CURRENT ISSUES

Docere Aut Non Docere Latinum

Brian Dykstra

To teach or not to teach Latin: that is the question. Whether 'tis nobler for the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of an outrageous dead language, or to take arms against Latin's sea of troubles to advocate the study of living languages such as German or Spanish. Much research is being done in educational circles on the usefulness of Latin for today's students. The study of the classical languages has fallen on hard times and is a topic of debate among educators.

Two recent newspaper articles also dealt with this issue. A reader sent in an article which appeared in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* of August 1, 1987 called, "The Last Gasp of a Dead Language" written by Marcus Eliason who is a writer for the Associated Press; and the *Grand Rapids Press* of July 24, 1987, printed an article by the deputy chairman of the National Eddowment for the Humanities, John Agresto, titled, "Why Should Students Study Latin and Greek?"

It is certainly true that fewer students are taking courses in the classical languages. Eliason demonstrates this when he writes:

> In the 15 years since the ancient Roman tongue ceased to be a compulsory subject to earn a high-school diploma in Britain, the number of Latin students has fallen sharply, while ancient Greek has all but vanished.
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> The debate resurfaced in March when it came out that in London, which has 300,000 high-school students, the number choosing to study Latin for their diploma was down from 877 in 1976 to just 286 last year. This year, only 30 of London's 146 high schools are offering Latin studies.

There are various reasons for Latin's decline. No doubt anybody who took Latin and purchased a used book has read in the writing of a former owner of the book:

Latin is a language as dead
as dead can be.
It killed the ancient Romans
and now it's killing me.

A language which is not currently spoken is viewed as being of little value. A traveller simply cannot go into a restaurant overseas and order a tasty local dish using Latin.

Latin also suffers from its reputation of being tough and not fun. Eliason writes:

> But most generations remember Latin classes as a nightmare of parsing phrases from ancient texts and conjugating serried ranks of verbs under the beady eye of a robed, cane-wielding teacher.
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> "It became unfashionable to study Latin because parents would tell their children, 'Oh, you don't want to study Latin. I did and I hated it,' " Belinda Dennis, a teacher and member of the Association for the Reform of Latin Teaching, said in an interview.

Latin also suffers because it is not useful to today's market. Living languages are more useful in business and travel. There is more of a demand for science and technology not only in many areas of business, but also for national security and trade. Eliason says:

> To those who say the classical heritage is Britain's virtue, critics reply that Latin and Greek for too long eclipsed the sciences, leaving Britain at a technological disadvantage.

Now that Latin lies bleeding badly on the battlefield of curriculum, its defenders rush to the scene with their tote bags of salve. Eliason presents the common defense for Latin in his article. The common defense for Latin is that it gives mental discipline, helps in the study of other foreign languages, improves spelling and grammar, and is an aid in vocabulary development. Eliason writes:

> Columnist Anne Smith says that mental discipline imposed by learning Latin still serves her well.
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> "Had it not been for the patient construction and analysis learned in the Latin room, I'd never have been able to fix my mother's washing machine as I did," she wrote recently in the Scotsman newspaper.
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> . . . Latin is needed to help students master technical terms, prepare to study European languages, improve spelling and grammar and learn the origins of Western culture.
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> . . . Dr. Rudolph Masciantonio, director of

foreign-language studies for the Philadelphia School District, says that knowing the Latin word *manus* (hand) helps pupils tackle difficult English derivatives like manuscript, manipulate, manufacture.

"They absorb it like a sponge and enjoy it tremendously," he said in a telephone interview.

Agresto asserts that these reasons are too shallow. He claims:

> Such narrow and merely utilitarian arguments are perhaps why a majority of Latin students drop the language after only one year. Surely we need to know the value of these ancient studies, but is there nothing good the classics have to offer beyond vocabulary building, pretechnical training and the academic equivalent of Marine boot camp?

Agresto's defense of Latin and the classical languages is:

> These languages and their books, their plays, their modes of thought have helped form not only our contemporary speech, but our politics, our literature, our history and the shape of our civilization. If we are to know ourselves, we must know our own. Despite glib talk in certain circles that insists our first job is to open our minds to the understanding of other cultures and ways of life, if we fail to know our own civilization — its hopes, its principles, its reasons and its greatness — we will not be able to make comparisons that are even worth a dime.
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> . . . Properly taught, the classics inhabit the best of all possible worlds. They can appeal to the desire to know ourselves, to see the roots of our principles, ideas and culture and, at the same time, to see who we are not.

Would some learning of Latin or Greek be beneficial to us? We might not be as interested in learning about our cultural heritage as others, but what about the writings and music of the early church? Would understanding more about the language and culture of ancient Rome and Greece help us to understand better the early New Testament church? In times when the King James version of the Bible could become hard to find and other Bible translations are suspect, might others besides preachers benefit from the study of Greek or Latin? *Salve.*