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A Lutheran Goes to Rome

JOHN NORDLING



AESTIVA ROMAE LATINITAS (SUMMER LATIN in Rome) is not any kind of “crash course or rushed Latin nightmare,” said the program brochure, but rather a “complete and direct, concrete and gradual experience of the entire Latin language itself . . . covering the past 2200 years.” It has been held in Rome for eight weeks every summer since 1985, and I went abroad to experience Latin in the manner described from June 4 to July 16, 1997. As a Latin professor who had never been to Rome before, I was in need of a cultural encounter with the lands and peoples about which I teach.

There were other ways of getting to Italy for summer study, of course: NEH grant possibilities, an archaeological site experience in Rome and Naples, an arrangement with the American Academy in Rome. But each of these had application requirements or stipulations that, I felt, were less than ideal for me at present. A former Latin professor of mine had attended Summer Latin in Rome several years ago and raved about it. It was an opportunity to study the Latin language itself on location, in the heart of the ancient empire. The man who had organized Summer Latin was Father Reginald T. Foster, raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in a typically American Catholic home. By a set of curiously interlocked circumstances, however, young Reginald had come to excel in Latin at precisely the same time as the Catholic Church was reducing Latin’s significance in the mass and in the academic curriculum. Now he serves in the Vatican as the head of a small college of churchly Latinists who convene each day to translate papal documents into a Latin prose that rivals that of Cicero. Thus, in addition to the intensive Latin encounter six days per week, seven hours per day, participants could also tour the monuments of Rome, Latin texts in hand. My heart was set: I had to go. Actually purchasing a round-trip ticket to Rome gave point to my last-minute requests for more money and helped my wife, Sara, and me to plan our summer, six weeks of which would be spent apart from each other. The day of departure came, and off I flew.

THE FIRST FEW DAYS = *DE PRIMIS DIEBUS*

I came to Rome five days before Summer Latin began so that I could experience Rome on my own terms. One commonplace of ancient and medieval biography is that of the wandering pilgrim

or scribe who finally encounters Rome for the first time. How will my direct encounter with “the city” (as the ancients designated Rome in antiquity, simply *urbs*) compare to the image of Rome in my mind, shaped by Latin texts for many years? The writings of Augustine, Jerome, Aquinas, Luther, Gibbon, *et multi alii* record such Rome encounters, and I had envisioned a similar process of discovery for myself.

Thus I spent the first few days of *my* pilgrimage sleeping off jet-lag, seeing the touristy things Father Reginald would likely not want to spend time on later, and walking just about everywhere to orient myself to this impossibly huge, crowded, and overwhelming city. In those first few days I saw the Colosseum, Campidoglio, Piazza Venezia, Pantheon, Trevi Fountain, Spanish Steps, Castel Sant’ Angelo, and the church of Santa Maria degli Angeli. I had seen none of it before and could not risk missing any of these places due to obligations imposed later by the Latin instruction. Rome struck me as a typical modern city such as exists also in America (Chicago, for example)—with the important difference that there is in Rome a curious symbiosis between things ancient and modern. One can expect at any moment to turn a corner and find crumbling Servian Walls (378 B.C.), columns of a temple built right into a modern substructure, Latin inscriptions above any one of the open fountains flowing free as in the ancient manner (there are few “drinking fountains” in Rome), a Catholic priest hurrying off to mass or to hear confession. I enjoyed transcribing Latin inscriptions into a notebook kept for that purpose. Latin writing is everywhere, even on the most modern of buildings. By copying these contrived texts, and trying (not always successfully) to decipher their subtle meanings, I preserved them for future students and prepared myself for the eventual encounter with Father Reginald.

That meeting occurred on June 9, in front of the Basilica San Pancrazio, located on the Janiculum Hill of Rome. A group of perhaps forty-five people surrounded a stout, red-complected man whose blue eyes glowed piercingly from deep within a balding skull. Instead of priestly garb he wore denim dungarees and a long-sleeved work shirt buttoned all the way up, so that he seemed to exude sweat from every pore in the blazing sun. *This* was Father Reginald = *Ecce! Pater Reginaldus est*. As I walked up and joined the group, Father Reginald was engaged in a frequently self-interrupted roll call, enjoying old friends and making new while checking the names of newcomers against a master list. Fortunately, said he, the Latin proof-sheets submitted

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months ago had already “scared off and eliminated” some participants (nervous twittering at this); then too, of the ninety to one hundred applicants from throughout the world who had expressed an interest lately, it was only to be expected that half or fewer would actually commit themselves to studying Latin in Rome for several weeks during the hot summer. So *perhaps* there might be room for us after all. In a few minutes we would cross the street and “begin immediately . . . [glimpsing] the whole Latin language, in active and passive exercises and fun, from the first hour” (final letter to participants, April 1997). And that is exactly what happened.

DAILY INSTRUCTION = *DE* *INSTITUTIONE COTTIDIANA*

The hours of Latin instruction were to take place in a children’s school run by the Sisters of the Divine Love, a teaching order located in Italy and Peru. All forty to sixty people who might comprise the Latin group at any one time (participants, sweethearts, occasional parents, friends from previous years, and curious hangers-on) would convene in the school’s auditorium, seated at desks and tables sized to elementary school-aged children. It was hot in there, and noisy, but Reginald thought street noises and children screeching outside honed the ear to listen more carefully to instructions spoken in both Latin and English—rather the way children were taught the Latin language long ago, right off some busy thoroughfare. Instruction for the *Iuniores* (“Junior Latinists”) would begin each day at *hora secunda post meridiem* (2 P.M.), Father Reginald explained, and would extend until 3:30 P.M., at which time there would be an *intervalum* of perhaps thirty minutes. At 4 P.M. instruction began for mixed Juniors and Seniors, and at 6 P.M., for the *Seniores*. Of course, participants were free to attend any or all of the sessions they desired, regardless of ability, but teaching would be adjusted to the two levels identified. For those who could not get enough at the regular sessions, there was the more informal setting known as *sub arboribus* (“Under the Trees”) where, from 8 P.M. to dark, the really hard-core Latinists could gather around a jug of wine, randomly chosen texts, and spoken Latin fellowship as the sun sank upon the darkening hills.

What is needed now are teachers who courageously dare to have students read, speak, and even think living Latin thoughts.

No textbook existed for any of the sessions. Each time he teaches a Latin course, Father Reginald ransacks monastic libraries and archives to bring together a great chorus of Latin texts and authors from throughout the ages. It would be tedious to list them all, but for our reading pleasure he had assembled a *few* rarely read “classical” texts (for example, Cicero letters, Lucan, Publius Syrus, Plautus), and a *lot* more ecclesiastical Latin texts from every

period of church history (Vulgate, hagiographies, papal pronouncements, chanted canticles, medical texts, epitaphs, abecedaria, and more). Fifty-four sheets *in toto* had been prepared, each sheet twice the size of a legal pad, and completely covered with fine Latin script on one side. “Lest we run out,” Father Reginald said. “And there’s a *lot* more where that came from!”

Such a vast collage seemed to suggest that there is much more Latin in the world than any one person can possibly read, even in a lifetime so completely devoted to Latinity as Father Reginald’s has been. Yet Latinists ought to become aware of this abundance because it will all be so excellent, superb, brilliant, and worthwhile for our students (evaluations proffered by Reginald, no matter the text). What has *hurt* the study of Latin everywhere is the emergence within Latin literature of so-called classic texts that all readers of the language are expected to “master.” This has led to an unfortunate emphasis upon the rote memorization of standard forms for their own sake, boring vocabulary and grammar shoved at students for many years, so that *perhaps eventually* one may slog through the same hackneyed passages of Virgil’s *Aeneid* or Caesar as one’s own pitiable ancestors did. What is needed now in the successful teaching of the language, fulminated Father on more than one occasion, are teachers who courageously dare to have students read, speak, and even think *living Latin thoughts* from day one! Put the “standard texts” away and pull out something else (there’s so much from which to choose!). Allow your students to see that Latin has had many forms and colors and textures, like music resounding down through the ages. So if they are having trouble with Bach and Haydn (cf. Cicero and Caesar), let them indulge in the language’s other styles and textures and rhythms. They’ll like this approach and teach themselves the forms and grammar with which we used to punish them. *Get out of the way*, O stodgy Latin professor, and trust that the Latin language itself will motivate, heal, convert, and inspire your diverse students just as it always has, long before *you* came along! Know what texts to use and how to present them, but allow your students to rise to the high level Latin requires. They will rise, you know; they have to. Trust me in this: *Credite id mihi!*

Frequent tirades along these lines were intended—obviously—for the Latin teachers of our group, and Reginald’s whole attitude implied that if you weren’t teaching Latin yet you soon would be; it was thus the sacred duty of each of us to export *Latinitas* to the four corners of the world, like triumphing legionnaires in Caesar’s army. Quite a few of the participants *were* in fact high school or college teachers, graduate students seeking to internalize the language, and undergraduates from throughout the United States who contemplated a career in classics. But not everyone fit this profile. Several more were Roman Catholic parish priests, monks, seminarians-in-training, and area students attracted to Summer Latin from the Gregorian University in Rome (Reginald teaches there during the academic year). One was a Supreme Court Justice from Sydney, Australia, and four or five hailed from the great universities of England. About the same number of Germans attended, striving to add English as much as Latin to their arsenal of active languages.

A young Russian named Igor knew at least five modern languages fluently: English, Russian, French, German, Italian. Although he looked like Mick Jagger, and still supports himself

occasionally as a musician in a rock band, Igor was preparing to take monastic vows and needed Latin to understand the divine liturgy. Igor thought that the mass should always be conducted in Latin, no matter where public Christian worship may occur on earth. Always trying to *understand* the mysteries of the mass, to *get a lot out* of the service, to *like* the sermon are annoying Protestant intrusions that should be recognized as such and so expunged. If worshipers need to *understand*, let us prepare a vernacular translation of the mass and place it in a parallel column beside the superior Latin vocables, averred Igor during one informal discussion outside of class. The beauty and the majesty of the mass will sustain the worshipers, elevating them from petty contemporaneity to worship that is timeless, holy, and eternal.

During that same discussion Father Reginald told the idealistic Igor not only that he disagreed with such views himself, but that Igor was *crazy* for holding them: *amentissimus es!* (“You are quite out of your mind!”). Father Reginald enjoyed locking horns with people on any subject, tossing his own flamboyant ideas into some mix without taking himself or an antagonist too seriously. Only Latin mattered, and this for its own sake; all other opinions, convictions, and even heresies could be tolerated, provided only that they contribute positively to the learning environment. Texts were not to be studied beforehand (as in most Latin classrooms) but approached spontaneously, as if for the first time. Reginald would help with the problem areas, but he was far more interested in our coming to terms with the fine points of a Latin passage, or appreciating a style, than simply deciphering broadly what it meant. Any text provided an opportunity to understand the Latin language inside and out. Therefore, actually *say*, in Latin, the passive of that active form, the plural of that singular. How might that verb sound in the subjunctive mood? in the indicative? What would it look like in the infinitive, future active participle, gerundive, supine? If given this English sentence (“He loved the Latin language the older he became”), Latinize it *now* and do so *correctly!* After the shock of such confrontation before fifty pairs of staring eyes, the mind would kick in and Latin would come welling forth from deep inside: *Latinam eo magis amabat linguam, quo senior fit.* “Good!” Father Reginald would beam. “You can’t go any further in Latin than that!” It was supremely gratifying to survive a Father Reginald barrage with some trace of dignity intact by providing correct, rapid-fire answers to each one of his questions. But those who put on airs of Latin superiority could be humbled, quickly. He knew each Latinist’s name and breaking point by the end of the first week, encouraging the weak, challenging the strong, ignoring no one. Our collective goal was to become “the best Latinists in all the world” = *ut fiat optimi discipuli Latini omni in mundo.* Daily progress was made to this end.

TRIPS AND OTHER ACTIVITIES = *DE ITINERIBUS ALIISQUE ACTIS*

Such Latin feats exacted a toll from people, not least from Father Reginald himself. As he constantly reminded us, he had been teaching the Latin course these many summers not for his own benefit, but for ours, and for the sake of the glorious Latin language itself, which he hoped would last *in saecula saeculorum* (“forever and ever”). Provided that one was a properly prepared

Latinist, could get to Italy on one’s own, and feed and house oneself somewhere in modern Rome, there was no charge for the Latin instruction itself—although “free and totally anonymous contributions” to the purse were certainly acceptable (program brochure). Two sets of worksheets were prepared each week, and meticulously corrected, but there were no grades assigned as such, and absolutely no academic “credit” given for the class (“damnable obstacles” to the cause of true learning, huffed Reginald when asked about this once). So the course was somewhat open-ended and could be adapted to the changing interests and abilities of those who participate each summer.

Texts were not to be studied beforehand but approached spontaneously, as if for the first time.

The schedule suggested that there should be six days of Latin instruction to one day of travel. Early Sunday morning was Father Reginald’s preferred time for gathering the group at one of Rome’s train stations and then leading us off on an excursion of either full- or half-day duration to some famous locale. Although these trips constituted a refreshing change from the regular routine, they were not a vacation from the Latin enterprise. Far from it. Each trip was “scripted” (*iter litteratum*), meaning that archaeological site plans, relevant pictures, and pages of pertinent Latin verbiage had been compiled beforehand into neat little booklets for every tour. To the casual eye we resembled just one more tourist group to accost the monuments of Italy. But our guide was different: a Latin instructor who used the very ruins of Roman antiquity to elucidate Latin texts we held in hand. This method of teaching Latin had an impact even upon complete strangers who happened also to be on site. Tourists craned to listen. Museum curators and archaeological site directors paused in their work to say hello, for most of them knew or had heard of the famous Father Reginald. Even children came running to listen to this man who could prattle on and on *in lingua Latina*.

Under such guidance I was privileged to visit Roman Ostia, Hadrian’s Villa, Tivoli, the probable place of Caesar’s murder, Rocca Secca, Formiae, and Fossa Nova (the last three associated with St. Thomas Aquinas), Alba Longa, and the Capitoline Hill of Rome. At Ostia we sat amid the weedy ruins of the inn where Monica, St. Augustine’s mother, died, and read the full account of her death in *Confessions* 9. Looking up, I was startled to see several of my colleagues weeping quietly at the beauty and humanity of the piece. We concluded the Caesar tour beneath a massive bronze statue of Julius Caesar overlooking the Forum, right hand raised in the posture of *adlocutio* (“address”). Chaplets had already been set adoringly at Caesar’s feet by modern Romans, so we added a burning votive candle and toasted Caesar’s ghost with fine red Falernian. Our tour of the abbey at Fossa Nova where St. Thomas Aquinas died in 1274 was capped by a hearty banquet of pasta, vegetables, cheese, stone-baked pizza, and *gelato*. Then the

trip home on one of Italy's ultra-modern electric trains. All the fleeting impressions and experiences cannot now be described, although I *did* thankfully write some of it down in the same red notebook that contained my transcriptions.

Many of the undergraduate Latinists had never engaged "a real Lutheran" before.

Another dimension of Rome that Summer Latin revealed to me with clarity was the Roman Catholicism of the place. Rome continues to draw millions of pilgrims from throughout the world. Monks and nuns, many resplendent in bright robes and habits, flock regularly to the city to keep in touch with monastic superiors, consult the Vatican archives, fulfill some spiritual quest. Most of the Latinists in my immediate group were devoutly Roman Catholic, and I came quickly to realize that I was the only Lutheran of the bunch. So I became something of a sounding board for the Lutheran faith. Many of the undergraduate Latinists had never engaged "a real Lutheran" before, and some came to me with specific questions. Such learning is always a two-way street, of course. So I'd ask members of our group about specific items in the ecclesiastical texts we were reading, or about rituals of the daily office I had observed in churches throughout the city. One evening after supper I witnessed a spirited discussion among my Catholic friends as to whether the (traditional) Tridentine Mass, or the (more innovative) *novus ordo*, is best suited for the church at this time. (A similar debate rages in Lutheranism between Church Growth proponents and liturgical purists.)

Father Reginald realized that, in my case, a "Lutheran minister" had been admitted into his fold of mostly Catholic sheep. For the most part I comported myself appropriately, although I could not keep from wincing visibly at the works-righteousness evident in a series of sermons prepared by Pope Leo the Great to inspire the faithful to generous almsgiving: "by your offering God will liberate the poor man from his toil, and you from the multitude of your sins" (*Tractatus* 6.11). There is an accent here which many Lutherans would find disconcerting, as though one's forgiveness before God depends on almsgiving. But sound Christian teaching properly elevates Christ, for "He is the propitiation for our sins" (1 Jn 2.2). Lutherans have always stressed that alms and service really "good" in God's sight proceed after coming to a joyful faith in Christ, never before — as though one could earn or merit favor in God's sight on one's own, apart from Christ (Ap 1v, 81, 165). The good works proceeding from Christ-centered faith do, to a point, "liberate the poor man from his toil," as Leo says, and may even exert a salubrious effect upon the structures of this world. But moral and social improvements are always secondary, incomplete, and provisional — even among Christians, who remain sinners until the end (LC II, 57–58). Only Christ remains forever. Of course, Christ's people accomplish good works in the world, but these remain largely hidden from outward discernment and are

holy in God's sight only by virtue of a faith that clings to Christ alone (Ap 1v, 189–191). This is the type of theological reaction a Pope Leo sermon on almsgiving might provoke from many pristine Lutherans such as myself.

Reginald noticed my discomfiture and asked if it was a case of Lutherans not paying alms for theological reasons, or perhaps they were just plain greedy! This had a pleasantly explosive impact upon the group. He was jerking my chain to complete a synapse between the scruple of a modern Lutheran and the glorious Latin of an earlier pope who had produced a piece well worth reading, matters of doctrine aside. Father Reginald avoided "pointless theological argument" (as he called it), yet was constantly on the prowl for those Latin texts that he knew would stir individual members of our group. So for my benefit we read a superb Luther-Erasmus exchange. Another Latin-Astronomy major from Harvard insisted that we read a portion of the *Syderus Nuncius* in which Galileo excitedly describes his discovery of the *perspicillum* ("telescope"). Still another college student recited perfectly from memory a large chunk (one legal-sized page, very small script) of Laurentius Valla's *In Sex Libros Elegantiarum Praefatio*. Marvels of memory and other feats of Latin virtuosity were not uncommon in a group so completely devoted to the one enterprise. Several of the participants were resolved to converse only in Latin during class, at meals, or on a trip, and I myself delivered a twenty minute oration *de Latinam docendo linguam ad Universitatem Valparaisiensem* ("About Teaching the Latin language at Valparaiso University"). This talk by "the Lutheran boy" (*puer Lutheranus*) was enthusiastically received by an overflow crowd in the auditorium, but other colleagues spoke with equal Latin facility on other themes too.

THE FINAL DAYS AND RETURN HOME = *DE DIEBUS ULTIMIS ET DOMUM REDITU*

My time in Rome was over almost as quickly as it had begun. Time passed rapidly because every available moment was spent to the full on Latin endeavors. I missed Sara, and wrote fifteen postcards home to her. (She could not write back because, when she finally learned my Rome address, it was almost time for me to leave. Mail from the U.S. to Italy requires at least two weeks.) I departed Rome two weeks early in order to attend a family wedding in Wisconsin, so spent my final days in Italy on places not yet seen or on others requiring more attention: St. Paul's outside-the-walls, Appian Way, Museum of Roman Civilization, Circus Maximus, Roman Forum, Palatine Hill, St. Peter's Basilica, the Vatican Museum. One cannot see it all. Indeed, it is exhausting even to try. Four days before departure I was pickpocketed late one evening aboard Bus 64. It is especially this bus that conveys first-time pilgrims from Termini Station to St. Peter's Basilica; on it wolves often fleece the unsuspecting lambs. Thus was I obliged to spend several prime hours of time at the end finding the *Divisione Stranieri* ("Aliens Department"), and there filed a police report.

On my final day Father Reginald insisted that I be the last to translate a bit of *De Apostolatu Maritimo*, a papal encyclical Reginald and his associates had Latinized earlier in 1997. The paragraph describes how even sailors, far out at sea, can "earn a full indulgence" (*indulgentiam plenariam lucrari*) by attending to

various disciplines a pope may impose. This was Father Reginald's way, I think, of saying goodbye to the lone Lutheran Latinist. Friends of the summer crowded around to wish me well: *Vale! Fac ut valeas!* Then the flight home and preparations to teach my own Latin students at Valparaiso University. This is a holy undertaking, and important at a university *sub cruce* ("under the cross"), as Valparaiso claims to be. The chapel is not St. Peter's Basilica, nor is Valparaiso Rome, but pilgrims and scholars are drawn here too, and the glories of Latin literature need to be taught well on this campus for serious minds to ponder and engage.

So goes the argument for inner truth, beauty, humanity, which one hopes will continue to be part of any education worthy of the name.

Why Latin in 1998? Why should such diligence and effort be expended nowadays upon a discipline that apparently has no immediate, tangible, or financial reward? This is the question that education pragmatists continue to pose with increasing intensity. This whole essay has been a kind of response to that question. If education is only a means of making a living, of acquiring skills needed to succeed in today's workforce, then Latin (and related courses) may seem indeed to be a waste of time. But if education is more than this, if it is a precious time in one's life to consider what *other* men and women, in *other* ages, believed was good, holy, and true—then perhaps disciplines like Latin still have much to offer. I often think of Latin as a kind of time machine that links properly prepared modern readers to nearly all of the

literature that has mattered deeply to western peoples over the past 2,200 years. Of course, one can read much of this literature in translation! Yet such literature loses much in translation, to repeat that tired cliché. What is lost is not merely the technical skill of translation, the mental rigor of engaging Cicero in his own language, to cite but one author—but also the ability to see the world from the perspective of the ages, *sub specie aeternitatis* ("under the gaze of eternity"). It is a curious fact that most of what mattered to Cicero thousands of years ago matters still today, and always will matter. That is because an unbreakable humanity unites such a one as Cicero to all those people, ancient and modern, who are privileged to study his literature.

So goes the argument for inner truth, beauty, humanity, which one hopes will continue to be part of any education worthy of the name (from *educō* -are = to bring up, rear, educate). But even pure education pragmatists should pay attention to the skills and abilities that can enable those who study Latin to get ahead, also in our time. As I constantly tell my students: if you succeed at Latin you can succeed at anything you set your heart upon. Learning this language requires a superior character, if not intelligence, diligence over the long haul, attention to detail, an ability to read between the lines, and a host of other virtues that will enable any student to succeed at life, regardless of chosen profession.

Why Latin? Here is my final parting shot, drawn this time from the latest syllabus revision of Latin 101 (I had my beginning students stand and recite this paragraph on the first day of class):

THE WORK OF THE SEMESTER

Our goal: A stimulating, joyful, and experiential encounter with the Latin language and just a few of those millions of people who thought, spoke, and wrote in this glorious language. . . . It is a rare privilege and a priceless honor to study Latin at all in this day and age. Therefore, we shall engage ourselves to the full as we embark upon this *lifelong adventure!* **LOGIA**



You know, Pastor, there IS something to be said for cold formality.