

Perhaps accuracy will demand a few revisions to the KJV — or perhaps just a few footnotes. The old Revised Standard Version almost succeeded. But it too “fidgeted” just a little more than it had to, and it will soon be unavailable anyway, to be replaced (again!) by one without any Thees or Thous. As for the New Revised Standard Version or any translation beginning with the dread letter “N,” forget it. “New” here is a code word for “the first step in being politically correct,” and also for “to be further amended soon.”

The Tridentine Latin Mass is to the new Mass

what the KJV is to the new Bibles. We need a liturgical revolution here even more desperately (may Cardinal Ratzinger live forever!). I suggest a simple, radical-sounding step. In the pews we now find flimsy, cheap “missalettes” (“missalettes for Christianettes”), which look as ugly, commercialized, dull, secular, and ordinary as the language inside. I propose that we replace them with lightweight bronze tablets, chained to the pews, on which is inscribed the common portion of the Tridentine Mass. Within a year we will have our liturgical revolution. We will have conquered the Fidget! ■

## BEYOND LITURGICAL LATIN

THOMAS STORCK

### CONVERSATIONAL LATIN FOR Today. Really!

In the first letter of C.S. Lewis’s *Screwtape Letters*, the devil Screwtape remarks to his nephew Wormwood on one of the differences between 20th-century man and men of earlier centuries. In the past “humans still knew pretty well when a thing was proved and when it was not; and if it was proved they really believed it. They...were prepared to alter their way of life as the result of a chain of reasoning. But what with the weekly press and other such weapons, we have largely altered that.”

Today people want to be convinced by being shown, not by having complicated arguments presented to them. And this is doubtless true of the subject of this article: the feasibility, even the benefits, of using Latin as a living language again. For the common assumption is that Latin died with the Romans a long time ago, or, if anyone still speaks it, it must

be a few elderly men in the Vatican — a dying breed, as even the Church seldom uses that language. It’s only kept up as a kind of memory of the past, but in a decade or so even that memory will be gone.

In order to refute such an assessment, instead of making arguments about the benefits of having a universal language, or about our being united in thought and speech with our brethren of the past — instead of trying to convince people by means of such “a chain of reasoning” — I will *show* them by pointing to a remarkable gathering in July 1999 in North Palm Beach, Florida. For there, around 35 men, women, and children from the U.S., Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, Austria, France, Costa Rica, and the Dominican Republic spent a week studying, worshipping, and, yes, talking to one another over dinner, even joking and arguing, all in the Latin language. This event is the *Cenaculum* of the *Familia Sancti Hieronymi*, the Family of St. Jerome.

The *Familia* is an association within the Catholic Church dedicated to extending the use of Latin as a spoken, living language, not just for liturgical use, but in academics and even as a common language for ordinary purposes. I say “extend-

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ing” rather than “reviving,” for in reality Latin has always been a living language, ever since its beginnings in the ancient world. Though admittedly the number of its speakers declined over the centuries, and especially in the past forty or fifty years, there nonetheless exists an unbroken line of Latin speakers from the days of ancient Rome to today, and, moreover, these Latin speakers seem more than lively and not about to keel over and die.

The notion of Latin propagated for the most part by university classics departments is that of an ancient dead language, a relic of the past — with a worthy literature, to be sure, but a literature that ceased to grow long ago. Latin, according to this conception, is certainly not something to be spoken. And any Latin worthy of being read was written centuries ago by pagan Romans.

But the *Familia* knows that this is not the truth about Latin. Latin can be spoken today, it is not dead, and although the ancient pagans did leave us a marvelous literary and intellectual legacy, even more has the Latin language been the special preserve of the Church and of subsequent Western civilization. Thus since the days of the Fathers of the Church through the encyclicals of John Paul II, the literature in the Latin tongue has grown and continues to grow and is much more extensive than that of the classical pagans. In fact, many of the most noted literary and philosophical figures in Western history wrote in Latin, not just St. Augustine or St. Thomas but Dante, Bacon, Descartes, Newton, Leibnitz, and Locke. As late as 1831, John Keble, the noted Anglican associate of Newman’s in the Oxford Movement, delivered and published in Latin his Oxford lectures on poetry, and Latin was used as the language of debate in the parliaments of several central and eastern European nations well into the 19th century.

But granted all this, still, most people would say, isn’t this primarily a *literature*, something to be read? Surely it is expecting too much to actually speak Latin today. It’s much too complicated. This common objection, however, is usually based on unfortunate experiences studying Latin in school, where even the most advanced students cannot carry on a conversation in that language. And the stylistic model of classical Latin is in part to blame. This kind of Latin usually contains long involved sentences, which, as one wag put it, students do not so much

read as decode. But our model for Latin need not be the convoluted speeches of Cicero, but the often simpler style that characterized many of the Latin textbooks produced for seminarians even up to the early 1960s. I have in my possession, for example, a textbook on the sacraments published in 1960, whose preface promises a simple style since today, the author says, most seminarians, at least Americans, do not read Latin easily. The merit of such texts is that if students begin to read and *think* in Latin, then even difficult texts will become easier. Which leads me back to the *Familia Sancti Hieronymi*.

How does the *Familia* actually speak Latin? What are the conversations like?

“*Quomodo vales hodie?*”

“*Valeo bene. Et tu?*”

“*Mox habebimus jentaculum. Et tum valeo optime.*”

An exchange like this, asking “How are you feeling?” and being told, “OK, and you?,” and then the reply “Soon we’ll have breakfast and then I’ll feel fine,” could be a typical conversation at a

#### Everyday Latin

*Noli me vocare, ego te vocabo.* Don’t call me, I’ll call you.

*Non curo. Si metrum non habet, non est poema.* I don’t care. If it doesn’t rhyme, it isn’t a poem.

*Fac ut gaudeam.* Make my day.

*Te precor dulcissime supplex!* Pretty please with a cherry on top!

*Heu! Tintinnuntius meus sonat!* Darn! There goes my beeper!

*Prescriptio in manibus tabellariorum est.* The check is in the mail.

*Purgamentum init, exit purgamentum.* Garbage in, garbage out.

*Lex clavatoris designati rescindenda est.* The designated hitter rule has got to go.

*Cum catapultae proscriptae erunt tum soli proscript catapultas habebunt.* When catapults are outlawed, only outlaws will have catapults.

— from *The Wanderer*, Jan. 27, 2000

*Cenaculum*. And when we begin our breakfast we may prefer to drink *cafeum* or perhaps *thea* or even *succus pomorum lycopersici* (tomato juice). For dinner there might be *porcina* (pork) or *bubula* (beef) and some kind of *legumina* (vegetables). With conversations like this, those who attend the *Cenaculum* discover that Latin is an entirely suitable means for discussing any and all contemporary subjects, for bantering, arguing, playing games, and singing. All this is a far cry from endless drills of *amo, amas, amat*, and puzzling out sentences from Caesar's *Gallic Wars* that have been the experience of most students of Latin.

The moving force behind the *Familia* is a remarkable Carmelite priest from Austria, Fr. Suitbert Siedl. Venerable in appearance, with a white beard and wearing the full Carmelite habit, Fr. Siedl, who appears to speak nearly every European language, not to mention Hebrew, can lecture effortlessly in Latin without notes for hours at a time. And he is apt to toss out remarks on the linguistic theories of Noam Chomsky or the relative status of the various Marian shrines throughout the world while doing so. Without exaggeration, he is one of the most impressive men I have ever met. But the point here about Fr. Siedl is that he believes the key to learning Latin is the ear, *not* the eye. That is, we should concentrate our efforts on the aural/oral language skills, just as we did when learning to speak our native tongues. And, perhaps most important of all, and something that most of us who have studied Latin in school find hard to fully accept: We should not worry about mistakes. Leave your fear of errors in the garden (*Timorem errorum in horto relinque*), as Fr. Siedl said to me on the opening afternoon of the *Cenaculum*. For it is only by using Latin that we will learn to speak and understand and really read it. But if we are paralyzed by fear of making mistakes, we will never begin to do so.

To attain this end, the program of the *Cenaculum* consists of intertwined religious, intellectual, and social exercises throughout the day. We began at 7:30 with Lauds, followed by breakfast at 8:00. Our next exercise was a lecture at 10:00, after which we had Sext and Holy Mass at 11:00. After lunch and siesta we had a period for free conversation and refreshments, a lecture, another time for conversation and refreshments, Vespers, dinner, the evening lecture (usually accompanied by

slides of archeological and biblical sites in Rome and the Holy Land), followed by Compline and Benediction. Some of the exercises were geared to the children (and adult beginners) and were conducted not by Fr. Siedl but by Prof. Lydia Santiago García of Mexico City, and consisted of puzzles, games, and even a Latin comic strip. These kinds of Latin lessons could well supplement the repeated drill of *amo, amas, amat*, that has done so much to kill off Latin in the U.S.

Aside from the remarkable effect of this semi-monastic routine (I found it profoundly refreshing for my spirit), the effect of hearing and being forced to communicate in Latin all day long gave a great boost to my oral and aural abilities. For the principle remains: to learn Latin one must use it.

Unfortunately one cannot remain in a *Cenaculum* throughout the whole year. But the *Familia* sells tapes and books to help even the most isolated student improve or begin his Latin. The flagship of these is the *Cursus Linguae Latinae Vivae*, the Course of the Living Latin Language, 13 cassettes, which aim to help us think and speak and understand *in* Latin. Narrated chiefly by Fr. Siedl, I can myself testify as to its usefulness, and at \$61 (plus postage and handling), it ranks as probably the least expensive of quality audio language courses. In addition to this, the *Familia* has audio tapes of the entire New Testament, much of the Old Testament, *The Imitation of Christ*, lectures from previous *Cenacula*, and many other items for sale. Interested readers can contact the *Familia* at 507 S. Prospect Ave., Clearwater FL 34616.

The *Familia* is, however, above all a spiritual fraternity, emphasizing loyalty to the Church and the Holy Father. Actual membership entails "offering a sincere love and filial obedience toward the Holy Father...cultivating the spiritual life according to the teaching and examples of the Saints, and...study and use of the Latin language, the living language of the Church." Thus the use of Latin is intimately linked to the life of the Church and Christendom. We are not to cultivate Latin for its own sake, but for its spiritual and religious benefits for us and the Church. As the official invitation to the *Cenaculum* says, come "for the good of Holy Mother the Church, for the good of Catholic culture, for our own good." After this, what more is there to be said? ■