideas drove the discussions on liberation and *conscientización*. In his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (1968), he writes the following:

Consciously or unconsciously, the act of rebellion by the oppressed (an act which is always, nearly always, as violent as the initial violence of the oppressors) can initiate love. Whereas the violence of the oppressors prevents the oppressed from being fully human, the response of the latter to this violence is grounded in the desire to pursue the right to be human. As the oppressors dehumanize others and violate their rights, they themselves also become dehumanized. As the oppressed, fighting to be human, take away the oppressors’ power to dominate and suppress, they restore to the oppressors the humanity they had lost in the exercise of oppression.

(Freire 2005)

At the Council of Medellín, this idea became manifest from one of Vatican II's famous contributions to discussions on liberation based on human dignity. One of the documents of Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes*, speaks at length to discuss the importance of the true dignity afforded to humans due to their being made in the "image of God". If humans are created by God and all that God created is good (Gen 1:31), then humans are also good. However, this image is distorted by sin and humankind's inclination towards sin. *Gaudium et spes* 13 reads as follows: "Examining his heart, man finds that he has inclinations toward evil too, and is engulfed by manifold ills which cannot come from his good Creator. Often refusing to acknowledge God as his beginning, man has disrupted also his proper relationship to his own ultimate goal as well as his whole relationship toward himself and others and all created things" (Second Vatican Council 1975).

By disrupting the relationship between oneself and God, one can disfigure or distort the fullness of Christ within oneself and others. *Populorum Progressio* 16 states the following:

Self-development, however, is not left up to man's option. Just as the whole of creation is ordered toward its Creator, so too the rational creature should of his own accord direct his life to God, the first truth and the highest good. Thus human self-fulfillment may be said to sum up our obligations.

Moreover, this harmonious integration of our human nature, carried through by personal effort and responsible activity, is destined for a higher state of perfection. United with the life-giving Christ, man's life is newly enhanced; it acquires a transcendent humanism which surpasses its nature and bestows new fullness of life. This is the highest goal of human self-fulfillment.

(Pope Paul 1967)

The "fullness", in the sense of the word above, of the indigenous people of Latin America was disrupted by colonization. Their history of being exploited and enslaved over centuries of conquest and imperialism had created generations of poverty, trauma, and loss of identity and culture. The Spanish had supplanted their indigenous religious practices and language. Latin America has since gained independence but not without the pains of populist leaders, coups, and rebellions.

The documents at the Medellín Council described temporal actions that were part of the evangelization process. In chapter 7, section 13, it says the following:

Por otra parte, esta evangelización se debe realizar a través del testimonio personal y comunitario que se expresará, de manera especial, en el contexto del mismo compromiso temporal. La evangelización de que venimos hablando debe explicar los valores de justicia y fraternidad, contenidos en las aspiraciones de nuestros pueblos, en una perspectiva escatológica. La evangelización necesita como soporte una Iglesia-signo.⁸

Furthermore, this evangelization must be carried out through personal and communal witness, which will be expressed, in a special way, in the context of this same temporal commitment. The evangelization we have been speaking of must explain the values of justice and fraternity, contained in the aspirations of our peoples, from an eschatological perspective. Evangelization requires a Church as a symbol as its support.⁹

As a continuation of the mission of the early church, the Medellín Council called for the evangelization of the baptized. It was the responsibility of all Christians to evangelize each other in a temporal manner, as follows:

Por el hecho de que sean bautizados los niños pequeños, confiando en la fe de la familia, ya se hace necesaria una “evangelización de los bautizados”, como una etapa en la educación de su fe. Y esta necesidad es más urgente, teniendo en cuenta la desintegración que en muchas zonas ha sufrido la familia, la ignorancia religiosa de los adultos y la escasez de comunidades cristianas de base.

Dicha evangelización de los bautizados tiene un objetivo concreto: llevarlos a un compromiso personal con Cristo y a una entrega consciente en la obediencia de la fe. De ahí la importancia de una revisión de la pastoral de la confirmación, así como de nuevas formas de un catecumenado en la catequesis de adultos, insistiendo en la preparación para los sacramentos. También debemos revisar todo aquello que en nuestra vida o en nuestras instituciones pueda ser obstáculo para la “re-evangelización” de los adultos, purificando así el rostro de la Iglesia ante el mundo.¹⁰

English:

Because young children are baptized, trusting in the faith of the family, an “evangelization of the baptized” is already needed, as a stage in the education of their faith. And this need is more urgent, given the disintegration that family has suffered in many areas, religious ignorance of adults and the scarcity of basic Christian communities.

This evangelization of the baptized has a concrete objective: to lead them to a personal commitment to Christ and to a conscious surrender in the obedience of the faith. Hence the importance of a revision of the pastoral care of confirmation, as well as of new forms of a catechumenate given the adult catechesis, insisting on preparation for the sacraments. We must also review everything that in our lives or in our institutions can be an obstacle to the “revangelization” of adults, thus purifying the face of the Church before the world.¹¹

The New Evangelization represents a continuation of the early church’s mission, emphasizing that the responsibility for evangelization lies with all baptized individuals, including the laity. It marks a return to foundational principles and had a significant impact on liturgical music in South America. The vernacular Masses introduced in Latin America after Vatican II are a natural extension of the effort to reclaim the “fullness” of Christ and the dignity of individuals, reflecting their creation in the image of God. Two such Masses—José Ríos’s *Misa Típica* and Carlos Mejía Godoy’s *Misa Campesina*—encapsulate the essence of Nicaragua through the use of its native language, local music, and cultural history. These Masses represent natural inculturations of the Gospel—through multiple vernacular languages and musics—that are not just inevitable but necessary to reflect their community (Assis 2008).

6. The *Misa Campesina Nicaragüense*

The Episcopal Council of Latin America reinterpreted Vatican II in light of the Latin American experience at the council in Medellín, and among its many results was the Familia de Dios movement in Central America. The council emerged from “grassroots efforts by priests, sisters, and popular communities to collectively enact liberation. Each community established its own socially committed model of church within an experimental parish shaped by inwardly directed pastoral work” (Gordillo 2021). The whole point of the Familia de Dios course was to allow for “individuals to develop critical awareness via their own agency” (ibid). People were among equals in these courses, which a priest sometimes did not lead.

The Familia de Dios course was designed with conversion and renewal at its center. Conversion was brought upon by *cursillo* and conversion through “emotional conversion

experience” and sought to train lay leaders without the aid of priests. The course was brought to Panama in 1963 so that a parish could be founded that followed four principles of parish formation, as follows: work with men first, and then with their wives and other women, have an introductory course called *Familia de Dios* in small neighborhood group discussions which, connecting everyday human experiences to scripture, move toward a basic conversion through weekend retreat (*cursillo*) and form a neighborhood-based church community and expand it through the course and *cursillo* (ibid, p. 64).

Out of this community came the *Misa típica*, written by José “Pepe” Nelson Ríos (1938–2016), a member of the San Miguelito community in Nicaragua. The Mass itself uses several music styles to represent the San Miguelito community, as follows: *tamborito*, *torrente*, *gallino*, *punto*, *cumbia*, *capricho*, and *son de tuna*.

To familiarize the listeners of Panama with his Mass, Ríos uses a pre-existing melody for the Sanctus, subtitled “Melodía clásica panameña”. Among the different types of dances and instruments is also a way of singing called the *saloma*, a “melismatic wail or utterance sung on a vocable” or a “syllable” (ibid, p. 67). It can be heard in the Introduction, Kyrie, and Agnus Dei, and it is a distinct Panamanian practice.

After this Mass was recorded, the artwork was chosen for the front of its jacket. It was a photograph of a mural by Chicago artist Lillian Brulc (1923–2012) called “The New Passover”. On the left side of the image, there is a small gathering of worshipers around a leader to discuss the Word of God. In the midst of them is also a guitar player leading in song. To the right of that, there are several San Blas Indians meeting around a teacher. Above these groups is a highly stylized angel. On the right side, you will see workers building the “foundations of the New Church” elaborated in the construction of a wall meant to keep out figures in clerical garb. Within this group, a *Familia de Dios* leader develops lay leaders. And sharply in the center stands a Panamanian farmer with a bamboo stalk across his shoulders, making a cruciform shape. This is the Christ–Peasant, *el Cristo Campesino*, whose earthly suffering was the church’s focus after Vatican II, especially as a precedent for liberation theologians.

In San Pablo, Nicaragua, the *Misa típica* inspired the creation of the *Misa popular*, composed primarily by Manuelito Dávila in 1968 in San Pablo, Nicaragua. Inspired also by the *Familia de Dios* model from San Miguelito, this parish auditioned the new Mass for approval by church authorities during the Medellín Council in early 1969. The only reservation the authorities had was with its text during the Creed was the following: “... We believe in Jesus Christ, His Son, who ‘was born of our people’, in place of saying that he was born of the Virgin Mary” (ibid, p. 69). Although not official, other critiques of the new Mass include a bishop’s comment of the mass having “pinches guitarras”.¹²

Like the *Misa típica*, the *Misa popular* had a successful run of LP’s so much that in its second round, the artwork for its jacket depicted a socially conscious community. However, in its artwork, the socially conscious became politically conscious and engaged. Artist Leoncio Sáenz (1935–2008) depicts on the jacket the following:

A dystopian crucifixion scene in which a naked, suffering *Cristo Campesino* meets his end on a makeshift cross, while flanked by witnesses. At left, his family looks on with dread as a house burns in the distance. Carrion birds hover above the crucified. At right, a mélange of people completes the macabre spectacle: soldiers point their bayonets at the condemned, a seated military figure wields a bone staff, the Catholic hierarchy avert their gaze, and nondescript men crowd the background. Above them, just below the album title, a stylized depiction of the Palacio de la Curva, home of the director of the Guardia Nacional. . .

(ibid)

Following the success of the *Misa Popular*, Nicaraguan songwriter Carlos Mejía Godoy (b. 1943) was approached by Father Ernesto Cardenal (1925–2020), a well-known Nicaraguan liberation theologian and outspoken critic of the Somoza regime, to compose a vernacular Mass setting. He received theological guidance from Cardenal, as well as from Ernesto's brother, Fernando Cardenal (Gordillo 2021, p. 76). Godoy had previously collaborated with Father Ernesto, setting his poetry to music. Godoy was already known as a radio personality for his socially committed songs and activism. Godoy prepared the text and composed the music for all parts of the *Misa campesina*, except for the *Canto de meditación*, which was written by composer Pablo Martínez Téllez. The *Canto de meditación* is famous for beginning with an iconic whistling imitation of birds native to Nicaragua. The only other contributor to the LP recording was Capuchin priest Gregory Smutko (1931–2001), who provided the song *Miskito lawana*. Smutko worked with Miskitu indigenous communities on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua (ibid, p. 77).

The text for the *Miskito lawana* reads as follows:

Miskito nani ba won dara walaia
 Swak sakan storka na pain wali banwaia.
 Won aisa purara ai kupia pihni ba
 Miskito nesanka ban yami munisa.
 Won dama Ebrahim pain kasak luki kan
 Ba mita witinra God bui brisata.
 Miskito mani sin pain kasak luki ba
 Won Aisa purara yamni won brisa na.
 Won dama Ebrahim God bui aisata
 Ai Waihla nanira sut pura luaia
 Gad mita yawonra sim baku takam sa
 Won waihla nanira sut pura luisa.
 Won Dama Ebrahim God bui aisata
 Ai kyamka nani ba ailal ban takbia
 Gad mita yawonra sim baku takan sa
 Miskito nani ba ailal sin bara sa.

(ibid, p. 77)

English:

Miskitu brothers, we must reflect,
 This is the story of our salvation.
 Let us ponder that our Celestial Father
 Gives the Miskitu people his blessing.
 Our father Abraham had enormous faith,
 Which is why the Lord chose him as a guide.
 We, Miskitu, ought to believe
 In Him who is the pure fountain of Liberation.
 When the Lord spoke to our father Abraham,
 He gave him strength and valor to fight relentlessly.

When the Lord speaks to us, his Word gives us [strength]
 To overcome those who sow terror.
 God said to Abraham: your sons will grow
 And will joyfully populate this beautiful nation.
 The Miskitu brothers will multiply
 To exult, united as one, the glory of the Lord.

(ibid, p. 77)

The placement of this song in the liturgy can be interpreted by what comes before it and what comes after it. The *Santo* is sung before and ends with the following: “Vos sos el Dios parejo, no andas con carambadas, vos sos hombre de ñeques, el mero tayacán. . .”. This translates to “You are the just God, you are not messing around, you are the man of bravery, the only ‘tayacán’”. *Tayacán* is a Nahuatl word that describes a type of leader or teacher of the people. This word allows for the *Santo* to transition to the next musical portion of the liturgy, the *Miskito Lawana*, because the Miskitu people are the original people of Northern Nahuatl-speaking Indigenous people (Miskitu History n.d.). After the *Miskito Lawana* is the communion song, *Vamos a la milpa*. A communion song accompanies the Catholic laity in the procession to receive communion. The last few verses of the communion song, *Vamos a la milpa*, read as follows:

La comunión no es un rito intrascendente y banal.
 Es compromiso y vivencia, toma de conciencia de la cristiandad.
 Es comulgar con la lucha de la colectividad. . .
 Es decir yo soy cristiano y conmigo hermano vos podés cantar
 Es decir yo soy cristiano y conmigo hermano vos podés cantar.

(Godoy and El Taller de Sonido Popular 1979)

English:

Communion is not an insignificant and banal rite.
 It is commitment and experience, awareness of Christianity
 It is to communion with the struggle of the community. . .
 It is saying that I am a Christian and with me, brother or sister, you can sing
 It is saying that I am a Christian and with me, brother or sister, you can sing.¹³

The reception of the Eucharist in Catholicism is a horizontal acknowledgment of the presence of Christ in all peoples. It is a corporate act that St. John Chrysostom describes as “The Body of Christ. And what do they become who partake of it? The Body of Christ: not many bodies, but one body” (ibid). Many bodies become reconciled to one. Including the Miskitu text right before communion strongly suggests that the Miskitu people are to be reconciled with other Christians through communion and as adopted siblings of Christ.

The Miskitu text appears in a Latinized version of the language and is inserted alongside the Spanish vernacular text. The intent of having a vernacular text of a historically oppressed indigenous people in the Catholic liturgy is to dignify the Miskitu people as inheritors of the faith and adopted children of God every bit as authentic as Abraham. The historical precedent of devotional music and its connotation of representing its speakers and a personal relationship with God is present here. However, the impact is further felt with the oppressive Somoza government in Nicaragua when the song takes on a contemporary liberation connotation and immediate connection with the people.

The Guardia Nacional (National Guard) cut short the outdoor premiere of the Mass, and Mejía Godoy was quickly arrested. The Mass text was banned for its explicit appeal to revolutionaries and presentation of Liberation Theology. However, it was popularized because of its commercial recording and because the violence toward a defenseless crowd at the Mass premiere drew further criticism of the Somoza government. Godoy was already secretly a member of the underground Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) (Gordillo 2021, p. 78).

The following two particular movements of the *Misa Campesina* illustrate the localized vernacular of the Mass: the *Señor Ten Piedad* and the *Gloria*. First, the words of the *Señor Ten Piedad* are drastically different from the approved translation of the Kyrie and, without ambiguity, invoke tropes of oppressor and oppressed Liberation theology. The Kyrie reads as follows:

Cristo, Cristo Jesús
 Cristo, Cristo Jesús
 Identifícate con nosotros.
 Señor, Señor mi Dios,
 identifícate con nosotros.
 Cristo, Cristo Jesús solidarízate
 no con la clase opresora que exprime y devora a la comunidad,
 sino con el oprimido con el pueblo mío sediento de paz.

(ibid)

English:

Christ, Christ Jesus
 Christ, Christ Jesus,
 Identify yourself with us,
 Lord, Lord my God,
 Identify yourself with our cause.
 Christ, Christ Jesus, be in solidarity with us,
 Not with the oppressor who steps on and devours the community.
 But with the oppressed, with my people thirsting for peace.

Every movement of the Mass ordinary of the *Misa Campesina* differs from the official translations and uses various localized musical styles. The second movement, for example, is the *Gloria*, which, while vastly differing from the approved translation of the Catholic church, uses a *son de toro* musical style, a type of music called the *chichero*. This type of dance brings to the imagination the mischievous nature of the bull. *Chicheros* generally consist of brass bands used for various kinds of church worship in western Nicaragua but are also popularly associated with *chicha*. This rice-based drink can be alcoholic if fermented, and *Chicheros* are vendors of this drink. The incorporation of *Chicheros* in the liturgy is a stark contrast to the musical decorum of the extraordinary form of the Mass before the Second Vatican Council by incorporating the historically socially lower ranks of society in the Mass. In this way, the Catholic Church becomes a more inclusive institution where the phrase “preferential option for the poor” takes on real-world dimensions, particularly within the Mass liturgy. Class and extant ethnic divisions fade in the street behind the saint carried on a platform when people sing the *son de toros* during saint’s day processions. Interestingly, in 1662, a visitor named Frasso described how the members of Indian *cofradías*

feasted copiously, became inebriated, and played music and danced to “*remorar la memoria de su antigüedad*” on feast days of saints (Scruggs 2005).

Multilingual Mass liturgies serve multiple functions, particularly in linguistically diverse parishes. In California, for example, many parishes conduct liturgies in both English and Spanish to accommodate their multilingual congregations. However, following Vatican II, the incorporation of indigenous languages alongside Spanish—exemplified by the *Misa Campesina*—not only acknowledges but also validates indigenous communities by embedding their historical presence within the liturgy itself.

In this context, the “New Evangelization” is directed toward baptized individuals rather than those unfamiliar with the Gospel. Multilingual liturgies provide a symbolic and practical means for indigenous communities to claim space within the Church’s worship while maintaining continuity with the Latin tradition. In the *Misa Campesina*, for instance, Miskitu is used for the Mass propers, which vary from week to week. Similarly, the *Misa Incaica*, composed by Germán Quiñones, employs Latin and Spanish for the Mass Ordinary—fixed parts of the liturgy—while Quechua is reserved for the propers. Notably, the names of the Ordinary remain in Latin, though their texts are rendered in Spanish, reflecting the integration of indigenous identity with Catholic faith in a way that does not separate the liturgy from the lived experience of the laity.

The propers of the *Misa Incaica* include *Bendicionta Churaykuway* (Canticle to the Virgin), *Munakuyki* (Song to the Blessed Sacrament), *Wawaykita Muñapuay* (Song to the Virgin), *Hamullary* (Communion Hymn), *Kollama Maria* (Song to the Virgin), and *Bendicionta Churaykuway II* (Canticle to the Virgin) (Quiñones et al. 1996). These elements illustrate how multilingual liturgies function as both an expression of cultural identity and a means of fostering deeper engagement with the faith.

In Latin America, there were a number of vernacular mass settings. Some were simply translations of the Latin Mass, while others strayed further from the official translation. Many of these settings were not musically noted and require further study for their vernacular and multilingual language use, particularly of indigenous languages, and cultural music styles (See Table 1).

Table 1. A sample of mass settings from Latin America after Vatican II¹⁴.

Year of Publication	Mass Name	Composer	Nationality
1960s	Misa panamericana [or “Misa de mariachi”]	Jean-Marc Leclerc and Mariachi “Hermanos Macías”	Mexico
1964	Misa criolla	Ariel Ramírez	Argentina
1964	Misa nativa Tupanói [Tupasy?] rory	Mariano Celso Pedrozo	Paraguay
1965	Misa chilena	Raúl de Ramón	Chile
1965	Misa a la chilena	Vicente Bianchi	Chile
1965	Misa incaica en Quechua	Marcelo Grondin and Germán Quiñones	Bolivia
1965	Misa mexicana	Delfino Madrigal Gil	Mexico
1965	La misa en México	Rafael Carrión	Mexico
1965	Misa ranchera	Anselmo Murillo	Mexico

Table 1. *Cont.*

Year of Publication	Mass Name	Composer	Nationality
1965	Misal campirano	José Arraiza	Mexico
1966	Misa en jazz	Tino Contreras	Mexico
1966	Misa guaraní	Justo Ramón Colmán	Paraguay
1967	Misa típica panameña de San Miguelito	José N. Ríos	Panama
1968	Purahéi Guasú Ñandejárapi	Abdón Irala	Paraguay
1968	Misa folclórica paraguaya	Justo Ramón Colmán	Paraguay
1969	Misa criolla [de bodas o peruana]	Jorge Madueño and Chabuca Granda	Peru
1969	Misa nativa paraguaya	José Franco Alderete	Paraguay
1969	Ñe’a tovyvá	Mariano Celso Pedrozo	Paraguay
1969	Misa popular nicaragüense	Manuel Dávila, Ángel Cerpas, Luciano Sequeira, and José de la Jara	Nicaragua
1969–70	Misa folclórica colombiana	Mario Giraldo G. and Rubén Darío Vanegas Montoya	Colombia
1970	Misa por un continente	Francisco Marín Rubén Bareiro	Paraguay
1972	Misa tepozteca	Jean-Marc Leclerc and Gérard Krémer	Mexico
1974	Misa folclórica	Herminio Giménez	Paraguay
1975	Misa folclórica paraguaya	César Medina	Paraguay
1975	Misa guaraní	Miguel Angel Duarte Barrios	Paraguay
1980	Misa popular paraguaya	Miguel Angel Echeverría	Paraguay
1990	Misa folclórica paraguaya	Florentín Giménez	Paraguay
1992	Misa folclórica	José Luis Miranda	Paraguay
1997	Misa Ña ñe ‘e guaraní me	Miguel Gómez	Paraguay
2002	Misa guaraní	Casimiro Irala	Paraguay

7. Devotional Music: A Precedent for Sacred-Secular Styles Integration

Vernacular music and liturgy is specific to a region. The vernacular of Nicaraguan liturgies incorporated the styles, musics, and languages of the multiple peoples of Nicaragua.

They were not exclusive to the liturgy however since it was their culture through which they expressed the liturgy after Vatican II.

Before Vatican II, vernacular language served as a mode of both individual and collective devotional music within the Catholic Church. Moreover, the distinction between liturgical and secular music was not always clearly defined, as vernacular and popular styles were often employed in both contexts. As Kendrick notes, “the best-known case is that of Heinrich Schütz’s 1625 *Cantiones sacrae*, which is a book of sacred texts of pseudo-Patristic and Protestant heritage, and is dedicated to an Imperial counselor who had converted from Lutheranism to Catholicism” (Kendrick 2008, p. 325). Although *Cantiones sacrae* was composed in Latin—a language widely used among both Lutheran and Catholic communities in Western Europe at the time—Schütz incorporated the secular madrigal style, particularly as a means of expressing joy, as exemplified in No. 29 of the collection, *Cantate Domino canticum novum*.

Along with the blending of liturgical music and secular music among Protestants and Catholics was the notion of using music for personal devotion. Grazioso Uberti writes about the need for music in Part V of his dialogue *Contrasto musico*, as follows: “resolved the objections to the use of music in personal prayer by pointing to the use of the voice as an external expression and stimulant of internal devotion, and of song as one of the most perfect and regulated forms of vocal communication” and, referencing Boethius, “suggested that *musica instrumentalis* was not only useful in prayer, but served also to raise the soul to God, and to rouse the mind and the heart” (ibid, p. 329).

In late seventeenth-century Italy, vernacular moral cantatas, such as those in Monteverdi’s *Selva morale e spirituale*, began to emerge. In this collection, Monteverdi juxtaposes vernacular madrigals with Latin motets, masses, and psalms, creating a rich interplay between sacred and secular musical traditions. The spiritual themes of the madrigals closely resemble the devotional poetry of the seventeenth century, reinforcing their religious significance. While the precise context of their use remains speculative, these pieces were likely performed both within and beyond the liturgy. A wide range of genres and styles in Western Europe—including the solo motet, chorale, dialogue, villancico, *cantio natalitia*, psalms, and their paraphrases, noëls, madrigals, and *lauda*—contributed to the faith lives of the assembly, enriching both communal worship during Mass and personal devotion outside of it (ibid, p. 337).

The blurring of boundaries between liturgical and personal devotion is also evident in Scripture, particularly in the *Song of Solomon*. This biblical text frequently portrays the love between two spouses as an allegory for the relationship between Christ and the Church, while another interpretation presents Mary as the Bride and God as the Bridegroom, reflecting a form of Marian devotion. In both cases, the *Song of Solomon* serves to prepare the faithful—whether in a liturgical setting or through private devotion—to receive the Eucharist and cultivate a personal relationship with Christ. Music set to texts from the *Song of Solomon* played a dual role as a mediator between God and the Church, as well as between God and Mary. As one scholar notes, “Insofar as such pieces were sung at the Elevation of the Mass, they were also a musical personalization of a ritual moment, meant to prepare the believer for union with Christ in the reception of the Eucharist. On the other hand, the same goal of fusion with the Redeemer was an integral part of individual devotion, and this supported the private performance of such pieces” (ibid, p. 330). Thus, the interplay between sacred music, liturgical practice, and personal devotion reinforced a deeper spiritual connection between the believer and the divine.

The integration of the vernacular brought about the personal devotional practice in Nicaragua as well. Father Ernesto Cardenal wrote a work that blurred the boundaries between devotional/liturgical and sacred/secular in 1964. In his *Salmos*, Cardenal rewrites

specific psalms to be more specific to the socioeconomic realities of Latin America. The psalms used are attentive to the themes of liberation theology. For Psalm 150, he writes the following:

Alabad al Señor en el cosmos, Su santuario de un radio de 100.000 millones de años luz,
 Alabadle por las estrellas y los espacios inter-estelares alabadle por las galaxias y los espacios inter-galáxicos alabadle por los átomos y los vacíos inter-atómicos,
 Alabadle con el violín y la flauta y con el saxofón,
 alabadle con los clarinetes y el corno con cornetas y trombones con piano y pianolas,
 alabadle con blues y jazz y con orquestas sinfónicas con los espirituales de los negros y la 5 de Beethoven, con guitarras y marimbas,
 alabadle con toca-discos y cintas magnetofónicas.

(Cardenal 1969)

English:

Praise the Lord in the cosmos, His sanctuary of a radius of 100 billion light-years,
 Praise Him through the stars and interstellar spaces, praise Him through the galaxies and intergalactic spaces, praise Him through the atoms and interatomic voids,
 Praise Him with the violin and flute and saxophone,
 praise Him with clarinets and horn, with cornets and trombones, with piano and player pianos,
 praise Him with blues and jazz and with symphony orchestras, with Negro spirituals and Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, with guitars and marimbas,
 praise Him with record players and tape recorders.¹⁵

Cardenal's work represents the culmination of devotional and liturgical syncretism, as well as a profound process of vernacular inculturation. Like Godoy, Cardenal integrates more than just the local language into the liturgy; he fuses it with devotional practices, liturgical expression, vernacular music and poetry, and the principles of liberation theology. In this context, musical genre and style function as a form of vernacular expression essential for the full participation of the laity—inseparable from, rather than external to, their experience of worship.

8. Critical Response to the Use of Vernacular

The use of the vernacular in the 1960s onward does not come without critique and outright opposition. Bishop Peter J. Elliott writes about the problems of “dynamic equivalence”, a principle endorsed by the 1969 instruction of the Consilium for implementing the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, as follows:

The first way of understanding truth in liturgical translation is obvious and has been raked over by various critics ever since the International Commission for English in the Liturgy [ICEL] produced its translations over thirty years ago. This is simply the question of whether *this* vernacular text tells the truth, the question of truthfulness or truthful accuracy in translation. Do these English words convey the Catholic doctrinal meaning that is embodied in the words of the Latin original authorized by the Church?

(Bishop Elliott 2007)

Elliott here argues that vernacular language confuses the meaning found in Latin. This treats the text itself as external to its understanding by the laity. As language changes

from generation to generation, so do its different learning modes. Latin translations have undergone several revisions since the inception of the vulgate by St. Jerome in the 4th century. The *Nova Vulgata*, the authoritative Bible translation, is the most recent translation with different editions. Vernacular translations can be expected to undergo the same rigorous translation process. Instead of decrying vernacular translations, the Catholic Church benefits from them as adaptive texts for particular peoples, written as local interpretations of the initial Latin Vulgate.

Among the various cultures and peoples of the world, there exists a rich tapestry of understandings of theological, scriptural, and liturgical concepts, as seen in the Jesuit missions in China in the seventeenth century when they were determining how ancestral worship might conflict with Catholicism. The Catholic Church monitors the translations for significant deviations (as we encountered with the *Misa Campesina*). Still, even with substantial deviations, liturgical translations regarded as unsuitable for the Roman Rite are essential to the authentic devotional life of the laity outside of the official liturgy and its understanding.

The author goes on, as follows:

Taking the essential Christian word “grace” out of seasonal liturgical prayers is a symptom of the deeper doctrinal malaise underlying the current ICEL texts. As others have noted, this is a kind of Pelagianism. What *we* do is what matters. So *we make the liturgy*; it is no longer primarily a gift to us from God through the Church. By contrast, Pope Benedict XVI, when Cardinal Ratzinger, pointed out that the “liturgy derives its greatness from what it is, not from what we make of it”.

(ibid)

The author perceives the translation process as a type of Pelagianism, or self-earned salvation. It is possible to over-theologize this example since the translation process and inculturation were the same as the process of Latin liturgy. The quote by Cardinal Ratzinger also disregards the laity’s participation as irrelevant in the liturgy in judging its “greatness”, presented as outside the contribution of the laity. We can surmise that he is referring to the liturgy’s text and its function as serving as a place where heaven meets earth in a re-presentation of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. However, if Catholics believe the Eucharist to be the source and summit of the Christian life, as stated in *Lumen Gentium*, its greatness in the liturgy presumes a transformation in the laity that leads from and to the Eucharist.

Another writer argues over the semantics of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, as follows: “Obviously by those who have taken credit for the demise of Latin and so gleefully proclaim the triumph of their own version of the place of the vernacular, which the fathers *permitted* in certain parts of the Mass at the same time that they *ordered* the use of Latin” (Schuler 1981). Schuler here mischaracterizes the use of vernacular from the Christendom perspective as a top-down authoritarian mandate given by a ruler to subordinates at Vatican II. The reality is much more encompassing of the collaborative nature of Vatican II, uniquely understood in how participants spent time together during the council when not in official meetings and discussions. When all sixteen of the documents of Vatican II are considered, not just *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, one does not get the impression that reaching out to non-Christians, separated Christians, cultures around the world, and the Catholic Church’s call to mission is simply an option but an encouragement to adapt to different circumstances. For example, the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) posits the different options for the entrance chant not to simply affirm a hierarchy of musics but to allow the music to adapt to the congregation and situation present.

The use of Latin provides the framework from which to integrate the vernacular. Using the concept of *Ressourcement*, the French theology of the mid-twentieth century prioritized

early sources of the Catholic Church to bring about change through precedent, and the use of Latin as the official church language lends itself to using other languages. Lang writes the following: “It has been argued that the use of Latin did not raise an impenetrable barrier to popular understanding of and participation in the Mass. In the Romance-speaking countries, where the vernacular developed from Latin, there was a basic understanding at least of the meaning conveyed in liturgical texts, and this was so even among the lesser educated, at least if they chose to follow attentively” (Lang 2017, p. 110).

The focus on language is only a part of the picture concerning vernacular language. As many modes of participation exist within any setting, the vernacular becomes wider, encompassing different mediums such as art and architecture and, for our purposes, music. Frank Senn writes the following:

The laity have always found ways to participate in the liturgy, whether it was in their language or not, and they have always derived meaning from the liturgy, whether it was the intended meaning or not. Furthermore, the laity in worship were surrounded by other ‘vernaculars’ than language, not least of which were the church buildings themselves and the liturgical art that decorated them.

(Senn 2006, p. 145)

9. Conclusions

The use of the vernacular in liturgy encompasses a broad spectrum of musical styles, instrumentation, cultural practices, and languages. The shift to the vernacular marks a reversal of the nineteenth-century Romanization of the Mass, restoring linguistic and cultural diversity to Catholic worship. This process of inculturation, particularly evident in multilingual liturgies, such as the *Misa Campesina*, has contributed to the development of a liberationist theology rooted in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. Central to this theological framework is the recognition that the freedom offered by Christ extends beyond spiritual salvation to include liberation from poverty and oppression.

Multilingual vernacular liturgies serve as a tangible expression of the “New Evangelization”, emphasizing the active participation of the laity in the liturgy. By incorporating local languages and cultural elements, these liturgies not only affirm the identity of worshipping communities but also reinforce the Church’s commitment to social justice and inclusivity, aligning with the principles established at Vatican II.

Within this framework, poverty and violence are not seen as divinely ordained conditions of a rigid caste system but rather as systemic injustices that disproportionately benefit a privileged few. By integrating the vernacular, the liturgy becomes not only a more profound expression of cultural identity but also a means of articulating the historical struggles of the Nicaraguan people. This vision of liberation does not seek violent retribution but rather the dignification of the oppressed, aligning with the principles set forth at Vatican II and reaffirmed at the Medellín Conference.

The use of vernacular languages and musics in the liturgy embodies this theological vision, allowing the Catholic Church to be fully present within diverse linguistic and cultural contexts while maintaining its universality. As a result, vernacular liturgies offer a rich field for further study, particularly as an intersectional approach within liturgical studies, highlighting the dynamic relationship between faith, culture, and social justice.

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Notes

- ¹ AG, section 2.
- ² Father Uwe Michael Lang, “Trent and its Liturgical Reform: The Council Debates and Decrees”, <https://adoremus.org/2024/12/trent-and-its-liturgical-reform-the-council-debates-and-decrees-part-iii/> (accessed on 1 January 2025).
- ³ *Tra le Solitudini*, section 2.
- ⁴ Ibid., section 11.
- ⁵ SC, section 37.
- ⁶ SC, section 10.
- ⁷ SC, section 5.
- ⁸ “Documentos finales de Medellín”, Proyecto Ensayo Hispánico, last modified 2015, <https://www.ensayistas.org/critica/liberacion/medellin/medellin9.htm> (accessed on 2 January 2025).
- ⁹ Translated by the author.
- ¹⁰ “Documentos finales de Medellín”, Proyecto Ensayo Hispánico, last modified 2015, <https://www.ensayistas.org/critica/liberacion/medellin/medellin10.htm> (accessed on 2 January 2025).
- ¹¹ See note 9 above.
- ¹² Translated to “fucking guitars” (Gordillo 2021, p. 70).
- ¹³ My English translation is based on the Spanish text found in Carlos Mejía Godoy and Pablo Martínez Téllez, *Misa campesina nicaragüense*, text of mass (Nicaragua, after 1977).
- ¹⁴ Compiled from (Gordillo 2021, p. 60; Colman 2021, p. 24).
- ¹⁵ See note 9 above.

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