

# Latin Fanatic

## A Profile of Father Reginald Foster

ALEXANDER STILLE

A MAN IN A BLUE POLYESTER JUMPSUIT surrounded by a small crowd stands at the edge of the Palatine Hill in Rome overlooking the ancient *circus maximus* at sunset. To the tune of a Gregorian chant, he sings a hymn to Apollo by the poet Horace in clear, fluent Latin. This is not a pagan rite of a group of modern sun worshipers; it is a typical day in the life of Father Reginald Foster, a Carmelite monk from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. For the last twenty-five years, Foster has served as Latin secretary to three different popes, and today he is the senior Latinist to Pope John Paul II.

For Father Foster, Latin is anything but a dead tongue. A man of phenomenal energy, he wakes up well before dawn to say Latin Mass and to start preparing and correcting the hundreds of Latin homework sheets he assigns each week. At about 8:30 A.M. he goes to the Vatican to perhaps the only job in the world where he can write and speak Latin in the course of ordinary business. Father Foster translates the Vatican's public proclamations into the official language of the Church and gives, as a kind of full-time Latin missionary, free Latin lessons to anyone who is willing to study. After working in the Vatican all morning, he teaches until evening, and, on his day off, he takes his pupils to visit Roman sites where they read Latin texts in their original context. During the summer, Foster offers intensive, free courses for Latin teachers from around the world, to whom he imparts his original approach to the language in the hope that they will spread the gospel when they return home. He is a kind of one-man Audubon Society for the Latin language, determined to save it from extinction.

Living in Rome I kept hearing stories about Foster's singular relationship with Latin. I met people who had sung Latin songs with him to the cows of Castel Gandolfo—site of the emperor Domitian's villa

❖ ALEXANDER STILLE is the author of *Benevolence and Betrayal: Five Italian Jewish Families Under Fascism*. His book about the war against the Mafia in Sicily, *Excellent Cadavers*, will be published in the spring by Pantheon.

and now the Pope's summer residence. A friend described her surprise at tramping through the ruins of Ostia Antica and suddenly hearing someone telling ribald jokes in Latin. It was Foster, of course, showing his class the two-thousand-year-old graffiti on the bathroom walls of the old Roman port city.

Although he is one of the world's finest Latinists, Foster insists on teaching Latin at all levels, including the most elementary, so that he can make new converts. I decided to take his introductory course to see for myself.

For the last eighteen years, Foster has taught at the Gregorian University, center of Jesuit learning in downtown Rome. The building's exterior, bristling with papal tiaras and coats of arms, has the imposing air of a fortress. Huge studded metal doors lead to an equally prepossessing two-story atrium presided over by a life-size statue of Jesus.

The introductory course, with more than seventy students, is filled largely with novice priests and nuns wearing the cassocks and habits of various orders, from somber black to bright blue. Most of the seminarians—in keeping with the change in the Catholic clergy—are from Africa and Asia, where Catholic traditions are now hardest. Their names—echoing those of popes, saints, and martyrs—recall the bygone era of the Vatican's mighty temporal power: Ignatius, Innocent, Clement, Hyacinth, Linus, Titus, Bernardino, Vincent.

But beyond the setting and composition of the class, resemblances between other classes at the Gregorian and Foster's First Experience (as he calls his introductory course) quickly break down. Outsiders—as long as they are seriously committed—are welcome to take the course, for free. Foster is impatient with traditional church pomp and formality. "We'll call each other by our first names, freedom and joy and all that," he says with a twist of self-irony. Instead of his monk's habit, Foster always wears his metal blue polyester jumpsuit: blue pants, a matching windbreaker, a wash-and-wear blue shirt, and heavy black work shoes. He does not wear a clerical collar. The outfit combines a blue-collar work ethic with the Spartan simplicity of the monastic ideal and does not call attention to Foster as a "holy man." He looks as if he might sooner check your carburetor or fix your boiler than reveal the mysteries of Ovid or St. Augustine.

Father Foster is a fit-looking man of fifty-four, with a round, ruddy, balding head and wire-rim glasses. The thin wreath of hair that runs above his ears looks a little like a medieval tonsure. His spectacles, his wide, open face and friendly smile give him a mild-mannered, unworldly appearance—an impression dispelled almost as soon as Foster opens his mouth. His deep, sandpapery voice projects loudly through

the class; it starts out at a low growl, but rises suddenly, when he is trying to make a point—which is most of the time—to a thundering sonic boom or to a high-pitched screech. Foster delivers his introductory class barking like a drill sergeant breaking in a bunch of raw recruits to the rigors of Marine boot camp.

“You don’t have to be all that intelligent, but Latin takes a little bit of toughness,” he growls. “I hope you are all here voluntarily. I don’t like the idea that some of you have been pushed into this classroom by some *requirement*,” a word he pronounces with the utmost scorn and distaste. “Because if that’s the case, I’d like to push you *right back out*. If you have to take Latin and don’t want to, there is a list here, and you can just put your name on it and leave. And I will give you a passing grade for the year. I’m interested in teaching Latin to people who want to learn. So, if you *don’t* like me or you *don’t* like Latin, then you can leave and that will be that. Got it? If you want to learn Latin, we’ll learn Latin. I don’t care if you are registered. You can sit here for five years and not be registered. I don’t know how much they’re charging downstairs—I think it’s too much.”

There is nothing pleading or apologetic about Foster’s presentation of Latin. Many teachers treat Latin grammar as if it were a bad-tasting medicine that will eventually prove beneficial—a few dull years of memorizing conjugations and declensions that have to be put up with before slogging through Caesar’s *Gallic Wars*. Foster does not concede an inch, firmly convinced that from the very first class the study of Latin should be a revelation of the greatest urgency and importance.

“Why do you want to study Latin? *The question is, Why don’t people want to study Latin?*” he asks the class in a loud rhetorical shout, pacing back and forth in front of the blackboard. “If you don’t know Latin, you know nothing! I had my first experience of Latin forty years ago, and I have not been bored by Latin for ten minutes in these forty years. Latin is one of the greatest things that ever happened in human history.”

When Foster begins to shift into high gear, he picks up in speed and volume, like a high-performance car moving into overdrive. “If you don’t know Latin, you’re sitting out there on the sidelines—don’t worry, most of the world is out there with you. But if you want to see what’s going on in this whole stream of two thousand years’ worth of gorgeous literature, then you need Latin.”

Foster distributes a ten-page photocopied handout—a sampling of Latin literature from the comic playwright Terentius (185–159 B.C.) to a papal decree of 1990. This is the closest we will get to a textbook all year. “I am going to put real Latin in front of you. We are studying what Latin is on *planet Earth*,” he booms. “One of the things I don’t like about these textbooks they give you is that they fool around with

these phony little made-up sentences. We are going to deal with real sentences from the first day.”

After this little introduction, Foster rolls up his sleeves and starts to explain his teaching method. “There will be no grammar books, no textbooks. You are going to have me—whether you like it or not. That’s the system. Every student is going to get a good Latin dictionary.” The students are required to come to class on Monday and Friday and to do homework sheets that Foster invents twice a week. “You work this thing all by yourself,” he says. “The idea is that you teach yourself. This sheet is due a week from now, there won’t be class on Friday because there’s some kind of nonsense over at St. Peter’s basilica.” He is referring to the anniversary of the canonization of Saint Birgitta, a Swedish nun of the fourteenth century.

The reason Latin is generally boring, Foster says, is that it is taught all wrong. The grammar is presented as an enormous and complex abstract system of bizarre and arcane rules divorced from its actual context inside a real and living language. “People are not told what Latin is all about,” Foster says. “They are just told to memorize all the forms, the conjugations and declensions. Latin has nothing to do with memorization. Every bum and prostitute in ancient Rome spoke Latin and they didn’t learn it by memorization. *Got it?*” *Got it?*—generally pronounced in a raspy growl—is a constant refrain in the Reginald Foster experience.

Foster tries to get students to stop thinking in English and to enter the Latin frame of mind by immediately stressing some of the difficulties and peculiarities of the language. “The hardest thing for people who have grown up speaking English or one of the Romance languages is to grasp the fact that Latin does not depend on word order,” Foster explains. “That is the thing that drives people crazy. In English you more or less have your subject, you more or less have your verb, and you more or less have your object. If I say ‘Jane sends Jim to me’ and then change the order of the words, the whole meaning changes. It becomes: ‘Jim sends Jane to me’ or ‘To Jim Jane sends me.’ The meaning of a Latin sentence does not come from the word order but from the word endings. It means that if I write ‘*Marcum Joanna mittit,*’ I can have them in any order, and it will mean the same thing: ‘Jane sends Mark.’ I pick this up from the endings, the *-um* indicates object, the *-a* indicates subject. By changing the ending, I am changing the function. But I can make it ‘*Mittit Marcum Joanna,*’ and there’s no change in meaning. That’s what the whole thing in Latin is all about: *an infinity of possibilities*. Infinite combinations and the word order is *free!*” he shouts, emphasizing *free* like a discounter announcing an unbeatable sale.

As he promised, Foster plunged us, from the very first day, right into real Latin texts: Cicero, Petronius, and the Latin Vulgate Bible, which meant that learning grammar was never separated from the enormous aesthetic pleasure of the language itself. Thus, once we had finished identifying the subject, the object, and the verb, we found ourselves staring at sentences of extraordinary beauty.

To illustrate his point about word order, Foster had us look at a letter that Cicero wrote on June 13, 44 B.C., to his closest friend, Atticus. Because so many of Cicero's letters survive, and because they are written in such a fresh and direct fashion, they capture his daily life in all its particularity as if in suspended animation, the way the volcanic ash and lava of Vesuvius preserved Pompeii and Herculaneum. Reading them is like accidentally overhearing a conversation from two thousand years ago.

"*L. Antonio male sit, si quidem Buthrotiis molestus est!*" the letter begins, meaning: Let Lucius Antonius be hanged, if he's going to be obnoxious to the Buthrotians! "*Molestus* like *molest*, *annoying*, or *obnoxious*," Foster says. Cicero is commiserating with Atticus over a real estate deal in northern Greece (Buthrotum) that has gone sour. He moves on to his own nagging financial problems—a constant of his correspondence—then turns to the heart of the matter, the burning political situation following the death of Julius Caesar.

"*Reginam odi!*" says Foster in a stately, dramatic voice. "*Regina*' is the word for 'queen'; *odisse*' is the verb 'to hate,'" he says. "Like *odious*, got it? Don't say 'The queen hates!' The queen doesn't hate anyone!" Foster screams at full volume. "It says: 'I hate the queen!' Notice, the object comes first, the verb last. *Regina*' becomes '*reginam*' when it's used as an object.

"The queen is Cleopatra. Oooohhh," he croons. "Julius Caesar had been in Egypt and had spent about nine months playing around with Cleopatra. If you've been in Trastevere [a neighborhood in downtown Rome just across the Tiber River], you may have seen an area called the Horti Caesaris—the road of the Gardens of Caesar. Caesar brought her back to Rome and had her living in his gardens over in Trastevere. When I go home tonight, I will pass right by the gardens that Cicero is talking about here. So when Cicero writes this letter, this queen is floating around Rome, and Cicero says, 'I hate the queen!' She was right down the street in Trastevere. She was thrown out of Rome after Caesar's assassination. Cicero hates the Queen. See what Latin's all about?" By now, his voice has dropped to a stage whisper, and the class is in rapt silence.

"*Superbiam autem ipsius reginae.*' Once again Cicero is starting his sentence with the object. '*Superbiam*' means '*haughtiness*.' The haughtiness of the queen herself, '*cum esset*,' 'when she was,' '*trans Tiberim*,'

'across the Tiber,' 'in hortis,' 'in Caesar's gardens.' 'Commemorare sine magno dolore,' 'remember without great pain,' 'non possum'—finally we have the verb—"I cannot . . . I am not able." He then reads the whole sentence. "The haughtiness of the queen herself when she was living in Caesar's gardens across the Tiber, I cannot recall without great pain in my heart!" Foster becomes so excited that he exclaims, "*It's out of this world! Latin is simply the greatest thing that ever happened! Don't let yourself go, because you might just fall in love with it!*"

For Reginald Foster (or Reginaldus as he is sometimes known), Latin was love at first sight. He can still remember vividly his first Latin class in 1953 in St. Francis Minor Seminary in Milwaukee, when he was thirteen. "I saw right away how clever it was," he says. "I liked the way you could play around with this and say so much just with the little endings and switch things around. It was like a little puzzle. It seemed kind of mysterious and clever. I decided this Latin thing was going to be my endeavor, my contribution."

Except for one year in Milwaukee, Foster has spent the last thirty-two years living in the Carmelite monastery attached to the church of San Pancrazio on Rome's Janiculum Hill. The monastery is simple, spare, and modern, with linoleum floors and plastic furniture, like an elementary school or a budget motel. But the monastery's pleasant, tree-lined grounds occupy some of Rome's finest real estate, sharing the same view as the splendid seventeenth-century Villa Doria Pamphili, the suburban retreat of the family of Pope Innocent X.

Foster is exactly where he wants to be, doing exactly what he always hoped to do. "By the time I was fifteen years old I wanted to be three things in life: First, as a little kid, I wanted to be a priest. Second, I wanted to be a Latin teacher. Third, I wanted to be a member of a religious community, rather than a diocesan priest. And so, by the time I was fifteen, I knew I wanted to be these three things, and since then I have never had a moment's doubt about any of them. No wandering around until I was thirty figuring out what I wanted to become."

Foster wanted to be a priest from as far back as anyone in the family can remember. At the age of six, according to his mother, Margaret Foster, young Reggie tore up old sheets to use as vestments, and—instead of playing cops and robbers—he pretended to be a priest and perform mass. Mildly embarrassed by this maternal revelation, Father Foster explains: "A lot of kids did that in those days. It wasn't quite as strange a thing as it might seem today."

This early religious and scholarly vocation seems to have been entirely Reggie's idea. His family was Catholic but without particular emphasis. Foster's father and grandfather were both plumbers, and

his mother was a housewife. Reggie was a straight-A student and valedictorian of his eighth-grade class in parochial school. His brother, Tom, still runs the family plumbing business, and his sister, Susan, is a housewife and mother.

Foster's interest in language was stimulated by the severe German nuns who taught him in parochial school. "The sisters were very into this grammar thing," Foster says. "They taught us English grammar until it came out of our ears. We had to have it perfect. I liked that very much."

Aside from school and church, young Reggie had a series of solitary interests that he pursued with quiet but total dedication. From books he took out of the library, he taught himself to play the organ and to swim.

When Reggie Foster graduated from grade school, he decided to enter St. Francis Minor Seminary, a Catholic high school for students who intended to become priests. The arrival of adolescence coincided with a quantum leap in his already intense religiosity. "When I was twelve or thirteen I got really turned on by religion, most of which I've abandoned now," he says laughing. "I went through a period they call scrupulosity—this is a famous syndrome that psychologists have studied. It's a time in life when people become especially religious, and puberty is one of them. I was almost out of my mind: I was committing mortal sins every other minute. It was terrible. I couldn't laugh. I couldn't even look at a woman because it was a sin. I thought everything was a sin. I started reading *The Lives of the Saints*, about the penances they did and so on. I was driving everyone crazy with my religious fanaticism, candles, all that. It wasn't my parents who were pushing this on me—they thought I was a little crazy. I thought my parents were very bad, that we should be saying the rosary and prayers at every meal. This is natural when you're twelve years old. You grow out of it. In the midst of it, I decided to join the priesthood."

Some people were concerned that Reggie took things too seriously. One day a woman in the neighborhood saw him standing alone in front of a statue of the Madonna in the parish church with tears streaming down his face. The woman telephoned Margaret Foster to tell her what she had seen. "I thought it was ridiculous. I wasn't that upset," said Mrs. Foster, not long before her death in 1992. But she did talk to their priest, who told her: "They go through a stage like that."

In the throes of this personal crisis, during the summer between freshman and sophomore years of high school, Foster decided he wanted to be a monk and live apart from the world. "I wanted to belong to a religious community. The Carmelites were a perfect middle ground for me. I didn't want to be a complete hermit like a Cistercian. But on the

other hand, I didn't want a place like a train station or a boardinghouse. Our order really has the best of both. There's perfect silence here; there's prayer together but a lot of solitude and study. I like being able to turn it on and off. When I am outside, I am very much on; when I come home, I'm a complete hermit."

As the idea to join the Carmelites crystallized, so did Foster's consuming passion for Latin. Even though his first-year Latin course was taught according to the old method of memorization, he was totally absorbed by it; he took the textbooks home during his summer vacation, learned them backwards and forwards, and returned to school ready for advanced Latin. "That whole training in English grammar I had had with the nuns, of analyzing things linguistically, switched over and blossomed in Latin," he says.

In the fall of 1955, at age fifteen, Foster left Milwaukee for the Monadnock Mountains of New Hampshire, where the Carmelites had their training seminary. Waiting for him, when he got off the overnight train from Chicago to Worcester, Massachusetts, was a young Carmelite monk named Conrad Fliess, who immediately struck up an animated conversation in Latin. For Foster, it was like a revelation: suddenly this mysterious ancient language, which he had studied in silence, leapt off the page and came to life. The two men rattled on in Latin all the way back to New Hampshire in the seminary van. "He was all wild for Latin," Foster says. "We had Latin plays and had to write Latin compositions every week. He saw right away that I already knew Latin very well, and so he tutored me. We were great friends and remained so until the end of his life. Meeting this man changed my whole deal, my whole approach to Latin."

The move to the Carmelite seminary proved providential in many ways. "That's what really got me going," Foster says. "I would have been like most people had I stayed [in Milwaukee]. I found the Carmelites, and I love them very much." Living in a sympathetic religious community also helped Reginald get past his painful period of scrupulosity. "I saw other young people like me who didn't have this problem. And there were some priests who talked with me and helped me. It just disappeared. It's almost like having glasses—you just see things in a certain light, which was that of sin. If I took a toothpick off the table, I was stealing from my parents. [Later] I just started seeing things differently."

Foster spent three years studying with Fliess in New Hampshire, where he learned German, ancient Greek, along with the standard religious training, and, of course, intensive Latin. He officially joined the Carmelite order in Boston in 1959 and then went out to a Carmelite monastery near Milwaukee to do an advanced degree in

philosophy, where he was reunited with Father Fliess.

In 1962 Foster began theology training in Rome. His arrival at the center of the Roman world was the culmination of all his years of passionate study. "The day after I came to Rome, I went to the Roman Forum, and I saw all this stuff that I had read about as a kid and studied—the place Cicero gave his orations. I just lost my mind. Here was this whole living language which I had come to love in the United States. To come here and to imagine—as I still like to do—people walking around the Forum speaking Latin. To read Cicero's orations out loud and hear the same words bouncing off the walls that bounced off the walls in Caesar's presence in September of 46 B.C. It's just too much!"

Foster's insistence on Latin as a living language may seem eccentric and bizarre to some—like Don Quixote setting off in medieval armor trying to revive the age of chivalry in seventeenth-century Spain. But it is easy to forget how much more prevalent Latin was only thirty years ago, when Foster received his religious training. Not only was the Mass said in Latin, all of Foster's classes—theology, philosophy, canon law, archaeology, and church history—were taught in Latin. All priests were required to take seven or eight years of Latin, and everyone in the Catholic church, from San Francisco to Sidney, had some degree of proficiency in Latin. International Vatican meetings were conducted in Latin. Popes, cardinals, and bishops corresponded and sometimes conversed in it. The current Pope, Karol Wojtyła, wrote his doctoral dissertation in Latin when he was a student in Rome. The Pope's Latin, Foster says, "is a little on the spaghetti side, but totally functional." "Spaghetti" or "macaroni" Latin is Foster's term for highly Italianized Latin.

"All priests knew Latin," he says. "It was hard in those days. If you said 'I want to be a great Latinist,' you were competing with everybody in the class, and in every class around the world. When I see some of my old colleagues, we still converse in Latin. It used to be totally normal. Now it seems like some divine gift. Anyone who knows some Latin is a man with one eye in the land of the blind."

The great decline of Latin began in the sixties as a result of the Second Vatican Council (1962 to 1965), which attempted to modernize radically the Catholic church. Although all the meetings of Vatican II were conducted in Latin and the council took no steps to eliminate it, Latin became one of its unintended victims. "In all the upheaval—which I think was very salutary—Latin got clipped. It was inevitable. Latin was identified with the old system . . . Latin tyranny. Anyway, they threw all the old statues on the junk pile, and Latin went on the junk pile with the statues."

Aside from the junking of Latin, Foster was delighted with the reform of the Church. "It was just sensible and rational," he said. "We're just treated like adults now, that's all. Under the old system, we were treated like *bambini* [*children*, in Italian] in the name of obedience. In 1962, you couldn't go out the front door without permission, and there was silence at meals. You got to go out once a week for a walk. At ten o'clock all the lights had to be out. You couldn't stay up reading. Lord, help us, you couldn't have any money. If you needed two hundred lire [about fifteen cents], you had to go to your superior. It was a reign of terror. But in those days it wasn't a horror story because we knew nothing else. Now, it's a totally different world. We're much more responsible. I have certain tasks, I take care of my work, and that's it. The rest they don't even ask about. They can't put that toothpaste back in the tube. Some people would like to, but it's not going to work."

The demolition of the Church's millennial Latin legacy was equally swift. Foster was spared the painful moment of transition. Called back to Milwaukee in the spring of 1967, he returned to his monastery in Rome a year later and found a different world. All the public notices and signs in the monastery that had been written in Latin were now in Italian. Latin had been removed as the teaching language, and now all the classes were in broken Italian. "That whole system was demolished, taken down, burned up, and melted, and that was it," Foster says.

Rather than linking it to the reactionary elements in the Church, Foster identifies Latin with the tradition of Christian humanism—the Renaissance scholars and churchmen who passionately studied the texts of the ancient world: St. Thomas More, Erasmus of Rotterdam, Pope Leo X, Pope Pius II, Pico della Mirandola. For Foster, the humanists represent the most enlightened and tolerant tradition within the Church, the forebears of the more open-minded ecumenical spirit of the modern Church.

As Foster was finishing his graduate studies, an old cardinal who had been the Latinist to three popes asked him (in Latin): "So what are you going to do with all this Latin?" "*Deus providebit*" (God will provide), Foster answered. As fate would have it, Foster would be called on to fill the cardinal's old job. In 1969, when one of the pope's two principal Latinists, Amleto Tondini, who held the ancient title of Secretary for Briefs to Princes, died of a heart attack, Foster, at the age of thirty, was selected to take his place. Foster had been chosen by the other Latin luminary of the Vatican, Carolo Egger, Secretary of Latin Letters to Pope Paul VI, who had been enormously impressed by Foster when he had him as his student at the Institutum

Pontificium Altioris Latinitatis (the Pontifical Institute of Higher Latin Studies).

The office of Latin secretary has a long and distinguished history, stretching back to St. Jerome, who was secretary to Pope Damasus (366–384). St. Jerome left his enduring mark by translating the Bible into the famous Latin Vulgate, which served as the Bible of the Western world from the fourth century A.D. until the Protestant Reformation, when there was a proliferation of new vernacular translations. In the Catholic world, Jerome's Vulgate continued, until recently, to be the principal Bible. Because of the absolute centrality of Latin within the Church, the Latin secretary was traditionally one of the pope's closest advisers and generally lived in the pope's apartments at the Vatican palace.

On Foster's arrival at the Vatican, the august but archaic title Secretary for Briefs to Princes was replaced by the more modern-sounding Latin Language Department of the First Section of the Vatican Secretariat of State—which is where Foster works to this day. Foster's job includes composing the pope's official correspondence—letters to bishops and archbishops—and translating Vatican communiqués, ceremonial speeches, decrees, and encyclicals.

Through much of the 1970s, Egger and Foster handled the entire volume of work by themselves—a job now handled by a department of seven people. “And the workload has nose-dived,” Foster says. “When I think of the good old days, we were writing letters all over the world!” Even fifteen or twenty years ago, the Vatican could effectively use Latin as its principal tool of communication and expect that prelates around the world would understand it. Increasingly, Latin is being reduced to a merely ceremonial or decorative function—like the colorful uniforms worn by the pope's Swiss guards or the elegant calligraphy that adorns official Vatican invitations. There is some talk about eliminating the calligraphy department as an unnecessary extravagance, and Foster is worried that one day in the not-too-distant future the same will happen to the Latin department. “There is no illusion about Latin taking off. It's not,” Foster says with disenchanting realism. “It's definitely going down.” At a recent synod of European bishops, Pope John Paul II chose to give his final address in Latin, but, says Foster, most people didn't have any idea of what he was saying. For the moment, anyway, the Vatican Secretariat of State remains an oasis of Latin activity. Foster and his colleagues communicate exclusively in Latin. A Franciscan monk poked his head into Foster's office when I was visiting, and they chatted briefly in rapid, colloquial Latin. The one phrase I picked up was “*medicum dentium*” (doctor of the teeth)—the Franciscan was on his way to the dentist.

Foster's own office is as spare as can be—three plants and, until recently, no decorations on the wall. He has had a continuing feud with one of his bosses, who keeps trying to get Foster to put up a crucifix and a photograph of the Pope—standard issue in most Vatican offices. During one tussle, Foster told him, “If you bring those things in here I will sell them at Porta Portese! [the local flea market].” Finally last spring, the church hierarchy prevailed and installed the photograph and the crucifix, with the image of the pontiff placed, curiously, above that of the redeemer. Foster prefers the extreme simplicity of the early Christians to the pomp and bureaucracy of the modern Church. Passing by a nicely (but not luxuriously) furnished Vatican conference room, he points. “That’s where all that collection money is going!” he says, laughing a mischievous, boyish laugh.

Nonetheless, Foster is rather indulgent of the extravagances of the Renaissance popes who built the Vatican palace—especially if they were great patrons of Latin. He makes sure to point out the wonderful little bathroom that the painter Raphael frescoed in Pompeian style for Cardinal Bernardo Bibbiena, humanist adviser to Pope Leo X. Not only does the room show Raphael’s fascination with the newly discovered wall paintings of ancient Rome, it is also a typical expression of its patrons, the learned Cardinal Bibbiena, and Leo X, who himself cultivated a fine Latin prose style.

Despite his pessimism about the fate of Latin within the Church, Foster continues to fight the good fight, composing new late-twentieth-century Latin prose, convinced that Latin’s marvelous flexibility and concision continues to make it a living, breathing language even in this “*Aetas Informaticae disciplinae*” or age of the computer.

“The problems are not things, like photocopiers or computers,” says Foster, “but all the jargon going around. There are so many concepts that the Romans didn’t really have: ‘Power sharing’; the ‘realization of the organization of work’; to ‘SCUD’ something; ‘They acclimatized themselves.’ *Se accomodaverunt locis et temporibus*, ‘they adapted themselves to places and times,’ which is much nicer, it’s much more concrete.”

From the moment he arrived at the Vatican twenty-five years ago, Foster must have seemed a singular presence. He drove to and from work on a little Ciao motorbike. At the time, he was seriously overweight, weighing nearly 250 pounds, and, as he sped along atop his “motorino” in his monk’s cassock, he must have looked like a circus bear riding a bicycle.

It was only after 1974, when he began to teach, that Foster came into his own, creating his persona and life mission. He started taking off his cassock when he was teaching because it was getting covered

with chalk. Then, when he was at home one August, he found his trademark blue jumpsuit sitting on a rack at JC Penney's. It seemed to speak to him, answering all his needs. "I need something very durable. I want to do my own laundry—the nuns used to do our laundry, which I never liked. I want something perma-press, neat and trim. And this is the kind of thing that workers in America wear, the gas-station attendant or the electrician. It keeps its shape and color for about a year and a half. Twenty dollars for clothes every year and a half is not bad. They have my name and measurements at Penney's. I am for simplicity—I have two blue shirts and that's it. I don't have any hair, so I don't have to worry about it. You save all kinds of time and money by having nothing to choose." The only time he has worn his Carmelite habit recently was when he came home to see his mother in Milwaukee. Proud of having a monk for a son, she wanted to see him in his traditional garb. So on the flight between Detroit and Milwaukee, he did a quick change in the plane's bathroom and emerged in his cassock.

In order to stay within the measurements of his jumpsuit, Foster has to wage a daily battle against fat. "I have to watch my diet something terrible," he says. As a result, soon after Foster gave up his cassock, he also gave up his place in the monastery dining room. As Foster began to concentrate more and more on teaching, he developed his own separate life. He wakes up at 3:58 in the morning so that he can listen to Voice of America on his shortwave radio at 4:00. Up before anyone else in the house, he sings Mass in Latin by himself in the chapel at 4:30. He is in his room at 5:30, ready to start work. He works on Latin until about 8:30, when he leaves the monastery and walks down from the Janiculum Hill to his job at the Vatican. He walks from there to the Gregorian, where he teaches all afternoon. He usually gets home at about 8:00 P.M. and works preparing or correcting Latin homework until about 11:00 P.M. when he goes to bed. "I sleep about five hours, which is enough," he says. "Life is short; I don't want to spend my life sleeping."

Foster's schedule became more and more rigorous as he kept expanding and developing his teaching program. He started teaching informally, borrowing various classrooms around town from 1974 to 1977, when the Gregorian invited him to teach a course. Gradually, at his own initiative, he has built up his current curriculum of five "Latin experiences." There are four levels of Latin language instruction and one level (the Second Experience) of Latin conversation. In 1985, he started his summer course. The Latin literary tours, which are a part of the course, continue to increase in number. But the heart of Foster's mission is in the classroom, where he is trying to turn traditional Latin instruction on its head.

For well over a hundred years, Latin has been codified into an arcane system of declension and conjugation tables, which students were expected to memorize before beginning to read Latin authors. Since it is considered a dead tongue, Latin is virtually never spoken in class and often not even read aloud. Latin literature has been defined narrowly as the literature of ancient Rome, ending at about 300 A.D., despite the fact that for at least another fourteen hundred years dozens of the greatest minds of Western thought—St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Erasmus, St. Thomas More, Descartes, Spinoza, Galileo, Newton, and Leibniz (to name only a few)—wrote part or all of their work in Latin. (Many important Latin dictionaries do not even list words and meanings that entered the language after the second or third century A.D.)

Students spend years repeating verb forms—*amo, amas, amat, amamus, amatis, amant*—as if they were a series of magical incantations. The nouns are taught in declensions, listed almost invariably in tables following a standard format, and are taught in the same order, because it's easier (at least initially) to remember things in a singsong sequence, just as we teach children to repeat the alphabet. Many teachers specialize (even at the university level) in mnemonic tricks to help students keep the conjugation and declension tables straight. At the highly regarded summer Latin program at the City University of New York, students are taught rhyming ditties like "In conjugation number three, the sign of the future is long *e*; in conjugation number four, the *e* of the future appears once more." These mnemonic games can even be fun—like learning to recite Lewis Carroll's nonsense poem "Jabberwocky"—but it is a knowledge divorced from understanding.

Foster, instead, explains the inner logic of the language from which the grammar naturally flows. Latin—unlike English or any of the Romance languages—is an inflected language, meaning that the ending of a word changes as its function changes. The role of a noun in the sentence (whether something is a subject or an object) and all of the connective tissue between words (*to, of, from, by, etc.*) are encoded in the endings. If you understand the function a word has in a sentence, then you will understand quite naturally—and without undue memorization—what ending it should take.

Not only does Foster not require you to memorize forms, he actively prevents it. In order to get around memorizing declension tables, he teaches one case at a time. For the first three months of class, Foster hammered away at the idea of the subject and object (we never heard the words *nominative* and *accusative* cases). The point is to understand the function of the word in a sentence and to see how a word changes when it goes from being a subject to being an object.

The form is, therefore, always connected to its function. Not only is it more interesting to learn grammar this way, it is more effective. If you understand the way the grammar works, what you learn sticks with you. When you learn grammar rules mnemonically, as soon as you stop repeating the singsong jingles, you forget them, which is why most people can't go beyond the first line of "Jabberwocky" and can only remember "*Amo, amas, amat . . .*" from their years of Latin training.

In order to avoid rote learning, Foster never teaches verbs in the usual *I, you, he/she/it, we, you, they* sequence. Rather than ask a student to repeat an entire verb tense, he breaks up the pattern and changes the verbs, asking: "He sings?" (*cantat*); "They praise?" (*laudant*); "We ask?" (*rogamus*). By using this method, the form is never separate from its meaning, and the student has to think about each response rather than rely on the automatism of his or her reptile brain. Endings, he explains, are not an arbitrary set of sounds but ways of expressing ideas. The Romans express the third person singular (*he, she, it*) with a *t*, as in *cantat*. In the plural it becomes an *nt* (*cantant, sunt, they sing, they are*). The Romans say *we* through the ending *mus* (*rogamus*). *I* is expressed either as *o* (*amo, rogo, laudo*) or *i* (*amavi, I loved*) or *m* (*amabam, I was loving*). *You* singular is expressed with an *s*, while *you* plural becomes *tis*, whether it is *es, estis* (*you are*) or *ambulas, ambulatis* (*you walk*). Once you understand—and hear—this as another way of expressing *I, you, he*, you can add new tenses easily without memorizing entire verb tables.

The intuition at the core of Foster's method is to treat Latin like a living language. Grammar is always reinforced by immediate contact with Latin literature so that it is seen in context and learned inductively. "The students have to let Latin grow on them," he says. "What do we do with other languages? We go to Italian class. Meanwhile we see billboards, we see television, we see the newspaper, we overhear people on the bus, and all the while we're studying it. We start picking it up. This is learning a language naturally." Foster believes that students should not only read Latin from different periods and styles, they should hear the language, speak and write it. And while the First Experience is taught almost exclusively in English, he reads and has students read passages aloud in Latin. With each level he gradually introduces more and more spoken Latin. He will begin a Third Experience class by describing something he saw on the way to class—a pickpocketing on the bus—or by asking a student to describe the weather. By the Fifth Experience most of the class is rattling on in Latin. Foster recognizes that Latin is never going to be a widely spoken language, but it has to be taught as a language and not as a brittle,

dried parchment in a glass case. What Foster advocates seems so simple and logical as to appear completely obvious, and yet it runs counter to the way the language has been taught for more than a century.

Just how unusual Foster's oral Latin method is became obvious when two experienced Latin teachers tagged along on Foster's literary tour of the Roman Forum; they were agog when he suddenly broke into fluent, colloquial Latin describing Cicero's problems with his no-good son. "*Pater eius cupiebat ut haberetur par educatis omnibus aliis adolescentibus. Ah, quia senatores divites omnes mittebant filios suos ad studiorum universitatem Atheniensem*—Harvard, Princeton, got it?" (His father wanted him to have the same education as all the other kids—all the rich senators were sending their sons to study at the university in Athens—Harvard, Princeton, got it?) "In years of graduate school and twenty-one years of teaching, I had never heard anyone speak Latin," observed Margaret Brucia, who has a Ph.D. in classics and is head of the foreign language department at Port Jefferson High School on Long Island.

"The incredible thing is that he can speak fluently in just about any Latin style and pronunciation from any period," says Bernard Frischer, chairman of the classics department at UCLA. Frischer, too, in all his years of training and teaching, had never heard spoken Latin before meeting Foster. "I was skeptical because, like many classicists, I had heard that the Church Latin spoken by the priests was of a very poor quality." Frischer decided to make a video of one of Foster's Latin tours. "I had asked him to speak in classical style, and he was using an extremely complex Ciceronian style, with sentences that were a paragraph long, with several dependent clauses, and corresponding nouns, adjectives, and verbs miles apart from each other. At the time, I was wondering whether he was making any mistakes, but when we transcribed the tape and analyzed his sentences, everything lined up perfectly."

Frischer is now convinced that the traditional approach to Latin just doesn't work. "When I came to Italy for the first time in the 1970s after finishing my Ph.D., I lived with an Italian family. After six weeks I spoke and read Italian better than I did Latin, which I had studied for more than ten years and of which I was a professor," says Frischer.

The fatal mistake of most Latin textbooks and teachers is to try to make Latin seem as much like English as possible; they use invented Latin sentences that follow English word order or, if they use real Latin, they doctor it to make it conform to English syntax. Even the greatest and most complex authors write straightforward sentences that can be read immediately and used as examples of basic grammatical constructions. Thus as we were learning subjects and objects,

verbs or relative pronouns, Foster had us hunting down examples in passages from Terence, Cicero, Ovid, the Vulgate Bible, the natural history of St. Hildegard, or a papal proclamation from 1990.

Already in the second class, Foster showed us a passage from the *Satyricon*, the great comic, surrealistic novel of Petronius Arbiter, whose refinement was such that he was made “arbiter” of taste at the wildly decadent court of the emperor Nero. (Later, Nero, in his paranoia, forced Petronius to commit suicide.) Foster set the scene: “The narrator is sitting by himself at this banquet and he is trying to figure out why there is a wild boar running around the *triclinium* [dining room] with a hat on its head. He is wearing the type of hat reserved for slaves who have been freed. Crazy stuff. The narrator screws up his courage to ask the person next to him what this wild boar is doing running around the banquet with a freedom hat on. The guy looks at him and says, ‘Any slave could tell you that—*non enim aenigma est, sed res aperta.*’ ‘Aenigma’—meaning just what you’d expect—is the subject, so the sentence is: ‘It is not an enigma, *sed res aperta*—but an open thing.’”

Then one of the participants at the banquet stands up and says, “*Dies nihil est*” (Daytime is nothing). “*Dum versas te.*” “*Dum*” means *while*; the verb is *versare* (to turn). So the sentence is: While you turn over [in bed], *nox fit*, night falls. “This guy sleeps all day and eats and drinks all night,” says Foster. *Itaque nihil est melius, quam de cubiculo recta in triclinium ire.* “*Nihil est melius quam?*” Foster calls on someone. (Although there are about seventy students in his First Experience, by the second or third week, he knows everyone by name.) “Nothing is better than,” comes the answer. “Than what? Where’s the verb? At the end of the sentence, ‘*ire,*’ to go. Nothing is better than to go, ‘*de cubiculo recta in triclinium,*’ from the bedroom directly into the dining room. This is how they lived under Nero—don’t be scandalized, friends.” Translating, he says, “It’s cold when I get up, but ‘*Tamen calda potio vestiarius est*’—Nevertheless, a hot drink is like a set of clothes. It’s not St. Augustine. ‘*Matus sum,*’ I am soaked,” Foster explains. “In ‘*Vinus mihi in cerebrum abiit,*’ the subject is clearly ‘*vinus*’ (wine); the verb ‘*abiit*’ (vanished, gone), once again, is at the end of the sentence; ‘*mihi in cerebrum*’ (into my brain)—*cerebrum, cerebral*, got it? ‘I am completely soaked, the wine has gone up into my brain.’ This is Latin, friends, of 1,930 years ago. They were doing mostly the same things we do. They had the same virtues and vices.”

In the middle of all this wild banqueting and crazy speechifying, a voice of realism speaks up: “*Narratis quod nec ad caelum nec ad terram pertinet, cum interim nemo curat, quid annona mordet.* What is ‘*narratis*’ going to be?” he asks. “You—plural—‘*narrate,*’ ‘*quod*’—that which. What’s the verb that goes with *quod*?” Foster yells with urgency.

“*Pertinet*’—pertains—that which pertains—‘*nec ad caelum nec ad terram*’—neither to heaven or earth. You people are talking about that which pertains neither to heaven or earth, ‘*cum interim*,’ when in the interim, ‘*nemo curat*,’ no one cares, ‘*quid annona mordet*.’ ‘*Annona*’—is the price of bread, or the cost of living, how the cost of living bites, ‘*mordet*’—mordant, got it? See in the midst of all this banqueting, the cost of living is biting.”

Translating for a moment, he says: “‘For a year now, I can’t find a mouthful of bread, and the drought keeps on.’ Then look at this phrase: ‘*Aediles cum pistoribus COLLUDANT*.’ ‘*Aediles*’—judges, plural, subject—‘*colludant*’ (third person plural) are colluding ‘*cum pistoribus*’ with the bakers. So the judges are in collusion with the bakers and they are getting all the bread during the drought. *Serva me, servabo*. You take care of me, I’ll take care of you. It’s like the Mafia, see? That’s how they talked in the streets of Rome.”

Reading this ironic satire of corruption under Nero, we began to get an idea of why the emperor might have forced Petronius to commit suicide. Used to thinking of Latin as something remote and stuffy—oaths to gods and goddesses, centurions crossing the river, and edifying tales of “pious Aeneas”—it was almost a shock to discover such earthy colloquial language. “*Annona mordet*.” The cost of living bites. “*Serva me, servabo*.” You take care of me, I’ll take care of you. But what takes ten words to say in English, Petronius says beautifully in just three. “*That’s what Latin is all about!*” Foster says.

What enables Foster to get away without textbooks and forms are his extremely rigorous and ingenious homework sheets, known as the *Ludus domesticus* (literally: home game or, more loosely, game to be played at home). The *ludi* (plural) are deftly constructed engines of thought, which force students—while working through important passages of literature—to master the grammatical problems they are dealing with in class.

Each sheet introduces the students to a new author—with passages plucked from Foster’s seemingly inexhaustible storehouse of Latin literature: the comic playwright Plautus, St. Thomas Aquinas, the Stoic philosopher Seneca, the poet Horace, the Church Father Petrus Chrysologus, the etymologies of St. Isidore of Seville, the English Renaissance medical doctor Thomas Linacre. Aside from their aesthetic merit, the passages are chosen to illustrate a particular grammatical construction: the genitive case, reflexive verbs, the passive voice, the comparative.

Foster will often start out by giving a passage, but before asking for the translation, he will make students answer a series of questions that force them to pick apart the grammar of the sentences: If a certain

word is a noun, then what is its role in the sentence? If that is the case, then what is the verb? What tense is the verb? What noun must such-and-such adjective modify? Why? Write out the same sentence changing it from singular to plural. By the time you've answered the questions, you've decoded the whole passage, and the translation generally comes quite easily.

The *ludi* are written in Foster's inimitable style, both hyperbolic and humorous. They are composed on a typewriter that has no lowercase lettering, only two kinds of uppercase—the perfect typographic equivalent of Foster's voice, which has only two volumes, loud and louder! The *ludi* are also marked continually with underlinings and exclamation points so that reading a *ludus* is like hearing Foster.

A couple of *ludi* give an idea of Foster's singular style: "ROME'S GREATEST AND ONLY REAL PHILOSOPHER, THE SUPER-STOIC LUCIUS ANNAEUS SENECA [4 ANTE-65 POST CHR.], HAS SOME SENTENCES FROM HIS FAMOUS 'MORAL LETTERS' WHICH YOU CAN AND MUST UNDERSTAND AFTER TWO DAYS OF LATIN."

Ludus number 30 began with the following paean to his hero St. Augustine: "THE GREAT MATURITY, WHICH YOU HAVE NOW OBTAINED IN LATIN STUDIES, WILL FINALLY ALLOW YOU TO UNDERSTAND THE SPECTACULAR LANGUAGE AND APPRECIATE THE HEAVENLY CONTENT OF THE VARIOUS WRITINGS OF THE DEEPEST MIND IN THE WHOLE WESTERN WORLD, AURELIUS AUGUSTINUS [354-430 POST CHR.]."

Although each *ludus* fits on a single page, Foster usually creates a dense forest of about one thousand words, with several different passages and scores of questions. Although they are fun—combining the pleasures of reading a good book and doing a crossword puzzle—it can take the better part of a day to finish a *ludus*. Each one functions like the chapter of a textbook.

While Foster has been teaching at the Gregorian for seventeen years, he continues to write new *ludi* for each of his courses every year. Once, when I asked him to give me the next homework sheet a few days in advance because I was going to have to miss a class, he said: "I don't have the sheet for Friday. I haven't made it up yet." In other words, as often as he has taught basic Latin, he is still inventing it afresh, trying to react to the needs and progress of each new group of students. So, along with correcting about 240 sheets a week, he has to invent eight different *ludi* for his four basic classes, hunting for new passages and thinking up new questions for each of them. This is why he gets up at 3:58 A.M.

As word of mouth about Foster's courses has spread, the numbers have increased, increasing his workload. But Foster excludes the possibility of allowing an experienced assistant to help him correct home-

work. "I wouldn't allow that, it would be shirking my responsibilities," he says. "I believe the teacher has to work harder than the students."

Foster's eagerness to teach Latin is such that he finds it almost impossible to turn down a serious student. Aside from his students at the Gregorian, he conducts a kind of correspondence course with a convict in a federal prison in California, who wrote to him for help in learning Latin. "He wrote asking me where he could find certain books, without mentioning that he was in prison," Foster explains. "So I wrote back saying they would be in the nearest library. He wrote back explaining that he would not be able to get there until about the year 2010—I don't know what crime he committed—so I sent him some books.

But for all the hard work, Foster is committed to the notion that learning Latin must be fun or it shouldn't be done at all. His classes are always punctuated by extravagant utterances, shouts, howls, whistles, dramatic renditions, comic mimicry—even singing. In part, it allows him to express his lively and imaginative personality; in part, it is a calculated device to keep his students' attention.

From the plays of Plautus, Foster has been known to teach his students such Latin insults as "*vervex*" (muttonhead), "*vomitus*" (a puke), and "*caudex*" (a block of wood, a blockhead). He enjoys shocking his classes of young seminarians at the Gregorian by making irreverent comments about the Vatican or showing them mildly racy passages of Latin literature. For example, he picked a passage from *De Animalibus* (About animals), a natural history written by the German nun St. Hildegard (1098–1179), as a tool to study the comparative—"*Asinus est plus calidus quam frigidus*" (The ass is hotter than he is cold)—and as a highly amusing observation of sexuality. "*Fere caecus de superfluitate naturae, quam in libidine habet*" (When [the ass] is in heat [in libidine] he is nearly blind [fere caecus] from the excess of lust [superfluitate naturae]—literally, superfluity of nature). "The sexiness of the jackass makes it practically blind," Foster explains. "This was her objective study of nature as seen from her convent window! Don't worry about the philosophy," he reassures the seminarians. "Even St. Thomas Aquinas said some silly things."

It is part of Foster's conception of Latin instruction that it include all things from the ridiculous to the sublime, like life itself. During the annual class trip to Ostia Antica, we read everything from Cicero and Virgil to the graffiti in the so-called House of the Seven Sages, a bathroom in an ancient Roman apartment complex. Poking fun at the self-importance of philosophers, the frescoes here represent Greek sages offering bathroom humor in the form of philosophical maxims: "*Bene caca et declina medicos*" (Shit well and avoid doctors) says

one philosopher in clearly legible Latin. “*Mulcine sedes?*” (Mulcinus, are you still sitting there?) says another. “*Propero!*” (I’m hurrying!) comes the reply. “This is Latin from seventeen hundred years ago!” Foster says. Changing key, we went from the bathroom to the building where St. Monica, mother of St. Augustine, is thought to have died, and we read a long, moving account from Augustine’s *Confessions* of his mother’s death.

Foster is not only trying to shock and amuse his students by introducing them to Petronius or St. Hildegard’s reflections on the mating habits of jackasses and bears, but he wants to show that they are part of his vision of Latin and the Church. “For me Latin is liberating, and the humanists were broad-minded,” Foster says. “I gave the Fifth Experience some epigrams by St. Thomas More. Some of these epigrams are very risqué—not obscene, but crude and very funny. He said: ‘Look at that woman riding the horse,’—not sidesaddle, got it? ‘If she can get her legs around a horse, she can get her legs around any man.’ This is St. Thomas More! Humanists. Real neat stuff. Brilliant. Wonderful! This idea that Latin is like a lead blanket—it’s not, it’s liberating.”

Foster then starts laughing as he remembers a description St. Thomas More gives of a man getting seasick over the side of a boat. “More writes, ‘You are very charitable; you have this mutual relationship with the sea. You just ate some fish from the sea and now you’re giving back to the sea what you ate.’ They weren’t afraid of those things. Now it’s so phony and prudish. What we’re missing is this happiness, this healthiness that Christian humanism would bring. We can’t even joke about ourselves, about life, bodily functions. They weren’t afraid of *amorini* [naked cupids] or of nude statues. There’s a certain kind of hypocritical conservatism. We can’t talk about this or we can’t talk about that.”

While some might regard the celebration of nudity and sexuality in authors like Catullus, Petronius, and Ovid as antithetical to the celibate priesthood, Foster disagrees. “[Celibacy] is a choice and a way of life,” he says. “A lot of people do it for different reasons. . . . I can still appreciate that stuff. Let’s live!”

Foster has come a long way from the years when he stood weeping in front of statues of the Virgin. “In the beginning the Catholic Church was this gorgeous monolith, an unchangeable institution, and Latin was just one of the glories of the Church, like St. Peter’s basilica. That all collapsed because they found out that the Church was changeable. And now, my vision of Latin and the Church is, I would hope, much more mature and more rational. I need to know why she [the Church] says what she says, and what the sources are,

where the categories are coming from. This is all from Latin. St. Bernard paraphrases Virgil. And Augustine is quoting Horace. St. Thomas quotes Cicero in his famous *Summa Theologica* 196 times. This is a continuity that's very nice for me to see. Now, of course, [the Vatican] wouldn't quote Cicero. Out of the question. It would be seen as pagan or something. The humanists took what was good and solid in the pagans."

In his years at the Gregorian, Foster has watched his own program flourish while the general condition of Latin deteriorates. Originally, his course at the Gregorian was supposed to be a kind of finishing school for those students who needed to round off their Latin education. But as more and more students were arriving with little or no Latin training, he began offering an introductory course. Although Latin is no longer a required course at the Gregorian, students are expected to have a working knowledge of the language and must take a proficiency exam when they enter.

"Supposedly, we have 3,500 students at the Gregorian; only 120 need Latin, and the others are fine," he says. "The Latin situation at the Gregorian is a disaster," he says. "You have these professors quoting Latin passages to the students, and they might as well be quoting Chinese." Confirmation of his gloomy assessment of the state of Latin at the Gregorian came this year when the university stopped teaching canon law in Latin—the last course to hold out against the change. "They can't find teachers who can express themselves with any grace and ease in Latin," he says. "They were making up baby sentences in their head when they wanted to spew out all kinds of golden wisdom on church law. Twenty-seven years [after the end of Vatican II] there is a whole generation that knows very little. It's like stopping piano training throughout the U.S. for a generation. A couple of generations later, it will be totally dead. I think that is totally tragic."

If Latin is dying in the Catholic Church, there are some signs of revival outside the church. After a period of swift and steady decline in the United States, Latin study is enjoying something of a revival.

In the 1930s, more than half of American high school students took Latin as part of their standard curriculum. The numbers remained fairly high until the early 1960s, with some 702,000 students still taking Latin in public high schools alone—while hundreds of thousands of others studied the language in private schools. But in the decade that followed, Latin enrollment in public schools collapsed, dropping to a mere 150,000 by 1976.

Latin appeared on the point of extinction. "Somehow, a subject that had been considered for more than a century a staple in the general education of very large numbers of American high school

students . . . was suddenly considered irrelevant," writes Sally Davis, who teaches Latin at Wakefield High School in Arlington, Virginia. "The crash was the result of the craziness of the sixties," says Davis. "Relevance was the catchword of the day, and Latin wasn't relevant."

Since its nadir in the mid-1970s, however, Latin has made a modest comeback. Davis estimates that Latin enrollment is now at about 190,000 in the public high schools, with a similar number in private schools. Latin remains the third most popular language in American public schools after Spanish and French.

With the steady decline in the United States of basic reading and writing skills, many schools turned back to Latin. Statistics show that students taking Latin do better consistently on their SATs than students who don't. Moreover, Latin has been used effectively in recent years to improve language and logic skills among students at poorer inner-city schools, according to Richard Gascoyne of the New York State Department of Education, which sponsors a number of such projects. "There are plenty of good reasons," says Sally Davis. "About 70 percent of the words in the English dictionary come from Latin. Once you learn about 150 Latin roots, that will give you a command of maybe a few thousand words. And it is the basis for all the Romance languages."

Latin has also had some success in selling itself to both sides of today's education debate. It appeals to those who argue for greater "cultural literacy"—since the Latin language and Roman civilization are so central to the Western tradition. At the same time, Latin can respond effectively to the concerns of both multiculturalists and Afrocentrists. Rome was a supremely multicultural society; it included people from across North Africa, Asia Minor, and the Middle East, as well as most of Europe, who became not only citizens of the Roman Empire but often its leaders as well.

In the attempt to defend and revive Latin, American teachers have also tried to find new ways to teach it, exploring alternatives to the rote memorization of grammar. There is much more emphasis on Roman civilization, on etymology and word building, on learning grammar by induction from reading rather than by the studying of forms. In New York State, Richard Gascoyne is trying to introduce more spoken Latin in classes. In some ways, Foster is in the mainstream of this change. Indeed, a number of influential Latin reformers have come to Rome to study in Foster's summer program.

Frischer of UCLA would like to revolutionize Latin teaching by introducing a new curriculum based directly on Foster's oral method. He is hoping to get financial support for a project that would, in essence, "clone" Foster. The idea would be to bring a sizable number

of Latin professors to Rome to become fluent in Latin and develop a series of textbooks and videocassettes to apply his method nationwide.

In the tight-knit fraternity of American Latin teachers, Foster's summer course has become legendary. "For anyone who loves Latin, it's like heaven," says Davis. "Finally here is someone who loves the language, who truly knows the language, knows how to teach it, and who loves to teach it with unbounded enthusiasm and energy that never stops. . . . This was like finding the place I've been looking for my whole life."

But Foster remains a one-man institution, with no ties to any of the various philological and pedagogical associations promoting Latin studies. He remains, in fact, harshly critical of the American academic establishment and is not sure whether some of the current reforms aren't as bad as what they are trying to replace. This conflict came to a head when Foster was invited to give the final address at a conference in 1992 at the American Academy in Rome given by members of the College Board and by teachers who were preparing the high school advanced placement examination.

During the afternoon, Foster sat with increasing impatience during a long, soporific session in which teachers and testers discussed the weighting and grading of exam questions, the problems with the multiple-choice section, and the methods of preparing students for the examination. When a teacher from Atlanta, Georgia, explained how he xeroxed exercises out of a certain textbook because he didn't have time to make up his own, Foster made a groaning noise like someone whose appendix had suddenly burst.

By the time Foster approached the podium, his normally ruddy complexion was redder than usual. "Most of what I'm going to say is not going to please you, but that's all right. Latin, for me, is a completely different thing than what I've heard since four o'clock. Teaching Latin as preparation for an exam has no place in my concept at all. I'm troubled by this business of using Latin for remedial purposes. Latin was not devised to help people with English. It's like the people who play the piano to help them with their arthritis. You don't study Mozart because of arthritis, and you don't study Latin because your school is a disaster! After what I've heard today, I'm surprised that anyone is taking Latin!" Foster said, with the fury of Christ tossing the money changers out of the temple. "The AP thing sounds like the typical American quick fix. Some way to hurry things up and push them through so that they come out . . . with a degree and not much education."

Foster criticized the old-fashioned textbooks that rely on memorization and railed against the new textbooks that rely on little Latin

stories made up by the authors about a typical Roman family. "I saw this in an Oxford [University Press] textbook—this is absolute madness," he says. "After two volumes, the students are still reading sentences made up by the authors, not by real Latin authors. So that after two years the students have not moved one inch. They've learned all about this melon-headed family from Pompeii, but they've never seen real Latin. The word order of the sentences is the same, the verb is in the same place. Why don't we start with some easy stuff right from the beginning: *Multum te amamus* (We love you very much), Cicero writes to Atticus. Why not start with that the first day? 'No, we don't do Cicero until the fourth year.' Who says? You can take two or three lines from Cicero's letters that may be very easy and are just out of this world."

When, in the third or fourth year, they finally get down to reading real Latin, Foster went on, they tend almost exclusively to read poetry—Virgil, Horace, and Catullus. "What is this obsession with poetry? Why don't we get into some of these prose people? Poets are gorgeous and wonderful, but, if you were to be shown nothing but poetry in French or Italian, it would be very hard to get to the language. I don't think the Romans on the street talked in verse.

"It seems that with Latin we refuse to do what we do in other areas of life," Foster said. "With other languages you hear and see the thing right away, but teachers refuse to do it in Latin. When we teach swimming, we put the students in the water. But what we do with Latin is we keep them on the sidelines and tell them: 'You see, this is what water's about,' instead of getting in there and doing it. Or, we say, 'Let's talk about the theory of the piano,' and we let the students just sit there for three years looking at the piano instead of pounding out a few tunes. But have them play a few sonatas that are so gorgeous that they're knocked off their feet, and then they'll pass any examination.

"Someone said, 'I don't have time to do this.' I shouldn't have time to do this either, but, if I don't, I'll get out of it and not teach. We've got to decide what we want to do. Either we're going to teach or we're going to do something else. I love Latin too much to mistreat it," he says.

When Foster finished his jeremiad, the crowd appeared somewhat stunned. "I've been waiting for years to meet Reginald Foster, and he's a little different than I expected," said Barbara Weiden-Boyd, professor of classics at Bowdoin College and a member of the group that prepares the AP Latin exam. Her husband, Mike Boyd, summed up the general mood. "I came expecting to meet Mr. Chips and I got the Terminator."

Despite his lack of diplomatic skill, Foster has attracted dedicated students from Australia and Ghana to South Dakota and San Diego. "He has a loyal fan club around the world; it becomes a central part of who they are," says Bernard Frischer. The number of students in his summer course—meant primarily for teachers and other advanced Latinists—continues to multiply every year. What started as an informal gathering of five people in 1985, has grown to more than forty students—more than Foster would like. Foster refuses to charge for the course and has a hard time saying no. Several return to take the course for a second or third time, which—given the grueling schedule—says a lot. The intense group experience has fostered numerous romances and more than a couple of marriages. Two recent students told Foster that they would not get married unless he came to Maine to officiate at their wedding.

Foster's summer course is practically a Latin marathon. After working at his usual morning job at the Vatican, Foster teaches from two until six, then has optional classes *sub arboribus* (under the trees) in the garden at his monastery, from seven to nine, in which students read, drink wine, and talk in Latin until the sun goes down. "And after that he would tutor whoever needed it," says Sally Davis, who studied with Foster during the summer of 1987 and, again, in 1992. After spending six days in class, the students spend the seventh day—far from being a day of rest—on one of Foster's Latin literary tours. Some of the trips—like the ones to Pompeii and Herculaneum, to Cicero's birthplace at Arpinum, to Horace's Sabine farm, and the tour to Thomas Aquinas's birth and death places—are all-day affairs lasting anywhere from twelve to sixteen hours.

Paul Gwynne, a historian of Renaissance Latin literature, stumbled onto Foster's course in 1991 and was so impressed he dropped everything to stay in Rome so he could take all five of Foster's levels simultaneously. "He is not just the best Latin teacher I've ever seen, he's simply the best teacher I've ever seen," says Gwynne, who has had the opportunity to see some excellent teachers while getting a Ph.D. in classical studies at the Warburg Institute in London. "It's a Renaissance historian's dream come true," he says. "Studying Latin with the Pope's apostolic secretary, for whom the language is alive, and using the city of Rome as a classroom have changed my whole outlook on life. Historical texts are presented as living things," says Gwynne. "I loathe Thomas Aquinas and medieval scholasticism—but the Thomas Aquinas tour was one of the most delightful days of my entire existence. Climbing up that mountain into that ruined castle, reading about the birth of Thomas Aquinas, then singing some of his songs. You're not just given a text of one of his hymns, you're out there

singing it. Then you clamber down the hill to Fossanova, sit in the room where he died, and read a moving account of his death. Suddenly this whole world of medieval scholasticism comes to life. That's something that a lot of medieval historians don't do and can't do. Then you go and get drunk in a pizzeria. What could be nicer than that?"

All the elements of Foster's method come together in his Latin literary tours: each of the senses is engaged as you hear, read, speak, and sing Latin while seeing the sights and smelling the smells that Cicero, Horace, Plautus, or St. Augustine saw and smelled. The Roman world from its highest to its most frivolous literary expressions comes off the page and takes shape around you as the ruined monuments of antiquity momentarily assume their former life.

Seeing Rome with Reginald Foster is somewhat like a tone-deaf person hearing music for the first time. The city is threaded with a vast web of Latin inscriptions. They line the cornices of buildings, the bases of statues and monuments, the tops of fountains and gates. The biographies of tens of thousands of dead souls are carved onto tombs and sarcophagi. They provide a running commentary on all you see, although virtually all of Rome's three million inhabitants walk by them 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.

For Foster, the air buzzes with meaning, and the words of Cicero, Tacitus, Martial, and Livy tug at his ear. The intersection where Via Cavour and Via dei Fori Imperiali meet is the place where the emperor Augustus placed a series of busts from the Republican era to remind people of the old Roman virtues. Outside the Colosseum, where pushcarts now sell soft drinks and postcards, stood a massive statue of Nero; it was decapitated after the emperor killed himself. A bare plot of ground in the Forum is the spot where Cicero gave his famous Catalline oration; on that pile of rubble, the emperor Caligula built himself a temple and declared himself a god; here along a crowded sidewalk, shopkeepers from before the time of Christ had their stores and hawked their wares to potential customers on their way to the Capitol.

There are, of course, many other classicists who know ancient Rome, but very few have Foster's extraordinarily broad range. Foster knows the classical authors backwards and forwards and is steeped in medieval Latin and the doctors of the Church; he knows the glories and vices of the Renaissance popes and the inscriptions on all the Egyptian obelisks erected by Sixtus V. He is as interested in the Latin

on Mussolini's Fascist monuments as he is in the dedications on the buildings commissioned by the emperors Augustus and Hadrian.

More than just a walking encyclopedia of Latin literature, Foster also has an active imagination and a theatrical talent for conjuring up the past. When we were walking across the Palatine Hill—the green residential area in ancient Rome that overlooks the Roman Forum—Foster took us down to the cryptoporticus beneath an imperial villa where Caligula is believed to have been assassinated. As we stood looking at the elaborate stucco work in this underground passageway, Foster read the scene from Suetonius and, when he came to the denouement, shouted, “Repete! Repete!” (Again! Again!) and could not help himself from making a stabbing motion with his arm at a spot on the ground where the hated emperor might have lain. Foster's dramatic skills are such that the BBC radio broadcast large segments of his annual Ides of March tour in honor of the death of Caesar.

At the beginning of each tour, Foster hands out a xeroxed leaflet with as many as fifteen dense pages of text, all of it relating to the places to be seen that day. He will often describe a site or event by using passages from seven or eight different authors—plucking out lines of poetry, long-vanished inscriptions, even a passage from an eighteenth-century Latin encyclopedia—to create a multi-layered richness that corresponds to the palimpsest of Rome itself. For example, on the tour of the Colosseum and the Palatine Hill, he gave us 101 passages from 24 different Latin authors. He also read aloud from some writings we passed that had been scratched onto the walls of slave quarters now buried underneath the Palatine. For the Ides of March walk, Foster gave us not only Plutarch's famous account of Caesar's assassination—which Shakespeare used in his play—but also a page of the correspondence between Caesar and Cicero at the time of the Civil War (49 B.C.) that installed Caesar as the first Roman emperor. The letters describe the terrible psychological predicament of Cicero: Caesar is advancing rapidly from the north, Pompey is in the south, in retreat, and Cicero is in the middle at his villa near Formia, trying to decide what to do. He knows Caesar will win, but, in the end, he backs Pompey, because he is sure Caesar will destroy the Republic. Meanwhile, Caesar is trying to woo Cicero to add prestige to his cause, and the correspondence between the two of them in the summer of 49 B.C. is a complex game of cat and mouse and elegant wordplay.

“Look at what Cicero says to Atticus in the next letter,” Foster says to the crowd of thirty or so standing around dodging cars in the streets of Rome. “Cicero notices that in Caesar's letters asking for support, he uses the word ‘*ops*,’ which, if you notice, friends, means

*help* in the singular, but in the plural often means *resources, money*. So Cicero—who was a very clever man, says: ‘*quibus iam opes meas, non ut superioribus litteris opem expectat.*’ ‘In which letter he is asking for my resources, not, as in the previous letter, for my help,’ says Foster, translating literally. Then Foster offers his own free translation: “So Cicero says: ‘Now what does he want? My bank account!’” The tour ends in front of Caesar’s statue just outside the Forum, with Foster leading the group in a Latin song to Caesar sung to the tune of “My Darling Clementine.”

Foster pokes fun at himself and even at his favorite Latin authors. He enjoys the absurdity as well as the glories of the Roman world, which the Romans, with their well-developed sense of irony, never fail to notice. Visiting the site of Cicero’s house on the Palatine Hill, we read a serious account of its destruction by Cicero’s political enemies along with a humorous letter Cicero wrote about hearing his next-door neighbor snoring. “*Haec ego scribebam Marcellus candidatus ita stertebat ut ego vicinus audirem.*” (As I was writing this, Marcellus the candidate was really snoring so that I, his neighbor, could hear.)

The same day, as we were passing the house of Augustus Caesar, Foster read from a passage in Suetonius, which, after listing the emperor’s many virtues, mentions that he wore *calciamentis altiusculis*, literally *higher shoes* or *elevator shoes*. It is typical of both Suetonius and of Foster not to miss such a small telling detail that, quite literally, brings his subject down to human size.

To keep things from getting too solemn, halfway through many of his walks, Foster will break out and pass around a huge bottle of inexpensive jug wine—adding an element of celebration to the occasion. Because he does not take himself too seriously, he does not mind when curious bystanders—fascinated by a monk in a blue polyester jumpsuit declaiming in Latin—suddenly interject themselves into one of his outings. Foster enjoys the give and take and absorbs it into the experience. When we were standing in the neighborhood that once held the theater of Pompey, a local resident, who fancied himself a knowledgeable Cicerone, came over to explain about the assassination of Caesar. Rather than dismissing the man, Foster invited him to tell us what he knew. “They stabbed Caesar twenty-three times,” the man said in Italian. Foster then pointed to our reading sheet and found the passage in Plutarch saying that Caesar had indeed been stabbed twenty-three times. “Even today, in Rome,” the man said, “twenty-three is a lucky number.” Plutarch’s reference to the number of wounds on Caesar’s body may explain why many Romans today pencil 23 on their lottery cards.

In the same vein, Paul Gwynne recalls a similar moment on a trip

to Horace's Sabine farm in the countryside in Latium near Rome. The group had clambered through the weeds and brambles to find the remains of Horace's house and a Roman fountain to which Horace dedicated one of his most beautiful poems, the "Fons Bandusiae." The group read the Latin poem and talked about it, then read Virgil on Horace along with various commentaries, ancient and modern. But then, the local custodian, charged with looking after Horace's estate, wanted to join the group and recite the poem in Italian. "This guy was five-foot-nothing, as tall as he was wide, with a dark complexion—glowing with life. It was wonderful, because we had just read a description of Horace, which said he was about five-foot-nothing and as tall as he was wide, with a dark complexion. And so you've got this guy—who obviously enjoys life in the country—who recites this poem of Horace about the fountain which we're all standing in front of. It was almost as if the country gods had come down and said, 'Here we are.'"

These uncanny moments happen a lot when you spend time with Foster: for someone for whom Latin is a living language, time seems to bend, past becomes present and present, past, and the long-banished *genii loci* appear to return.

These moments appear especially precious because they are probably unrepeatable. Although he is still going strong at fifty-four, Foster shows no signs of wanting to leave behind a legacy. He has many intensely enthusiastic students but no disciples. Since he doesn't believe in textbooks, he has never written one. For his Ph.D. thesis he was supposed to write a textbook, using the letters of Cicero, to teach Latin, but he still hasn't gotten around to it. "I don't have the time," Foster says. "Maybe when I get too old to keep on teaching." But few of his students believe that he will ever stop teaching; most believe that when Foster goes it will be in mid-sentence, hammering away at a passage of Cicero or St. Augustine. "If he couldn't teach at the Gregorian, he'd be out on the street, teaching, and none of the students would mind. If it rained, they'd bring an umbrella," says Gwynne. "How many people do you know who can inspire that?"

As the school year came toward an end, someone in the class suggested that he at least publish a collection of his homework assignments, the *ludi*, in book form. "You see these?" he said, picking up a batch of homework sheets. "You know what will happen to these in a few weeks? I'll burn them all." He destroys his elaborately constructed work sheets, so that he has to reinvent his courses every year, making each course new and unique.