

LATIN LESSON ONE

A. Introduction

Why learn Latin ? We've all got a million things to do, and language study requires time. Why should I invest precious time in something as remote from modern life as the language of ancient Rome ? Here are a few reasons:

If you are reading this, it is because you are already interested in the traditional Latin Mass. And if you are interested in the TLM, that's because you think it will help make you holy and bring you closer to Jesus. To pray the TLM effectively, you need to know a little Latin !

Fortunately, ecclesiastical Latin is not hard !!!! Classical Latin -- the language of Vergil, Horace, Cicero, etc. -- that is hard. The Latin syntax and vocabulary of the Mass is much easier.

A serious ancillary benefit: The Church's patrimony and the culture of Western Civilization is awash in Latin! We are who we are today because of St. Jerome's *Vulgate* translation of the Bible into Latin, the beauty and holiness of the TLM, and the thought of the Latin Fathers and Doctors of the Church, including St. Augustine, St. Anselm, St. Bernard and St. Thomas. There are forces afoot in the Church and the World today which seek to do away with this precious heritage. If you prize the tradition of the Church and a culture informed by Christianity, learning Latin will help you strike a blow in this battle for the soul of the human race.

B. Latin "Declensions"

So, let's begin. With a semester of the Poughkeepsie Latin School already under our belt, we've learned that the first obstacle which English speakers face in learning Latin is understanding the English equivalents of Latin grammar. In English, meaning is frequently conveyed by the order in which words are placed in a sentence. "The dog bit the cat" does not mean the same thing as "the cat bit the dog." We find it puzzling, then, that the meaning of a Latin sentence does not depend on the order in which the words appear; those words can be placed in just about any order, and the meaning of the sentence will remain the same !

That is because, in Latin, the grammatical function of a word is signified not by its place in the sentence, but instead by what is called "inflection": altering the ending of the word. English for the most part has done away with inflection, but not entirely. Here's an example: the word "who". If we want to talk about a person doing something, we say "who." If we want to talk about doing something to a person, we say "whom." And if we want to talk about something that belongs to a person, we say "whose."

"Who, whom, whose" ~ this word is "inflected" by changing its ending to signal its grammatical function. The grammatical function thus signified is called a "case":

“Who” functions as the subject of a sentence. It is in the “nominative” case.

“Whom” functions as the direct object of a sentence. It is in the “accusative” case.

“Whose” functions to indicate possession. It is in the “genitive” case.

Almost all Latin nouns work this way. The nouns fall into five (5) categories called “declensions”, each with a set of word endings which signal the different grammatical “cases” of the nouns in both singular and plural.

In Latin, there are five (5) basic cases: Nominative, Genitive, Dative, Accusative, Ablative. (We’ll leave out the “Vocative” for now.) Consider this sentence:

“The boy sends his father’s book to the girl with affection.”

“Nominative” ~ the subject of a sentence: “The **boy** sends...”

“Genitive” ~ possession (usually conveyed in English by ‘s): “...his **father’s** book...”

“Dative” ~ the indirect object (to whom something is given): “...**to the girl**...”

“Accusative” ~ the direct object of a sentence: “...his father’s **book**...”

“Ablative” ~ various functions, including means by which: “...**with affection**...”

If we were to write this sentence in Latin using the same English word order, we would write:

“Puer mittit sui patris librum puellae caritate.”

A much more typical Latin word order would be:

“Puer librum patris sui caritate puellae mittit.” or

“Puellae caritate librum patris sui puer mittit.”

Although the word order is different, these three sentences are identical in meaning.

Note that in the Latin translation of the English sentence there are no words corresponding directly with the English words “the”, “to” or “with.” (1) Latin dispenses with what in English we call definite and indefinite articles: “the” and “a, an”. (2) English employs the preposition “to” to accomplish what Latin accomplishes with the “dative” case. (3) English employs prepositions like “with” or “by” to accomplish what Latin accomplishes with the “ablative” case.

So, you can see how important it is for understanding Latin to know the inflected word endings for Latin nouns.

Here are the inflected endings for the **first declension** noun “puella” (girl):

Case	Singular	Plural
Nominative	puella (girl)	puellae (girls)
Genitive	puellae (girl’s, of the girl)	puellarum (girls’, of the girls)
Dative	puellae (to the girl)	puellis (to the girls)
Accusative	puellam (girl)	puellas (girls)
Ablative	puella (by, with the girl)	puellis (by, with the girls)

C. So, What Is Really Involved In Getting Up To Speed ?

There are beautiful dual language (Latin / English) Missals available to assist you in participating in the traditional Latin Mass. The Latin Mass Society orders the Baronius Press Missal in bulk and makes it available to you at a substantial discount. You could simply rely on the English translation and leave it at that. Or you can invest some time and energy in learning enough Latin to engage with the TLM in all its wonder and beauty and rely on the English translation only as needed. What’s involved in getting up to speed ?

Here are the basics:

Vocabulary: You’d be surprised how many Latin words you know already. As so many English words are derived from Latin, many of the Latin words you encounter in the Mass have English cognates. The vocabulary you need to participate in the TLM is finite and readily acquired.

Nouns: Latin nouns fall into five (5) declensions, each with a set of word endings like the first declension set forth above. Memorizing these word endings lets you instinctively recognize the “case” (nominative, genitive, etc.) and “number” (singular or plural) of the noun and quickly grasp its meaning.

Verbs: Latin verbs, like Latin nouns, are “inflected” to express meaning. Much like the nouns, the verbs fall into four (4) categories, called “conjugations”, each with a set of word endings. Verbs are more complicated than nouns, because of the number of different grammatical functions that must be expressed: (1) person (I, you, he/she/it, we, you, they), (2) number (singular and plural), (3) tense (present, past, future, etc.), (4) voice (active and passive), and (5) mood (indicative and subjunctive). Some familiarity with the system of Latin verbs is essential for comprehending the Latin of the TLM.

Translation: Fortunately, we are not trying to become fluent Latin speakers. We need only recognize the meaning of the words in our Latin Missals. Our task is made easier in several respects:

Much of the language of the Mass is the same from Sunday to Sunday.

You already know many of the prayers in English: e.g., the Gloria, Creed, Sanctus, Agnus Dei.

You already know in English much of the Scripture that you will hear in the Epistle and Gospel.

All of these things make understanding the Latin of the TLM considerably easier. With practice (and you will be practicing every Sunday at Mass ~ the Church is a great teacher!) facility in translation can be achieved in a remarkably short period of time.

D. What's Next ?

The Poughkeepsie Latin School will be resuming classes in the Spring. For the next few weeks, I will be sending out these brief Latin Lessons as a refresher for our existing students and a primer for potential new students who might contemplate attending the Latin School.

Details re time and place for Latin School classes will be forthcoming. In the mean time, if you have questions you can reach me at latinmasshv@gmail.com

God Bless James