SILENT HOMILIES

Amen

The word we borrowed and never gave back



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Little Treasures

Amen

The word we borrowed and never gave back

Before You Begin

†

You have said it thousands of times. At the end of the Our Father. When the priest finishes a prayer and the church answers. When someone at the table says grace and the children, if they are listening, join in. It is one of the shortest words in the language, and most of us learned it before we knew it was a word from somewhere else.

Amen did not begin in English. It did not begin in Latin. It is Hebrew, and the Church kept it. She could have said "so be it" and moved on. She did not. This little book is about what she kept, and what you are doing when you say it.

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Chapter 1

The Word We Kept

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Amen comes from a Hebrew root that has to do with being firm. The same family of words is used for something you can lean on, for a person who is reliable, for a statement that will still be true in the morning. When a congregation in the Old Testament answered Amen, they were not adding a polite full stop. They were saying that they stood under the words they had just heard.

You can hear it in Deuteronomy, when the people answer Amen to the curses and the blessings read out before them. You can hear it when the books of the Psalms and the prayers of the assembly close with it. By the time of Jesus it is already at home in Jewish prayer. He does not invent it. He uses it, and then he uses it in a way that makes people look up.

Christianity inherited the word and did not give it back. Greek-speaking Christians kept it. Latin-speaking Christians kept it. We kept it. That is the odd fact at the centre of this book. We translated almost everything else.

Reflection

A borrowed word can become so familiar that you forget it was a loan. Amen is like that. It sits in an English sentence and does not look foreign, which is exactly why it is worth noticing. The Church decided, century after century, that this syllable was worth keeping in the original.

Next time you hear it, you do not have to make a study of it. Just notice that you are using a word older than the parish, older than English, and still doing the same work: standing under what has just been said.

A practice for today

At Mass this Sunday, listen for the first Amen that is not yours. Let it land before you join it.

A short prayer

Lord, make our Amen as firm as the word You gave us. Amen.

Chapter 2

Why We Did Not Translate It

†

"So be it" is close. "Truly" is close. "Yes" is close. None of them quite carries the whole load. "So be it" can sound like resignation, as if you are putting up with whatever comes. "Truly" is about the truth of a statement. "Yes" is agreement. Amen has been used for all three, and also for something slightly larger: I stand by this. I put my weight on it.

The Church has not been fussy about every word. She translates the Gospels into the language people speak. She has been unwilling to let this one go, in the same way she has kept Alleluia and Hosanna. They already carried a history, and a local word would have been accurate without carrying the same one.

You can see the same instinct in a family. Some words stay in the language they were first said in, because that is how a grandmother said them, and a translation would be correct and not quite hers. The Church's reason is larger than nostalgia. The word had already been prayed by Israel, and by the apostles, and by the churches Justin Martyr describes. Translating it would have broken a link with the people who had already prayed it.

Reflection

There are promises you do not paraphrase. A couple at a wedding do not say "something along the lines of I will." They say the words. Amen has become one of those words for the Church. Close is not the same as kept.

If you have ever tried to explain a family saying to somebody who was not there when it started, you know the feeling. You can give the meaning. You still want them to hear the original.

A practice for today

Once today, say the English meaning under your breath after you say Amen, so you hear both.

A short prayer

Faithful God, keep us from thinning the words You have already filled. Amen.

Chapter 3

The God of Amen

†

Isaiah speaks of the God of Amen. English Bibles often say "the God of truth," which is fair, because that is what the word is doing there. It is a way of saying that God's reliability is so much the heart of who He is that a word for firmness can stand in for it. He does not say a thing and then reconsider.

St Paul picks up the same thread in the second letter to the Corinthians. The promises of God, he says, find their Yes in Christ. That is why we say the Amen through Him, to the glory of God. Paul thinks of the congregation's Amen as the Church joining the Yes that God has already spoken in His Son, rather than as a decoration on the end of a prayer.

Revelation calls Christ "the Amen," the faithful and true witness. That is a startling use of a word we mostly treat as punctuation. The last book of the Bible takes the response and makes it a name. The one we answer to is Himself the answer that does not fail.

Reflection

Most of our promises are a bit provisional. We mean them, and then the week happens. The Gospel's claim is that there is one promise that is not like that. Christ's Amen does not depend on our mood. Ours leans on His.

When your own yes feels thin, you are not being asked to pretend it is made of iron. You are being asked to attach it to a Yes that was spoken before you got here.

A practice for today

Read 2 Corinthians 1:20 once, slowly, before you sleep.

A short prayer

Lord Jesus, You are the Amen. Hold the promises we keep dropping. Amen.

Chapter 4

Amen at the Beginning

†

Most of us think Amen belongs at the end. You pray, and then you close. Jesus often does the opposite. In the Gospels He begins sayings with it. "Amen, I say to you." In John it is doubled: "Amen, amen." Scholars have noticed for a long time that this opening use is His. Other teachers did not stake a sentence that way.

What is He doing? Before the sentence arrives, He is telling them that what follows can take their weight. He is not waiting to see whether the crowd will agree afterwards. The firmness is at the front. You do not get to wait and see whether the saying will be convenient.

That is why the doubled form in John feels so steady. It is the same word, said twice, because the truth He is about to speak does not need the crowd's permission to be solid. We still mostly say Amen at the end, and that is right. It helps to know that the Lord we are answering sometimes put it first.

Reflection

There is a kind of faith that waits to see how a thing turns out before it will commit. Jesus' opening Amen is the other shape. The truth is firm before you have decided what to do with it.

You will meet this in ordinary life. A hard word from the Gospel does not become softer because you have not said Amen yet. Saying Amen is how you come into line with something that was already reliable.

A practice for today

When you read one saying of Jesus today, pause before it and remember that He often began there.

A short prayer

Lord, teach us to trust the word before we have managed it. Amen.

Chapter 5

The Great Amen

†

At Mass the Eucharistic Prayer ends with the doxology. Through Him, and with Him, and in Him. The priest lifts the Body and Blood of Christ. And the people answer with the Great Amen. It is called great because of where it stands, not because it has to be loud. Justin Martyr, writing in Rome around the year 155, already describes it. The one who presides prays. The people answer Amen.

That is worth sitting with. The word you said last Sunday was already the people's part in the second century. Justin is not writing a romance. He is explaining Christian worship to an outsider, and the Amen is one of the details he thinks worth mentioning. The prayer has been offered. The church takes it as its own.

This is why one person can pray aloud and the rest can answer. The Amen makes the prayer common. You were not the one who chose the words. You are the one who stood under them. In the Roman rite that answer at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer is the congregation's great assent to everything that has just been done.

Reflection

You can say Amen to a prayer you did not write. That is one of the ordinary mercies of belonging to a church. Somebody else carried the sentences. You agreed to stand under them for a moment.

If your mind was in the car park when the doxology came, you are in a large crowd. Nobody needs a speech about it. Be there for the next one, and mean the word when it arrives.

A practice for today

At the next Mass, do not reach for your coat during the doxology. Say the Amen on purpose.

A short prayer

Father, receive the Amen we add to the prayer of Your Son. Amen.

Chapter 6

The Body of Christ. Amen.

†

There is another Amen, and it may be the one you have said most often without hearing it. The minister holds the Host and says, "The Body of Christ." You answer, "Amen," and you receive. It can sound like "yes, thank you." It is more than that. You are saying that what you have just been told is true, and that you are willing to be involved in it.

St Ambrose, teaching people in Milan who were about to receive, put it very plainly. You hear that it is the Body of Christ, and you answer Amen, that is, it is true. What the mouth says, he tells them, the heart should hold. He is not giving them a new ceremony. He is telling them what the ceremony they already have is for.

St Augustine says something nearby, and it is not the same sentence, so it should not be folded into Ambrose. Preaching to the newly baptised, he tells them that they answer Amen to what they are. They are the Body of Christ. They receive the Body of Christ. Be what you see, he says, and receive what you are. One Father is talking about the truth of the Sacrament. The other is talking about the Church you are joining by receiving it. Both belong. They are not one quotation.

Reflection

Of course we should receive Holy Communion with attention and reverence. Preparation matters, and a distracted queue is not what the Church hopes for. But Christ does not become more present because I am having a particularly devout morning. My Amen does not make Him the Body of Christ. It is my answer to what He has already given.

If you have said it for forty years without stopping on it, you have not been fraudulent. You have been hurried. The word will still be there next Sunday, waiting to be said at full size.

A practice for today

Before you receive next time, hear the minister's words as a statement you are about to affirm.

A short prayer

Lord, let my Amen at Communion be as honest as the gift. Amen.

Chapter 7

At a Baptism, and After Confession

†

At a baptism the Amen comes from more people than the child. Parents answer. Godparents answer. The church answers. The child, if he is small, does not yet have the word. That is not a gap in the sacrament. It is the shape of it. Somebody else stands there and says the yes the child will later be asked to live. The child does not make the sacrament happen by answering. Christ is already at work in the Baptism the Church celebrates, with water and the words of the Trinity. The Amen is the family's public agreement with what God is doing.

Confession is quieter. You have said the difficult thing. The priest has spoken the words of absolution. And somewhere in that short rite there is an Amen, yours or his, closing the prayer. It is easy to miss, because you are thinking about the thing you just admitted. The Amen does not make the absolution work. Christ has already spoken mercy through the priest. Your Amen is how you receive that mercy, instead of walking to the car still arguing about whether you can really be forgiven.

The two moments are different, and they rhyme. At the font, other people say Amen over a life that has not yet learned the word. In the confessional, you say it over a mercy you did not earn. In both places the word is doing the same sort of work. It stands under a sentence God has spoken.

Reflection

Parents sometimes worry that they answered for a child who may later walk away. The answer at the font was never a guarantee of the child's mood at twenty. It was an agreement to tell the truth, to pray, and to bring him to the Church that can carry him when he cannot carry himself.

If you have not been to Confession for a long time, the Amen at the end is a good reason to go, not a reason to wait until you feel firmer. You borrow the firmness. That is what the word is for.

A practice for today

If you are a godparent, say the child's name once today and mean the Amen you gave.

A short prayer

Lord, hold the yes we spoke for those who could not speak it yet. Amen.

Chapter 8

At a Wedding and a Graveside

†

A marriage is full of Amens that nobody planned as a set piece. The church answers the prayers. People answer the nuptial blessing. Two people have just promised something that will have to be true on a Wednesday in ten years, and the congregation's Amen is not decoration. It is the parish agreeing to treat those promises as real. You do not usually think of it that way when you are looking for your coat.

A graveside is the same word in a different weather. The prayers are said. People answer Amen, sometimes thickly, sometimes because it is the only word they can still manage. It does not tidy the death. It says that the Church's prayer over this body, and this hope of resurrection, is a prayer they are willing to stand under. Hope, at a grave, is not a feeling. It is a word you say when the feeling has gone.

The rites are not identical in every country, and the exact responses vary. What does not vary is the moment itself. A community answers. That answer is older than the family that is crying.

Reflection

Promises and burials both ask for witnesses. Amen is one of the ways the Church witnesses without making a speech. You may not be asked to give an address. You may be asked to say one syllable as if you meant it.

If you have stood at the back of a funeral and mouthed it, you were still part of the answer. Next time, if you can, let it be audible. The family can hear the difference between a crowd that is present and a crowd that has agreed.

A practice for today

If you know a couple who were married in church, pray one Hail Mary for them and finish it properly.

A short prayer

Lord of the living, hold the promises and the dead we have commended to You. Amen.

Chapter 9

At the Table and the Sink

†

Grace before a meal is where most children meet Amen. Somebody says the prayer. Everybody is supposed to answer. Somebody is looking at the potatoes. The word still counts. A family that answers, even briefly, is doing a small version of what the church does at Mass: one voice prays, the others take it as theirs.

The same word turns up in less arranged places. A woman says the Rosary while she washes up, and the Amen at the end of each prayer is quieter than the tap. A man prays in the car and loses the end of the sentence at a junction. These are not inferior Amens. They are Amens said in a life, which is where most prayer actually happens.

Children often get there first. They learn that this is the noise the family makes when a prayer stops, and they shout it, sometimes too early. That is not irreverent. It is somebody who has understood that the word belongs to all of them, not only to the person who was speaking.

Reflection

A distracted Amen is still an Amen. It is not what we would choose if the house were quiet, but it is the truth of a house with children in it. You can aim at something more attentive without despising the ordinary version.

If grace has died out at your table, one sentence and an Amen will bring it back. A short grace is enough, so long as more than one voice is in it.

A practice for today

Say grace once today, even if you are eating alone, and do not swallow the Amen.

A short prayer

Bless us, Lord, at the table and at the sink. Amen.

Chapter 10

The Mumbled Parish

†

Not every Amen in a parish is a triumph. Some are late. Some are private. An elderly voice gets quieter, and the word is still there. A teenager says it because everyone else did. A man in the middle of the bench is thinking about Monday. The Church has never required a perfect interior symphony before she will accept the answer. She asks for the answer.

There is a risk, and it is ordinary. A word said for years can become a noise. Justin's Romans were not immune to that, and neither are we. What it needs is attention. We do not need a new word. You already have the old one. It wakes up when you remember what you are standing under.

Accents differ. A Polish Amen, a Welsh one, a whispered one, a sung one: the Church did not standardise the music of it. She kept the syllable. You can be at home in a church where you do not know the hymns and still know when you are being asked to agree.

Reflection

Do not wait until you feel devout before you answer. Devotion often arrives after the word, not before it. A mumbled parish is still a parish. What would be sad is a church that had nothing left to stand under.

If your own Amen has gone quiet with age or with tiredness, you have not lost the right to it. The people around you are answering with you, even when they cannot hear you.

A practice for today

At Mass, answer one Amen clearly enough for the person beside you to hear.

A short prayer

Lord, take the Amen we mumble, and do not despise it. Amen.

Chapter 11

The Amen You Should Not Say

†

There are prayers you should not underwrite. Amen means you are willing to stand there. If the words just spoken were cruel, or untrue, or a curse dressed up as piety, silence is the honest response. The Church's Amen is an agreement with her prayer, not a habit of agreeing with every religious sentence you hear.

This comes up in ordinary life more than in liturgy. Somebody says, "Well, these things are sent to try us," over a grief that is simply grief, and waits for you to bless the sentence. You do not have to. Somebody uses God to settle an argument they were already going to win. Leaving the Amen out is not rudeness. It is a way of staying accurate.

At Mass the prayers are the Church's, and the Amen belongs. Away from that, you are allowed to think before you join. A word that means firmness should not be used for something that will not hold.

Reflection

Refusing a false Amen is a kind of respect for the true one. If you say it over everything, you have made it a noise. The people in Deuteronomy were answering a specific word, not the weather.

You can still pray for the person whose sentence you would not endorse. You can still be kind to them without agreeing.

A practice for today

Once this week, notice an Amen you are about to give out of politeness, and do not give it.

A short prayer

Lord, keep our yes for what is true. Amen.

Chapter 12

When Someone Else Must Say It

†

There comes a point when a person cannot answer. Illness, unconsciousness, the last hours, a child who has not learned to speak, a man who has lost his words. The Church does not stop praying because the voice in the bed has stopped. At Viaticum, at Anointing, at the prayers beside the dying, somebody else carries the sentences. Often somebody else carries the Amen.

It is the same shape as baptism. The Church has always believed that a person can be carried by the prayer of the body they belong to. Your Amen at Mass, said for years, is part of what the Church draws on when you cannot say it. The communion of saints includes the famous dead, and it also includes the living parish answering for the one who is silent.

If you have sat by a bed and said Amen because they could not, you have already done the theology. You did not replace them. You stood where they had stood, in a Church that does not require a working voice before she will pray.

Reflection

A family that answers for someone is not pretending the person agreed with every detail. They are refusing to leave him outside the prayer. That is a decent reading of belonging.

And if it is you, one day, who cannot speak, the Amens you said in the kitchen and at the back of the church will not have been wasted. Other people will still know the word.

A practice for today

Pray tonight for someone who cannot answer, and say the Amen aloud for them.

A short prayer

Lord, receive the Amen we speak for the silent. Amen.

A Last Word

†

You will say it again before the week is out. That is the point of a word like this. It does not need a new explanation every time. It needs, now and then, to be heard.

So be it is close. Truly is close. Yes is close. Amen is the one the Church kept, because Israel had already prayed it, and Christ had already used it, and a Roman congregation had already answered with it while the Eucharist was still new.

Say it at the end. Remember that He sometimes said it at the beginning. And when the Host is lifted to you, let it be the true word, not only the polite one.

Sources and Further Reading

†

Scripture: Deuteronomy 27; Isaiah 65:16; Psalms and the liturgical use of Amen; 2 Corinthians 1:20; the Gospels, especially the opening "Amen, I say to you," and the doubled form in John; Revelation 3:14. Hebrew amen, from the root related to firmness, reliability and faithfulness.

St Justin Martyr, First Apology 65 and 67, on the people's Amen after the prayer of the one who presides, Rome, mid-second century. St Ambrose, On the Sacraments 4.25: the communicant hears that it is the Body of Christ and answers Amen, that is, it is true. St Augustine, Sermon 272: the newly baptised answer Amen to what they are, and are told to be what they see and receive what they are. These are kept separate on purpose.

The Roman Missal and the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, on the people's Amen at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer and on the dialogue at Communion. Rites of Baptism, Marriage, Penance, Pastoral Care of the Sick and Christian Funerals, where the assembly's Amen varies by edition and country and is not quoted here as a single fixed text.

You Have Already Said Amen

†

Amen may be the shortest word in this book. Finding out what it has carried takes longer. Somebody has to read the Hebrew, check Justin and Ambrose and Augustine, and refuse the quotation that was never said.

These pages are free to read. A gift is not payment for them, and it is not payment for a prayer, a blessing, or a grace. Nothing here is exchanged for a spiritual favour. They are already yours. What a gift adds, if you are able to give one through the Silent Homilies website, is time and means for the next one: the research, the writing and the rewriting, the checking, the editing, the design.

If you have stayed to the end, thank you. You already know what the word is for. If you can also help the next little book to be written, I would be truly grateful. If you cannot give, nothing is owed. Pass this one to somebody who has been saying the word all their life and has never been told where it came from. www.silenthomilies.com

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