

The Pope's Latinist

By Patrick Harvey

It is Holy Week in 1974. The faithful are gathered beneath the majestic arches of the crypt church of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. Within the crowd, there is a man, a young professor of history, straining to hear the bishop's sermon. Although the professor spent two rigorous years with the Trappists in Virginia, when everything was in Latin, his Latin is a little rusty, so he has to strain to understand. The Latin is perfectly period, and the vocabulary still mostly medieval, with the grammar and syntax leaning more toward the classical period, dating it, for those in-the-know, to the early Renaissance. Bishop Fallani's diction is practiced and smooth, and he hardly glances at the notes before him. This little exercise is hardly worthy of note from a man who was called on not even ten years ago to address the Vatican Council in Latin and whose entire formal education was conducted in Latin. Dr. Riley is impressed and, despite himself, whispers to the man sitting next to him, "This guy is pretty good!"

The sermon is in Latin because in addition to the mysteries of Holy Week, the faithful are gathered to pay tribute to Francis Petrarch on the 700th anniversary of his death. Many scholars simply regard Petrarch's life as coterminous with the Renaissance, beginning with his birth in 1304 and ending with his death in 1374. He was one of the principal causes for that great revival of Latin learning that continued almost unabated for centuries, but finally began to wane during the last century. The Mass is given in Holy Week because Holy Week was the central point of Petrarch's life; the archbishop represents the pope, to whom Petrarch was also devoted. The mood is perfect; everything about the occasion is calculated to evoke some element of Petrarch's life half a world away in Italy.

Petrarch's Rome

Rome was much beloved by Petrarch and the subject of a collection of letters he sent to the popes of Avignon trying to convince them to return to their ancestral home. They speak so eloquently of the beauties of Rome as to be suitable to this day for the Roman tourist bureau. How appropriate, then, that one who so admired him should occupy a sparse Vatican office, devoid of any shred of luxury, a man dressed in the brown habit of Carmel is hunched over a bare table top, bare except for a few sheets of paper that constitute his morning's labour. He mutters to himself that an archbishop should be able to handle this little bit of composition that any of his classmates in his minor seminary days back in New Hampshire could have done. He pauses for a moment as a memory flashes through his mind from those

days, himself being called on to recite Cicero from memory, a misplaced accent meriting a vicious tongue-lashing from the instructor. “Ah! Those were the glory days. Oh! How quickly things change,” he muses. Even five years ago you could still have a proper conversation in Latin around here; now you consider yourself fortunate to find someone who can still recite the *Ave Maria* correctly!

The priest, Fr. Reginald Foster, O.C.D., the newly appointed Latin secretary for Pope Paul VI, completes the composition before noon and permits himself a ray of satisfaction despite himself, for his morning assignment was to write an oration honouring Petrarch, one of his favourite historical figures, for some prominent archbishop to give back in the States.

As so often happens in history, the real significance of an event is lost in the middle of so many distractions and is only perceived with the benefit of time’s wonted clarity. We do things not really knowing why until years of winnowing away the chaff of obfuscaty make clear to us in hindsight their real meaning and importance. Fr. Foster — or just simply “Reggie” as everybody from cardinals in the Vatican to his horde of devoted students from around the world and perhaps even the pope call him — could not have known how utterly appropriate it was that he, of all people, should be the one called on to pen this tribute for Petrarch.

As Petrarch stood on one end of that great revival of letters and Latin, Reggie, considered by many to be one of Latin’s principle personages, today apparently stands on the other waning end and may well preside, through no fault of his own, over Latin’s demise. Reggie’s Latin, which is considered stellar today, would have been considered good among authors such as Augustine and Cicero, people who grew up speaking the language. He is literally one of the last products of that tremendous system of seminary education that trained centuries of young men to safeguard the truths of the faith in their common language of Latin that was so unceremoniously decimated after the council for not being relevant. When Reggie is gone, there is literally no one of his caliber to take his place. That great period of Latin renaissance — with the torch being handed down over so many centuries by great Latinists such as Sylvius Aeneas Piccolomini, better known as Pius II, to the more recent but every bit as great Leo XIII, to name a few — will finally end with no one left to carry on.

Man with a Mission

His vocation to the Carmelite order began the day he was born in the German quarter of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on November 14, the feast of All Carmelite Saints. Reggie began life in a good Catholic home where he was taught in grade school by the good Sisters of Notre Dame, about whom he talks in only the most reverent tones and whom, now in their 90s, he visits every year, as he puts it “on my knees” because of the very solid grounding they gave him in the fundamentals of the English language, making him diagram sentences in third grade. His vocation as a Carmelite took shape early on with his deep and lifelong devotion to the Blessed Mother. At age 13, he entered St. Francis Minor Seminary in Milwaukee and, at age 14, moved to the Carmelite House of Formation in Peterboro, New Hampshire. Reggie remembers those years in New Hampshire fondly and still speaks with pain about when the house was finally closed a few years ago due to a lack of vocations.

Reggie’s vocation to the Latin Office has about it the aura of predestination. In 1967, just after he was ordained a priest, as he was looking forward to a few years pursuing a doctorate at the School for Superior Latinity in Rome, some friends arranged for Reggie to meet with Cardinal Bacci in his Vatican apartment because of Reggie’s tremendous ability in Latin. A visit to a curial prelate in his Vatican apartment was then, even more so than now, an opportunity that would be talked about for the rest of one’s life. The meeting took place entirely in Latin. Were a transcript available, Latin students everywhere would ogle at this Latin of such refinement and difficulty, for which both had laboured so many hours to perfect, flowing from their lips so easily. Cardinal Bacci, sitting next to Reggie, asked him what he would do with his Latin knowledge. Reggie responded with typical humility, becoming a humble friar before a curial cardinal, saying “*Deus providebit*” (God will provide). A picture of Cardinal Bacci and Reggie was taken, and Reggie went home to savor the memories. Years later, long after Bacci had retired and Reggie had assumed his position, Reggie realized that his office was in the very room and his desk on the very spot where he was sitting when Bacci had asked him what he was going to do with his Latin.

His external appearance — he now spurns, for most occasions, his brown habit for his trademark blue, cotton work suit — has been the source of more than one case of mistaken identity. Priests of the Fraternity of Saint Peter, who say the Tridentine Mass, still chuckle about the time they asked Reggie to come to the offices of *Ecclesia Dei*, the office that administers the papal provision for the indult Mass, to help them with some transitional work. When he showed up at the appointed time, the secretary exclaimed in Italian, “Thank goodness!,” and whisked him upstairs to the bathroom,

then suffering from some sort of malady in the plumbing. The secretary was, of course, mortified when Reggie explained to her who he was.

Another time, when he was standing in front of the Gregorian University, in what can best be described as his “meditative state,” a group of German tourists, mistaking him for a homeless man, offered him money. Great was their surprise when Reggie, speaking fluent German, introduced himself as the papal Latinist and ended the matter well by treating the tourists to a mini-tour of ancient Rome.

Reggie’s home in Rome, in the very cradle of the Latin language and the heart of the Church, lies on the Janiculum Hill just behind the Vatican. He has lived in the same spartan cell up the steep Via delle Fornaci in the Carmelite residence of San Pancrazio for the past 30 years. In addition to teaching Latin at the Gregorian University, he is currently the head of the Latin office at the Vatican. Every day, he goes to his barren office, which is devoid of any sort of decoration or creature comfort, having only a table, a chair, a Latin dictionary, and a telephone relegated to a spot on the floor, and translates the pope’s “homework,” as he calls it, into Latin.

The homework comes to him in Italian every morning in a pouch, the fruit of the labours of a Polish nun of the Holy Family who first translates the texts from Polish for the Holy Father. Not that the Holy Father has any trouble with either Latin or Italian; he is perfectly fluent in both, but he prefers to write in Polish. Reggie then sends his translations back for approval. One time, the Holy Father, disapproving of one of Reggie’s translations, decided to change the wording a bit in the Latin. Reggie protested and sent it back to the Holy Father to change it back. The Holy Father ended the matter simply enough by sending the document back to Reggie with the words “*Quod Scripsi Scripsi!*” scrawled across the top, echoing the words of Pilate to the Hebrews, “What I have written, I have written.” The final documents, having been duly translated into the declensions and other assorted inflections of Reggie’s perfectly idiomatic Latin, are then published as the official versions of Church documents.

Sometimes Reggie’s Latin is a little too good for this century, which is characterized by prelates who gawk at a dollar bill and wonder what in the world “*Novus ordo seclorum*” or “*Annuit coeptis*” mean, or, as Reggie more bluntly puts it, call his office for a translation for the “*Ave Maria*”! Once, he was writing a document for Paul VI that said, “The best seminarians should be sent to Rome to study.” Reggie, with an ever-present bent toward fecundity, penned “the best” as “*robura*,” which literally means “oak trees” but can mean “the strongest or best.” Apparently, there

was some consternation when the cardinal in charge of approving the document tried to figure out why oak trees should be accorded a Roman education. The cardinal sent it back to Reggie, telling him not to write so fecundously.

The office once bustling with activity and considered a choice appointment for a cardinal well-ensconced in the papal curia — in the Vatican, it is just down the hall from the Holy Father's — is now a shell of its former glory. In keeping with the general neglect and diminished status of Latin in the Church today, the position, once actually two positions, *Secretarius Latinarum Epistularum ad Principes* (Secretary of Latin Letters to Princes) and *Secretarius ad Brevium Apostolicorum* (Secretary of Papal Documents), no longer requires a cardinal. That's just fine with Reggie, whose most wounding insult for an ambitious young cleric is “*Est cardinalis in pectore!*” (He is a cardinal in his heart). Diminished, too, is the workload, as Latin's obsolescence has necessitated using various vernacular tongues for communication. Reggie's fear is that, despite the mandates of the Second Vatican Council, the use of Latin in the Church will be relegated to certain ceremonial functions, with its utility as an instrument of communication in the Universal Church having at long last, after some 1,700 years, been extinguished.

The Terminator

In addition to being the papal Latinist, Reggie teaches Latin at the Gregorian University. His ability as a teacher is equal to his ability as a Latinist. Reggie's students, mostly seminarians and sisters studying theology at the various universities in Rome and having no Latin background, finish his three-year curriculum knowing Latin better than graduate students in classics at Ivy League schools. Many times, I saw students with seven and eight years at our finest universities visit his class and struggle through the same text that Reggie's students with only two or three years of Reggie's class were reading at sight. This is partly because Reggie knows Latin so well but also because his method of teaching the language is just better.

In class, Reggie dispenses with the traditional and arcane vocabulary by which students usually learn Latin. Among the things you don't hear in Reggie's class are things like “First person singular present indicative active of the verb ‘*amare*,’” which is the fancy way to say, “The word ‘*amo*’ means ‘I love.’” I, as a lover of the arcane—indeed, this is at least part of my own infatuation with Latin—had to grudgingly give up this time-honoured but ineffective system. Reggie doesn't want students to get too caught up in a system of terminology that is unnecessarily complicated and impedes a student's ability to learn Latin. Once, he was observing a

Latin class in a U.S. high school where a teacher asked a student for “the first person plural present subjunctive active of the verb ‘ire.’” The student understandably stammered for a moment until Reggie, much to the teacher’s chagrin, asked the student, “How do you say ‘Let’s go’ in Latin?” The student said immediately, “Oh! *Eamus!*”

It is his zeal for Latin and his disgust for teachers who seem to be less than motivated that animated him to address a convention of Latin teachers at the American Classical Academy in Rome with a verbal castigation that will be long remembered. That afternoon, he heard one Latin teacher after another articulate their various Latin teaching “heresies.” One particularly struck a chord with Reggie. The teacher didn’t have time to make up new exercises every day, so she just recycled her old ones. Reggie spends several hours every day making up his “*Ludi*,” specifically tuned to the strengths and weaknesses of a particular class. When it was Reggie’s turn to speak, he began, “Much of what I am going to say isn’t going to please you.” Never were words more truly uttered. Reggie proceeded to blast the crowd with a righteous fervour not seen since the Crusades. His fullisade caused one observer, who had wanted to meet Reggie for some time, to comment, “I came expecting to meet Mr. Chips, and I got the Terminator.”

“Energy” was the one word that Dr. Maria Marsilio said when I asked her to comment on a seminar Reggie gave at St. Joseph’s University last August. Marsilio arrived at about 7:30 a.m. to set up, only to find that he had beaten her there. Reggie then proceeded to give the conference with the intensity of a heavy metal rock band, animating every gesture, as would Knute Rockne in a half-time pep talk when Notre Dame was down against Army. He continued at this pace throughout the conference session, which lasted well into the evening.

It is precisely his personality traits that have been instrumental in his labors to keep the language from dying. Like the defender of an ancient and holy city long under siege, Reggie wages battle for his beloved Latin. For example, one day the man in charge of the Vatican’s ATM machine, which had until then faithfully dispensed its lire (thanks to Reggie by the way) in perfect Latin, ordered it to be reprogrammed to use Italian, French, Spanish, and English—but not Latin. When Reggie heard about this, he made a beeline for the official’s office, where he demanded an immediate reversal. The upshot of it all, after some rather spectacular fireworks, I am told, was a draw; the Latin was reprogrammed into the machine as the initial language, but the other languages remained.

Reggie hears Latin like we do English. In class, when we had to converse in Latin, he would grimace at our errors, as would a piano teacher at a wrong note, and instantly snap back the right form. And I do mean snap, for a misplaced verb tense to Reggie was tantamount to a desecration of Latin that was only appropriately met with righteous indignation. While most of his antics in the classroom are just simply a vehicle for teaching, there is no doubt that he has a deep love for the language.

The Lone Torchbearer

Despite the many stories about Reggie's eccentricities, which are mostly overblown, he maintains an extremely rigorous and disciplined lifestyle and, true to his Carmelite heritage, practices contemplation. I have been to Mass on several occasions, and every time when he is the celebrant, as he pronounces the words of consecration, he exudes a sense of reverence and of being in the presence of God. I have encountered him several times while walking in Rome, and if he is alone, he is usually in very deep meditation. Anyone who has ever spent a day in Rome will quickly recognize this as a minor miracle, given the frenetic pace of Roman traffic through which one must wade with gaggles of youth buzzing perilously close on their *motorini*.

I am constantly amazed and edified as I read history and see how so often precisely the right person seems to materialize for precisely the right job. Reggie, in this age of Latin neglect, reads, writes, and, yes, speaks Latin better than anyone in the world today. He is about as perfectly placed in his job as Latin secretary at the Vatican as you could imagine. In addition to his proficiency Latin, his personality is just right for the job. Reggie is far from some effete classicist, pale and undernourished from too many years burrowed away in some dimly lit library researching the frequency of use of the enclitic "ve" in the corpus of Cicero's letters to Atticus. A portly man of 60 or so, bald, and with a booming voice more appropriate to a drill sergeant or an offensive line coach than a cultivated man of letters, he would seem more at ease with a mason's trowel than a Latinist's pen. His boyhood as the son of a Milwaukee plumber has never left him during his 40-plus years as a Carmelite in Rome. His anything-but-weak personality and phenomenal energy have been instrumental in his role in keeping Latin from the dustbin of history.

Whether the language may persevere now in its former context is in serious doubt. There is just simply no one left after Reggie who has been educated in Latin as he was. Vatican II is, without a doubt, responsible for an almost instantaneous and unilateral decline in the use and knowledge of Latin. Far beyond the discontinuance of Latin in the Catholic liturgy, the centuries-old, Latin-based system of education for priests fell to the axe of *aggiornamento*. Even in the 35 years since the council,

the day-to-day operation of the Church, from heated debates among Vatican prelates over *Ostpolitik* to the idle chatter over coffee in the morning in the Vatican refectory, has been affected. But for the efforts of this one man, Latin, after a glorious 2,500-year history, would doubtless be dead.