

Vatican Latin reboots education for true freedom

By C.S. Morrissey

On May 9 the Vatican web site unveiled a special section entirely devoted to the Holy See's official language: Latin.

The Latin section now supplements the English, Italian, Spanish, French, German, and Portuguese versions of the Vatican's official output. True, some Latin documents were available online previously, but they were not organized in any comprehensive fashion.

Now a new Latin page, summoned with one click from the Vatican's main page, allows web surfers to quickly and easily access statements from the Pope, Vatican II documents, the Catechism, documents from the Roman Curia, the Code of Canon Law, and the Bible, all displayed clearly in beautiful Latin.

Many Vatican observers will probably deride this new development as quaint and irrelevant, yet Pope Benedict XVI's academic background and lifelong love of education may offer a clue why people should think twice about the significance of this Vatican upgrade.

During his recent trip to the Catholic University of America, for instance, the Pope hinted at his hope for renewal in Catholic education. He said, "We observe today a timidity in the face of the category of the good and an aimless pursuit of novelty parading as the realization of freedom."

In other words, perhaps Pope Benedict, with this new web page, may be quietly insisting Latin is good.

A good education opens you up to not just Latin, but many good things, yet many parents have observed how school curriculums have often changed for the worse since their days in school.

For example, in 2004 British philosopher Roger Scruton lamented, "Grammar schools have been largely abolished, the curriculum has been vandalized (and also compelled) and the subjects which contain worthwhile knowledge: maths, the hard sciences, Latin, Greek, and ancient history, have been driven to the margins of the system."

"Having destroyed the schools, the state would now like to destroy the universities," Professor Scruton protested, "by forcing them to take the dumbed-down products of its vandalism."

Scruton is married to Sophie, with children Sam, then 5, and Lucy, 3. He was roundly mocked because he wrote (in jest), "It goes without saying that Sam will not enjoy his childhood," planning for Sam to be reading Greek by the age of 6 (as John Stuart Mill did), along with "nightly readings of the classics and our home performances of Shakespeare."

Scruton's critics missed the joke, and the joke's main point: namely, that one man alone cannot beat back the sewage of popular culture to preserve the cultural treasures of a great tradition. For even if he did try, how many would follow his lead? How many would simply view him as quaint and irrelevant?

However ... what if that one man were our Pope? Indeed, for true education in the good to work on a sustainable basis, the co-operation of many cultural resources and dedicated local communities would be required.

What if, then, Pope Benedict's new Latin reboot is a seed for a new springtime for Catholic education? What if schools and universities followed his quiet but

insistent lead? What if they redoubled their efforts to resist the vandalism deployed by "the dictatorship of relativism" and offered students not platitudes but rather truly "worthwhile knowledge"?

Father Richard John Neuhaus said, commenting on Pope Benedict's visit to Catholic University, "Education is about truth, and the crisis of truth is a crisis of faith. Authentic freedom is discovered in the exploration of truth."

Should students learn Latin? The option is now one mouse click away. Why learn Latin? Why click that way?

Two reasons: first, not just one concerned parent, but the Vatican itself has obviously decided that the language is neither quaint nor irrelevant in the Internet age. Yes, the Vatican is now ready for you to Google Latin on your future iPhone.

Second, as Pope Benedict put it at Catholic University, "Freedom is not an opting out. It is an opting in, a participation in Being itself."

Well, if that phrase "Being itself" is not clear, it's because the Pope's learned allusion is to the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas. The phrase is a technical translation of St. Thomas' cryptic Latin formulation: ipsum esse, so if your Catholic education lacked training in Latin and philosophy, you may very well be lacking the resources for fully understanding what Benedict means when he speaks of true freedom.

I like to explain to my new students what participation in "Being itself" means this way: have you ever heard of the TV commercial that says, "Be all you can be"? That's the idea. True freedom means truly activating all the great potential you have within you (like learning other languages).

That's why education in true freedom is so exciting. You can work at being your true self, the full person you really are meant to be.

The Vatican's Latin Web site is found at www.vatican.va by

clicking on "Sancta Sedes" or "Latine."

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