Pope Benedict XVI has recently set up a Papal Academy for Latin, via a Papal motu proprio. The idea of the Academy is to promote the use and study of Latin within the Roman Catholic Church.

It may come as a surprise to some, but Latin is still the official language of the Catholic Church in the West. This means that all publications that emanate from the Vatican, though simultaneously appearing in several European languages, also appear in Latin, and the Latin version is the official version. Thus, should any doubt, or rather dubium (as the theologians say), arise because of the wording of some Papal document, the version to be consulted ought to be the Latin one.

This can be, believe it or not, of crucial importance. Theology is a nuanced subject and the devil (for want of a better phrase) is often in the detail. It is often said that the Church teaches that artificial birth control is an intrinsic evil, but when one turns to the letter of Pope Paul VI, entitled Humanae Vitae, after its opening words, which deals with this matter does not use the term 'intrinsic evil' but the much softer sounding 'intrinsic dishonesty'. One of the reasons Benedict XVI wants the Church to retain the use of Latin is in order to ensure fidelity to the theological sources. Every theologian up to the twelfth century wrote in Latin; and in order to understand what they really said one has to understand their frequently highly nuanced Latin.

Another example may be of interest. The first question of St Thomas Aquinas's multi-volumed Summa Theologica is this: 'an Deus sit?' A few misguided people think that this should be translated as 'Does God exist?' But to translate the subjunctive as an indicative wipes away most of the meaning.

Aquinas was not really interested in the existence of God as such - the fact that the Summa extends for many questions makes one realise that the answer to the first question is likely to be positive. What Aquinas is really asking may best be expressed by the question: What are the preconditions for the existence of God? What is necessary if God is to be? In other words - 'Whether there be a God?' and whether that question makes sense, which is a far more philosophically deep question to the crass 'Does God exist?'

Paul VI, who died in 1978, was probably the last theologian or indeed Pope to write in Latin; all his letters to the Church were composed on a battered Olivetti typewriter in Latin. John Paul II, it is generally thought, wrote in Polish.
which was then translated into other languages, including Latin. And it shows! Whereas Paul VI's letters were models of precision, clarity and concision, those of John Paul II were book-length, dense and complicated. I read the works of Paul VI in English translation as a child, and read them with profit. John Paul's work has to be read time and time again in order to squeeze meaning out of it. Paul VI stands at the end of a long line of classically trained theologians; John Paul II inaugurated an era of Church-speak that is often dubbed 'Latinism' by its critics.

In fact the Latinity of the Roman Catholic Church has been pared down a great deal in recent decades, and the founding of the new Papal Academy must be taken as a sign of the desire to put this decline into reverse. Seminaries where future priests are trained still require to teach Latin; the Mass can still be celebrated in Latin and all priests are supposed to be able to do this; but these regulations are honoured more in the breach than the observance.

Until the 1960s, not only were students taught Latin, they were taught in Latin. The text books, manuals of theology that had not changed much for centuries, were in Latin, and the lectures based on these manuals were in Latin too. It is true to say that the standard of teaching was often abysmal. One famous (that is famously bad) professor in Rome was quite inaudible, and when a microphone was placed in front of him, he would put it away with the words 'hoc instrumentum non est necessarium'. Another would start his lectures on the Old Testament every year with the same sentences, to wit: 'in Palestina, sunt montes et valles, montes sunt inter valles, et valles sunt inter montes.'

By the sixties, when everything else was changing, the manuals of theology were tired, the teaching methods were tired, and Latin, by association, seemed dusty and out of date. The Roman schools, by the end of the decade, had all switched to Italian, which was not perhaps what the international student body would have chosen, left to itself.

The abandonment of Latin has been part of the general impoverishment of the patrimony of Roman Catholicism that has taken place in the last five decades. Out have gone the great hymns of the Roman Church, masterpieces like the Dies Irae, which is still heard in the concert hall, but hardly ever in the Church it was composed for. Out too has gone the sonorous Latin of the Mass, though it has to be said that the Latin of the Mass is Latin, not of the Golden Age of Horace and Virgil, but for the most part the decadent age of Pope Gregory the Great (who died in 604). Worst of all, in have crept methods of thought that are woolly and verbose, from which the habit of thinking in Latin would have saved us.

The Pope's Latin Academy will probably be mocked by some and resented by others as an attempt to turn back the clock, or, as contemporary theologians often say, to squeeze the toothpaste back into the tube. And here we have a real problem: many Catholics today, especially older ones, are wary of Latin, and see any attempt to revive Latin, or to use it in the Mass, as a Trojan Horse for a wholesale return to the bad old days. (The young, who do not remember the pre-sixties Church, do not, by and large have this problem.) But this is not what the Pope has in mind, if one can judge him by his other actions. Benedict XVI has a huge love of Europe's cultural heritage, and sees Latin as integral to this - about which he is surely right. Moreover, someone as culturally refined (indeed some would say fastidious) as Benedict could hardly be suspected on trying to revive the degenerate habits of yesteryear. For it cannot be denied that back in the 1950s Mass was often said, in Latin, by priests who had only a hazy idea of what the words they were reading meant. The Pope is not trying to breathe new life into a tree that is long withered. Rather he is planting something new, a Latin Academy, which, along with, for example the Church's interest in art and architecture, will help in the cultural revival of our age. Though, it has to be stressed, just as it has taken our culture a long time to decay, it will also take it a long time to revive. If this Latin Academy is a success, that success will be felt centuries from now.

It is not yet clear exactly what the Academy will do in practical terms. It may well be an exclusive club for the great and good of the classical world, who may be invited to join as members of the academy, rather like the Papal Academy for Science, whose members are not necessarily Roman Catholics. As such, it may organise conferences to raise the profile of Latin studies. One hopes it will take practical steps to support and encourage the teaching of Latin in schools and universities, particularly those institutions already administered by the Church. Perhaps it will encourage summer schools and provide bursaries for those wanting to brush up their Latin, or take it up from scratch.

One thing I hope it does not do, and am reasonably confident that it will not do, is retreat into an ecclesiastical ghetto. The founding document makes clear that the Academy is not an Academy for Church Latin, but for Latin, which seems to indicate that Latin in an ecclesiastical context is no different to Latin in a secular context. This is refreshing. One of the problems that led to the decline of Latin in the Church was the way the Church's use of Latin diverged from proper healthy Latin through the creation of a linguistic ghetto. Catholics in the Church who use Latin need to be as in touch with Virgil as they are with Aquinas. Indeed, a knowledge of Virgil is invaluable in understanding Saint Augustine. Aurelius Augustinus, who died in 430, just as the Western Empire's last intact and prosperous province, his native Africa, was being lost to the Vandals, wrote Latin works which were consciously modelled on Virgil and Cicero, which were the two authors he, a qualified Roman rhetor, grew up on. It is true that there are traces of many authors who postdate the Golden Age of Latin letters in the works of Augustine, but the Saint, who is the last figure of any cultural note in the Western Empire, as well as being the chief inspiration of scholars in the Middle Ages, remains a giant Latin literature, quite apart from his theological distinction. Benedict XVI is supposed to be an Augustinian, and in his Latin Academy, perhaps wants to do what Augustine does - speak to the Church, by all means, but speak to the wider world of culture as well.

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