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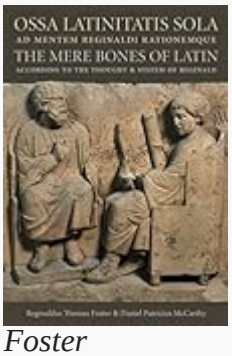
The Vatican's Latinist

by John Byron Kuhner

On the career of Reginald Foster.

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



Foster
Ossa Latinitatis Sola

The Catholic University of America Press, 800 pages, $39.95

In 1970, the Procurator General of the Discalced Carmelite Order, Finian Monahan, was summoned to the Vatican for a meeting. The subject of the meeting was a promising young American priest by the name of Reginald Foster. The head Latinist of the Vatican's State Department had tapped Foster to write papal correspondence, which was at the time composed entirely in Latin. Foster wanted the job but was bound by a vow of obedience, and the decision would be made by his superiors. Monahan intended to resist. Foster, thirty years of age, had proven himself to be both supremely intellectually gifted and utterly reliable—a precious thing at a time when the Catholic Church's religious orders were hemorrhaging priests. Monahan thought Latin was a dead end. He didn't want to lose one of his best to a Vatican department that would only get less and less important every year. He said Foster would go to the Vatican "over my dead body."

Foster remembers the meeting vividly. "So we arrive there, and we're ushered into this office, and who do we find there but Ioannes Benelli," Foster says, using Benelli's Latin name, as was

customary at the Vatican at that time. He continues:

> Benelli was Paul VI's hatchet man—whenever he wanted something to get done, he called on Benelli. He was very energetic—got things done, and no nonsense. Everyone was terrified of him. I was too, and now here we were in the room with him, and he turns to Monahan and says, "This is Foster?" The General said yes. Then Benelli said, "Thank you very much, we won't be needing you anymore." And he took me by the hand and brought me down to the State Department and that was the end of that. Monahan didn't say a word. I was now working for the Pope, and it was like I was more or less out of the Carmelite Order. A lot of the time the Order didn't even really know what I was doing.

Foster would spend the next forty years at the Vatican, part of a small team of scribes who composed the pope's correspondence, translated his encyclicals, and wrote copy for internal church documents. His somewhat unique position between the Carmelite Order and the Vatican bureaucracy meant that in fact he had a great deal of freedom for a priest. Later in his career his loose tongue—some in the church called it a loose cannon—would attract the notice of journalists looking for interesting copy. "Sacred language?" he said when asked about Latin as the "sacred language" of the church. "In the first century every prostitute in Rome spoke it fluently—and much better than most people in the Roman Curia." The Minnesota *Star Tribune* quoted him as saying "I like to say mass in the nude," which caused a small Curial kerfuffle (Foster claims he was misquoted). He appeared in Bill Maher's movie *Religulous*, which featured him agreeing with the proposition that the Vatican itself was at odds with the message of Jesus, that the pope should not be living in a palace, and that hell and "that Old Catholic stuff" was "finished" and "gone." Foster says the pope received complaints from bishops and cardinals about his appearance. "They said 'Who is this Latinist of yours and what the hell is he doing?' They would have fired me for sure. But by the time the film came out I was sick and a few months away from retirement anyway. So they just waited it out and let me go quietly." He had already been fired from his post at the pontifical Gregorian University for allowing dozens of students to take his classes without paying for them.

Besides being the Pope's Latinist and "one of the Vatican's most colorful characters" (as the Catholic News Service called him), Foster has been a tireless champion of Latin in the classroom. Indeed, Foster's greatest legacy may be as a teacher. "The most influential Latin teacher in the last half-century is Reggie Foster," says Dr. Nancy Llewellyn, professor of Latin at Wyoming Catholic College. "That's not just my opinion—that's a fact. For decades, he had the power to change lives like no other teacher in our field. I saw him for an hour in Rome in 1985 and that one hour completely changed my life. His approach was completely different from every other Latin teacher out there, and it was totally transformative."

A humanist par excellence.

A humanist par excellence, Latin for Foster was not something to be dissected by linguistic analysis or serve as the raw data for a theory of gender or poetics: it was a language, a medium of human connection. I first met Foster in 1995, at his summer school, and couldn't get enough: I

returned seven times. No one on Earth was reading as much Latin as he and his students were, but he was more like an old-school newspaper editor than an academic: he wanted the *story*. But for that you actually had to know Latin, and know it well. Foster was ruthless about ignorance, and equally ruthless about anything that to him looked like mere academic posturing. "I don't care about your garbage literary theory!" he barked at his students one day. "I can tell in about ten seconds if you know the Latin or if you are making it all up." "Latin is the best thing that ever happened to humanity. It leaves you zero room for nonsense. You don't have to be a genius. But it requires laser-sharp concentration and total maturity. If you don't know what time of day it is, or what your name is, or where you are, don't try Latin because it will smear you on the wall like an oil spot." The number of Foster's students runs into the thousands, and many of them are now themselves some of the most dedicated teachers in the field. "When I was in college I asked people, 'Hey, we all know Latin is a language. Does anybody actually speak it anymore?' And they told me there was one guy, some guy at the Vatican, who still spoke the language, and that was Fr. Foster," says Dr. Michael Fontaine, a professor of Classics at Cornell University. "I said to myself, 'I have to study with this guy.' And that changed everything for me." Dr. Paul Gwynne, professor of Medieval and Renaissance Studies at the American University of Rome, said of Foster, "He is not just the best Latin teacher I've ever seen, he's simply the best teacher I've ever seen. Studying Latin with the Pope's apostolic secretary, for whom the language is alive, using the city of Rome as a classroom . . . it changed my whole outlook on life, really."

Time seems to bend around Foster, and past and present intertwine. When I wrote to Fr. Antonio Salvi, the current head of the Vatican's Latin department, for comment about Foster, he responded entirely in Latin, beginning with four words that sounded like an old soldier praising Cato—"Probus vir, parvo contentus." An upright man. Content with little. And in many ways Foster's resembles the life of a medieval saint: at the age of six, he would play priest, ripping up old sheets as vestments. He entered seminary at thirteen. He said he wanted only three things in life: to be a priest, to be a Carmelite, and to do Latin. He has spent his entire life in great personal poverty. His cell had no mattress: he slept on the tile floor with a thin blanket. His clothes were notorious in Rome: believing that the religious habit no longer reflected the simple garb of the people as it once had, he gave up his cassock and bought his clothes at Sears: blue pants and a blue shirt, with brandless black sneakers. When it was cold he added a zip-up blue polyester jacket. The Vatican's Swiss guards called him "il benzinaio," the gas-station attendant. Reporting for work at the Vatican, he looked like someone called to fix one of the washing-machines in the laundry room. His outfit was more like something his own father, a plumber in Milwaukee, would have worn. When people would give him gifts, he would give them to the poor. He owned almost nothing, and his Vatican office was legendarily spare: a typewriter, pens and paper, one chair, one desk, and a Latin dictionary. Nothing mattered to him except Latin.

But through the Latin language and his work, Foster might just as well have been living during the Italian Renaissance. He made two exceptions to his no-gifts policy: books, because he loved them, and music, because he could not resist. He covered all his books in brown packing paper, and treated them as precious relics. The solitary pleasures of his cell were the words of Cicero and Leo

Magnus, and the music of Handel and Haydn. And outside his cell he reveled in the artistic treasures of Rome. He would show visitors around the Vatican with evident pride, to Raphael's loggia, a private balcony overlooking Bernini's colonnade, or the Pauline Chapel (like the Sistine Chapel painted by Michelangelo, but closed to the public and reserved only for Vatican employees).

The papal Latin secretaries have a storied history: the first to hold the office was St. Jerome, Latin secretary to Pope Damasus. During the Renaissance such Humanist luminaries as Lorenzo Valla and Poggio Bracciolini held the post. Foster was the first American so honored. "When I first started, there were two people in the Latin office," Foster explained to me when I interviewed him for this profile. "They had traditional names, which they got rid of after Vatican II. One was the Secretarius Brevium ad Principes, the Secretary of Briefs to Princes. That was all the diplomatic correspondence. That was Cardinal Amleto Tondini, and it was his death that opened up a position for me. The other was the Secretarius Ab Epistolis Latinis, the secretary for the pope's letters. That was Carlo Egger. It was Egger who was my teacher in Rome, and he was the one who wanted me to work with him. I remember the day like it was yesterday. He came into the classroom where I was studying and said 'Foster, would you like to be the pope's Latinist?' and I said 'Certissime.' "

Foster's Latin abilities turned out to be truly extraordinary. Fr. Salvi wrote to me: "He was at the Vatican for forty years. In that time he developed a reputation for being one of the greatest masters of the Latin language since the Renaissance." He was a master of both types of tasks assigned the pope's Latin secretaries: free composition and faithful translation. The papal correspondence is mostly freely composed, in a particular style known as the Curial style. Highly formulaic and traditional, it is laden with scriptural metaphors and classical flourishes. "He had such an incredible command of the language that he could work quickly and flawlessly," says Monsignor Daniel Gallagher, who worked in the Latin office of the Vatican after Foster. "Whenever there was an urgent document that needed to be composed within minutes, everyone would turn to him." Foster drafted acceptance speeches for three popes, each with an immediate deadline. The other part of the work consisted of official papal pronouncements, such as encyclicals. These are accepted as authoritative and translations into Latin must be extremely faithful and precise. "That's the hard part," Foster concedes. "Paul VI's writing was very concrete, and avoided jargon. John Paul II—not so much. So how are we going to say 'the economic consequences of globalization' in Latin? That stuff doesn't mean anything in Latin. You need to think."

While Foster was adapting the Latin language to modern concepts, the general decline of the language his superior Monahan had foreseen picked up speed. Foster had first arrived in Rome in 1962, the year the Second Vatican Council opened. The entire Council was conducted in Latin: speeches, debates, drafting and editing and finalizing documents, everything was in Latin. "In those days they would play games where one bishop would recite a line of Vergil and the next guy had to give the next line and on they would go, until someone couldn't remember a line. That's all gone now." The destruction of the Church's Latin culture would remain the abiding sorrow of

Foster's life. But it was also an opportunity. By 1974 Foster was asked to start teaching a remedial Latin course. In 1977 he started teaching at the Pontifical Gregorian University, where he would teach for the next thirty years.

Foster wanted only people who loved Latin for its own sake.

During that time he may well have undertaken the most strenuous teaching schedule ever attempted by a university professor. Rising every day at 3:58 A.M., he said mass in Latin, graded papers, and then headed to his full-time job as papal Latin secretary. By 2:oo P.M. he would complete his day's work at the Vatican and be ready to teach. Every year he taught ten semester-long courses at the Gregorian, from Latin rudiments to the most difficult authors. Beginning in 1985 he began a summer school, at the request of some students, to fill up his time in between semesters. Here, unconstrained by university policies and scheduling, he could teach as he desired: he hired space at his own expense, and taught six to eight hours every day, seven days a week for eight consecutive weeks. Sundays were not off days but day-long excursions into the countryside with twenty-page packets of Latin texts: to Cicero's birthplace, Tiberius's cave at Sperlonga, Horace's villa in the Sabine mountains, and many other locations. The course was free and no one received any official credit for taking it—Foster wanted only people who loved Latin for its own sake. "Summer school" became a kind of legend in Rome, particularly within the American expatriate community (it was taught in English and attracted mostly Americans). By the late 1990s a hundred people were passing through every summer. He also tutored, kept up a vast correspondence, recorded a weekly radio program for Vatican Radio called "The Latin Lover," did any interviews he could, and kept up his priestly duties, saying mass and hearing confessions. All this while serving as the pope's Latin secretary.

This Herculean effort led to Alexander Stille calling him "a one-man Audubon Society for the Latin language, determined to save it from extinction." Stille, a journalism professor at Columbia University, wrote a lengthy profile of Foster—still the best in print—which appeared in *The American Scholar* in 1994 and was later gathered into his book *The Future of the Past.* Stille had doubts as to how much success Foster would have with his attempts to save Latin—he found his work "quixotic but compelling."

Foster is now approaching his eighties but is still teaching, now in the basement of the Milwaukee nursing home where he lives. Physically reduced—he can no longer walk—but still mentally fit, Foster has reduced his teaching load to six hours a week to work on consolidating his legacy. During his last years in Rome the signs of wear were evident—he would sometimes teach with a beer in hand, or lapse into angry tirades embarrassing to students and visitors. In 2008 he collapsed while teaching and nearly died in the hospital. Since his move to Milwaukee, he has grown healthier and more productive. October 2016 saw the publication of his first book, The Mere Bones of Latin (Ossa Latinitatis Sola), from The Catholic University of America Press.1 A second volume is nearly ready to go to press, though Foster, ever intent on doing things his own way, has

been squabbling about fonts and covers.
In the meantime, Foster's students have become the teachers, and the decades he spent dedicated to his students are now showing signs of paying off. "You have to understand that many if not most of the people who went through Foster's classes were Latin teachers when they got there, or became Latin teachers later," says Matthew McGowan, professor of Classics at Fordham. "That has had a ripple effect through the entire discipline. People know that there's a way to do Latin the way Foster did it—with passion and pleasure. And with real human connection. And it's starting to take off."

Second-generation efforts by Foster's students—known as "Reginaldians"—are becoming respectable enterprises in their own right. Anthony Grafton, professor of history at Princeton, wrote a piece in *The Nation* in 2015 where he confessed that the single most dramatic change during his forty years in academia had occurred in the past four or five years, when suddenly he began seeing "an infestation of undergraduate genius" and "an outbreak of inspired work," which he traced back to a cadre of Foster's students. In 2008 Foster was too sick to finish his summer school; in 2009 none was held. But by 2010 a pair of Reginaldians, Jason Pedicone and Eric Hewett, reconceived Foster's school as their "Living Latin in Rome" program for college students, and started a not-for-profit called the Paideia Institute to keep it going. Since its founding, Paideia has moved from success to success, growing as quickly as a Humanities start-up possibly could, now running Latin programs in Rome, Paris, Provence, and New York, a Greek program in Greece, an online Classics journal called Eidolon, as well as elementary-school Classics enrichment programs at fifteen different sites throughout the United States. Last summer Paideia had more than a hundred people involved in its programs in Rome alone. In 2016, Paideia's founders were presented with the President's Award from the Society for Classical Studies, the highest honor in the field of Classics, a kind of capture-the-castle moment for Foster alumni. In Grafton's glowing panegyric for the Institute he writes:

> Reginaldus's method remains the groundwork of their teaching, and he himself is present in the conversation every day, as the ruling spirit. They celebrate him with inspiring loyalty. But they have also found ways to build an infrastructure—something Reginaldus's courses lacked. . . . Paideia has five universities as institutional members—Brown, Cornell, Dartmouth, Harvard and Princeton. They support Paideia by sending students to study and faculty members to teach in its programs.

That was in 2015. By the end of 2016, Paideia counted nineteen universities among its institutional members.

Paideia isn't even the only not-for-profit inspired by Foster. In 1997, Nancy Llewellyn founded the Septentrionale Americanum Latinitatis Vivae Institutum, the North American Institute of Living Latin Studies, or salvi for short. salvi promotes the use of active-language pedagogy in the teaching of Latin—the kind of speaking and hearing that Llewellyn first saw when she met Foster. More than two hundred people are expected to pass through salvi's programs in 2017, which will take place not only in New York and California, but also West Virginia and South Africa.

What is most exciting about these developments is these programs are generating the same kind of enthusiasm as the Foster classes that inspired them: “I’ve not looked at Latin the same way since.” “An initiation.” “Without a doubt the most valuable course I have ever attended in my academic career.” “Transformative.” “Mindbending.” “All people that want the classical languages to survive should really be doing these courses.” Foster’s model has proven to be imitable (though his energy and expertise is not—Paideia last year used six teachers to cover what Reginaldus would do alone).

Foster ended up teaching an entire generation of church leaders.

And Foster taught innumerable other teachers, who have been at work in schools from Santa Monica High School to Harvard University. And the fact that the Catholic Church sends its most promising young priests to Rome means that Foster ended up teaching an entire generation of church leaders. “His alumni are filling ecclesiastical offices, tribunals, and episcopal cathedrae throughout the world right now,” says Fr. Daniel Gallagher from his Vatican office. “And because of that, things are much better off for Church Latin than they were forty years ago.” Foster confirms this: “I don’t keep up on what’s going on all over the world, but I can go through almost every episcopal see in the Midwest and the bishop now is a former student of mine.”

What was it that was so revolutionary in Foster’s approach? Some sense of what the experience was like can be found in his new book, the Ossa Latinitatis. The book is divided not into chapters or lessons but “experiences” and “encounters.” The language is significant. Foster’s method was primarily to be present in the room when exposing students to real Latin. He would settle on one particular thing he wanted students to look for, cold-call, and then correct mistakes publicly. About this method he said, “You don’t need a hydrology course to learn to swim. You don’t point at the water and say, ‘This is water, this is how water works.’ you just throw the babies in.” As with throwing babies into swimming pools, the method depends on the presence of a teacher, and is not for autodidacts. But as a template for trained teachers, the book is priceless. And a glance at the readings shows what kind of intellectual experience Foster’s students got. The book is more or less a transcript of Foster’s 2010–11 Latin classes in Milwaukee. The vast majority of students who study Latin study five or fewer authors (Caesar, Cicero, Vergil, Ovid, and Catullus), and take four or more years to see even those five. A select percentage of students may read as many as half a dozen more. But students who studied with Foster in 2011 read what can be found in Ossa: all of those five authors, plus Roger Bacon’s Compendium of Philosophy, Lucretius’s On the Nature of Things, the correspondence of Marcus Aurelius with his teacher Fronto, Seneca’s Consolation to Helvia, Raphael’s epitaph, the personal letters of Anselm of Canterbury, the dedicatory plaque of the cathedral of Milwaukee, Boccaccio’s On Famous Women, Tacitus on the Germans, Clement XIV on the suppression of the Jesuits, Kepler’s Commentary on Galileo’s Starry Messenger, Walter of Chatillon’s twelfth-century Satire Against the Curia, Antonius Galateus’s Hermit, Giovanni Pietro Maffei’s sixteenth-century description of China, documents from the Councils of Constance, Trent, Vatican I and II, and

dozens more texts by dozens more authors: Livy, Raymond Lull, Ambrose, Bede, John Paul II, Thomas More, Tibullus, Plautus. Foster's method put back together what language courses generally separate: the experience of learning a language and the cultural value of knowing it.

What the book cannot give, of course, is the experience of not only reading these texts with Foster but strolling through the streets of Rome with him. For that we will need his like—or to wait for the Reginaldians to start writing memoirs. Alexander Stille writes of him:

> Seeing Rome with Reginald Foster is somewhat like hearing music for the first time. The city is threaded with a vast web of Latin inscriptions. They line the cornices of buildings, the base of statues and monuments, the tops of fountains and gates. The biographies of tens of thousands of dead souls are carved onto tombs and sarcofagi. They provide a running commentary on all you see, although virtually all of Rome's three million inhabitants walk by without noticing them. To see Rome without having access to this Latin subtext is like going to the opera without a libretto—you can love the music, the singing, and the spectacle but you miss a lot of the drama.

Foster has lived his life immersed in the river of recorded human experience that is the Latin language. "It's as if the whole Latin tradition—Classical, Medieval, Renaissance—came down to just one man," Michael Fontaine says. "He was like the funnel-point for all that culture. And he worked tirelessly to bring it to people—hundreds, thousands of people. And now it comes down to the rest of us to carry it on."

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1 *Ossa Latinitatis Sola Ad Mentem Reginaldi Rationemque* (*The Mere Bones of Latin According to the Thought and System of Reginald*), by Reginaldus Thomas Foster and Daniel Patricius McCarthy; The Catholic University of America Press, 736 pages, $39.95.

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