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*Why Students Study Latin  
at St. Theresa Academy?*  
by Jonathan Beeson

**I**f today's elementary student learns another language, he or she typically learns Spanish; however at St Theresa Academy we intend to teach Latin from first thru eight grade. To many onlookers St Theresa Academy appears novel but just a cursory glance into the history of American and British education shows that historical precedence tips its hat to Latin, not Spanish. For centuries the study of Latin grammar vitalized English and American Grammar Schools but its reign, quickly, and unceremoniously, came to an end at the beginning of the twentieth century. We feel something was lost.

One can easily imagine a person initially being surprised, somewhat intrigued, but ultimately unmoved by the historical precedent for teaching Latin in primary school. There can, of course, be many reasons for such a reaction, but, most frequently, objections concern the best use of a student's time. Is it best to have students study a "dead language" like Latin? My short answer is, yes, but a more developed response to this concern involves situating Latin within the greater educational philosophy of a classical Catholic school.

### Latin and Language Arts

When students are in Pre K thru the first grade, they spend most of their time learning how to read phonetically. In contrast to the "look say" or "whole word" method phonetics teaches, in graduated way, the rules of pronunciation by breaking words down into their component phonemes. Through phonics, students have the key to unlock the printed page. Once children are reading we begin, in an age appropriate manner, teaching them grammar. Grammar,



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like phonics, breaks a sentence down into its component parts and conveys the rules which display the structure of our language.

At St. Theresa Academy, when we start English grammar, we also start the study of Latin. We feel that Latin assists us in the study of English grammar in a number of ways. First it helps the students see their own language from the perspective of another language. Goethe once remarked that: “Those who know nothing of foreign languages know nothing of their own.” Any language offers helpful perspective but Latin is particularly helpful as it is an inflected language. In contrast to non-inflected languages like English, Latin word order varies greatly from sentence to sentence or author to author. Latin’s radically different syntax, therefore, offers a truly different perspective and thus enables the English speaking student to more fully grasp how words function in a sentence. Second Latin assists us in the study of English precisely because it is so familiar to us. Latin—along with ancient Germanic dialects—is the foundation of our language. It is well known that Latin helps with vocabulary building as over 50% of our words—typically the more difficult polysyllabic ones—come from Latin. But the foundation of English grammar is also influenced by Latin and we choose English grammars that make connections to Latin grammar. In short, students who study Latin can contextualize—and thereby understand—English grammar in a way that non Latin students can not.

It is significant to our overall Language Arts program that Latin and English are taught in a manner that highly emphasizes grammatical structure. We want kids to understand on a conceptual level how words relate. In acquiring this conceptual framework, brain mirroring, if I may borrow an analogy from neuroscience, occurs. In learning the structure of language, children are developing structured minds. Much like phonics, the study of Latin and English grammar becomes a “key” to unlock a world which is still, sad to say, largely unknown to most high school students. In creating an



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ordered mind which can understand the ordered relationship between words, grammar provides students with the ability to reflect on the conceptual order behind words and thus move to logic! At St. Theresa Academy, Latin plays an vital role in helping us achieve important educational goals.

But none of these goals seem to be accomplished in the typical American School Spanish curriculum. Why? In short because of the way Spanish is taught. Grammar takes a back seat to speaking in the average Spanish class (1<sup>st</sup> thru 12<sup>th</sup> grade) and as a result students miss a wonderful teaching event. One can only hope that they are exposed to a rigorous grammar curriculum through the school's Language Arts program but, more times than not, that is not the case. To make matters worse, most students never really learn how to speak Spanish. What is typical in terms of language instruction in our country is driven by noble concerns but its paltry success hardly recommends ignoring the time honored tradition of teaching Latin grammar to primary students.

People, however, may still protest against the study of Latin. Some might respond to my argument thus far by suggesting that we teach Spanish with more emphasis on Spanish grammar. In response, I think such a proposal would be an improvement of the status quo; nevertheless, I still think students are better served by starting with Latin as their first foreign language. My rationale for this position will become apparent as I further develop my argument for Latin, but, at this point in the essay, it is important to address the reason why most people just assume the appropriateness of Spanish and reject Latin out of hand. The general consensus seems to be that a living language is more useful than a dead language. Dorothy Sayers, the great Dante scholar and educational philosopher, recognizing the importance of usefulness, persuasively turns this nagging objection against Latin into an argument for Latin:

The sort of argument which continually crops up in correspondence upon the teaching of Latin is: "Why should children waste time learning a dead language when Spanish or what-



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have-you would be much more useful to him in business?" The proper answer, which is practically never given, is the counter-question: "Why should a child waste time learning half a dozen languages from scratch, when Latin would enable him to learn them all in a fraction of the time?" .

Dorothy Sayers makes a very good point. When one has a good education in Latin, one already knows 80 plus percent of the romance languages. Let me offer an example to make my point:

She always closes the window before she eats. (English)

Ea semper fenestram claudit antequam cenet (Latin)

Ella chiude sempre la finestra prima di cenare. (Italian)

Ea închide întotdeauna fereastra înainte de a cina. (Romanian)

Elle ferme toujours la fenêtre avant de dîner. (French)

Ella siempre cierra la ventana antes de cenar. (Spanish)

Ela fecha sempre a janela antes de jantar. (Portuguese)

Ella tanca sempre la finestra abans de sopar. (Catalan)

In essence, when one knows Latin well, learning the romance languages is not terribly difficult. It is our hope that students will take full advantage of their Latin education and learn additional languages in the years that follow their time at the Academy. It is often said: Rome was not built in a day; what we intend in primary education is to lay a solid educational foundation for future intellectual development. Much more, of course, could be said concerning best teaching practices for language acquisition, but, in the interest of time and clarity, it behooves us to explain the primary rationale for teaching Latin at St Theresa Academy.

### A Catholic Worldview Inspires the Teaching of Latin at St. Theresa Academy

Learning a language is part of the larger process of enculturation. Enculturation is that process whereby one is prepared to live within a certain culture. It would be fair to say that one can not know a culture well without learning its language. At St. Theresa



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Academy we are concerned to enculturate our students to Western Civilization through Latin Literature.

It should be clear, then, that we are hardly provincially minded educators. Western Civilization is far from monolithic; there are many subcultures and centuries that comprise Western Culture. But they are a united—and thus we can speak of Western civilization—because they are all Latin based cultures. It is also important to see how the Church defines Western Civilization. The West is Latin but it is also Christian. Prior to the advent of the Church much was accomplished in the ancient and classical world but all of these accomplishments were saved, transmitted and developed by the Church. Furthermore, we would insist that all the genuine advancements of our now secularized culture stand on the historical foundations laid by the Church and find their true home in the Church.

Still one may wonder—of all the world's cultures, why this culture? First we study Western Civilization because it is privileged. We are not saying, of course, that other cultures are bereft of all greatness nor are we abandoning a critical perspective towards the West; instead we are simply making the assertion that unique and high things were accomplished in this culture and no where else. We want our kids to be inspired by this history. Also Western Civilization is privileged because it is ours. One can hardly hope to know others if one does not first know oneself. But finally, Western Civilization is privileged because it gives a unique glimpse into God's redemptive plan for the entire world. Please do not understand me to be suggesting that God intends the world to be Western—the world is more decentralized than ever and will continue, I am sure, in that direction—but I would want to insist that—contra all the current lopsidedness about diversity—the world longs for that type of unity that the Church promises and has already achieved, in some measure, within Western history. At St. Theresa Academy, we are convinced



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that studying Western Civilization through the lens of faith gives students a global mindedness that they could not acquire elsewhere.

St Theresa Academy enculturates its students through the study of Latin Literature. Students begin the study of Latin grammar in primary school. In middle school they begin to translate the Vulgate and texts from the middle ages. God willing, they will continue the study of Latin in one of our good Catholic high schools. In high school and college they will begin to read the great classical authors of ancient Rome. I would not want to suggest that being Catholic necessitates teaching Latin but I would want to say that a Latin centered curriculum thoroughly equips students to play their part in an ever developing Catholic Culture which promotes human greatness and intends that global unity for which the human race longs.

