

Chapter Two

HOW TO LEARN OR RE-LEARN LATIN

Some good news: Learning Latin is not only easy, but it won't even take you very long. If you can devote thirty to sixty minutes a day to study, you can master this simple, logical, and extremely beautiful language in between three and twelve months, depending on your background and natural aptitude. Most Americans waste much more time than that every day, especially on TV, so finding the time to study Latin shouldn't be too tough. Simply turn the set off for an hour every evening. After enjoying this small period of quiet for a few weeks, you may find yourself leaving the set off more and more, whether to study Latin or just to enjoy the silence.

More good news: You need to learn only how to *read* Latin. You needn't worry about writing, speaking, or understanding it, as you would with almost any other foreign language. Granted, if you wish, you can push on and become completely fluent in Latin, but for all practical purposes, you need only a good reading knowledge. With just that you can use the missal, the breviary, and so on.

Latin: Classical vs. Ecclesiastical

Latin comes in two "flavors," Classical and Ecclesiastical. Classical Latin was the language used by the great writers of the Roman Empire (Caesar, Cicero, Virgil, *et al.*). Ecclesiastical Latin, which grew out of the Classical language, has been used by the Church down through the centuries. Obviously, as a Catholic wanting to learn how to read the missal, the breviary, and Church documents, you should concentrate on the latter, Ecclesiastical Latin. But, frankly, overlooking the obvious divergence in subject matter, the major difference between the two is in pronunciation. Classical Latin has several harsh, almost Germanic sounds, while Ecclesiastical Latin has only the resonant, melodious sounds of modern day Italian. (Granted, back when the Jesuits still used Latin, they used the Spanish pronunciation, but it differs from the Italian in only two consonant sounds, soft "c" and "gn.")

I remember a seminary priest back in the early 1950s who denied any

difference between Classical and Ecclesiastical Latin beyond pronunciation and subject matter. He claimed that, through Her history, the Church has used every variety of Latin known to man. He could support this claim with as many examples as necessary to silence, if not convince, the unfortunate seminarian who had provoked his response. He had a point, too. Latin, like all living languages, grew and developed through the centuries without really losing anything it ever had. You'll find no construction in the Classical authors that you can't also find in Church writings. In fact, you'll find some constructions in Ecclesiastical Latin... for example the expanded use of the infinitive to express purpose... that weren't yet used in the Classical Period. Ecclesiastical Latin also has a fuller vocabulary, both because new words were added... for examples, *monasterium* = monastery, *nonna* = nun, etc. ... and because old words took on new meanings... for example, *oratio* changed from "speech" to "prayer." Thus, Ecclesiastical Latin is more flexible and more expressive than Classical Latin, just as Shakespeare's English is more flexible and more expressive than Chaucer's.

However, during the Renaissance, chest-thumping scholars, after rediscovering Classical Latin, had to have it another way. For them, Classical Latin was necessarily superior because of its combination of antiquity and newness (to them). They started the myth that Classical Latin was elegant, beautiful, and expressive, while Ecclesiastical Latin was common, ugly, and vulgar. The Protestant Revolt followed the Renaissance, leaving some once-Catholic universities in Protestant hands. These universities focused quite naturally on Classical Latin and further promulgated the Renaissance myth about the inferiority of Ecclesiastical Latin. Such nonsense continues to this day. One even hears it from Catholics who should know better.

If You've Never Studied Latin

Those who didn't take Latin in high school or college, and especially those who've never studied any foreign language, probably need human guidance through the basics. If you live near a college or university that offers Latin (always Classical), you should investigate what they offer and, if possible, discuss your goals with the teacher. If the teacher inspires confidence, go ahead and enroll. In two semesters you'll learn the basics of Latin grammar (albeit with Classical pronunciations, vocabulary, and readings). Between travel time, class time, and study time, you'll spend substantially more than