

Father Reginald Foster, exuberant figure in Vatican life who was Latinist to four popes – obituary

He translated papal writings from Italian into Latin and devised new Latin words for modern phenomena from Twitter to hot dogs

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Reginald Foster: he did not charge students for lessons and they soon warmed to his eccentric but rigorous teaching style CREDIT: Chris Warde-Jones

Father Reginald Foster, who died on Christmas Day aged 81, was the Roman Catholic Church's greatest post-war Latin specialist; for 40 years he translated Vatican documents into the ancient tongue and he served as Latin secretary to four popes.

Following the Second Vatican Council, Foster (an American Discalced Carmelite priest) mounted a brave and eloquent, if ultimately futile, protest against the marginalisation of Latin. He condemned the growing ignorance of the language in the upper echelons of the Church, and argued with considerable ingenuity that there was a place for Latin in the modern world.

“Reggie”, as he was known to generations of students, had a formidable grasp of Latin. His prowess was said to rival that of Cicero and St Augustine. In an earlier age, his mastery would have earned him wide recognition; until recently the Pope's Latin secretary was a cardinal. But as the importance of Latin declined, the post lost its prestige. This suited Father Foster well: he was ambitious for Latin, but not for himself.

He had a small office in the Apostolic Palace, just down the corridor from the Pope's study. The room was sparsely furnished, with only a desk, a chair and a monumental Latin dictionary. The telephone was relegated to the floor. Each morning a nun brought him what he called "the Pope's homework".

His daily task was to translate the papal writings from Italian into Latin and send it back for the Pope's approval. He often argued with pontiffs over correct usage, and he rarely backed down.

On one occasion, Pope John Paul II was unhappy with a translation and altered the Latin wording. When Foster saw the change, he sent the text back to the Pope with his words restored. John Paul II ended the debate by sending the document back to the priest with Pontius Pilate's words scrawled across the top: Quod scripsi, scripsi ("What I have written, I have written").

Foster accepted papal correction grudgingly, but he would not accept advice from less eminent curial officials. He flew into a rage one day when he noticed that the Vatican's automated teller machines no longer dispensed money in Latin, but had been reprogrammed in Italian, French, Spanish and English. He found out who was responsible for the change and, after a ferocious encounter with the bureaucrat, Latin was returned to the cash-points of the Holy See.



Reginald Foster: after 40 years in Rome he retired to his home town of Milwaukee CREDIT: Chris Warde-Jones

Reginald Thomas Foster, the son of a plumber and a housewife, was born in the German quarter of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on November 14 1939. He began to learn Latin from the age of 13, when he entered the city's St Francis Minor Seminary. He later moved to the Carmelite House of Formation in Peterborough, New Hampshire, and was ordained priest on April 17 1966 in Rome.

Foster hoped to study for a doctorate at Rome's School for Superior Latin. But in 1969, the first year of his advanced studies, Pope Paul VI's Latin secretary fell ill. Foster, who was only 29, was asked to take over the role.

He was obliged to abandon his doctorate, but life in the Vatican's Office of Latin Letters brought him new opportunities to champion the language. He competed for the esteemed Latin prize, the Certamen Vaticanum, which he won, first, with a commentary on the 1969 moon landings, and later with a report on the 1975 "Thriller in Manila" bout between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier.

Foster delighted in inventing Latin words for modern phenomena. In 2003 the Vatican published a Lexicon Recentis Latinitas, including many of his favourite coinages, such as universalis destructionis armamenta (weapons of mass destruction), pastillum botello fartum (a hotdog) and sui ipsius nudatio (striptease).

Foster operated the papal Latin Twitter account @Pontifex_In on behalf of Pope Benedict XVI, and one of his recent neologisms was breviloquentia ("tweeting"), which he adapted from a usage of Cicero's.

He taught at Rome's Gregorian University and in the 1970s founded an international Latin summer school in the Eternal City. Students soon warmed to his eccentric but rigorous teaching style, which was described by a devoted pupil, Katie Walker, in an article in The Oldie: "It's Reggie's urgency that makes his classes so delightful. I love it when he shouts, Apage nugas! ('Cut the jokes!'); or Expergiscere! Fac sapias! ('Wake up! Wise up!')."

"We foreigners come from around the world for eight weeks in the summer. It's all free! Reggie has never charged a bean and never will."

Dressed in a threadbare blue cotton boiler-suit and sipping from a glass, or bottle, of red wine, he asked pupils to translate the day's headlines into Latin. He believed that Latin should be spoken like modern languages and insisted that students brought Lewis & Short's bulky Latin dictionary to every class.

At the end of each lesson, Foster handed out his famous "sheets", pages of homework in large type. He would destroy these exercises at the end of each year and write them out from scratch.

In 2006 the Gregorian University cancelled his Latin course, however, reportedly because his students were not paying tuition fees.

Foster believed that uninspiring Latin teachers were largely to blame for the demise of the language. He began one memorable address to a convention of Latin lecturers in Rome with the words: "Much of what I am going to say isn't going to please you."

After listening to Foster criticise almost every aspect of modern Latin teaching, an observer was heard to remark: “I came expecting to meet Mr Chips, and I got the Terminator.”

Stories about Foster’s eccentricities multiplied. He was said to sleep on the floor of his cell in the Carmelite residence of San Pancrazio, and to stand on busy street corners frozen in meditation like Socrates.

He was once in this trance-like state when he was approached by a group of German tourists. Mistaking him for a vagrant, they offered him money. To their surprise, he introduced himself, in fluent German, as the papal Latinist and proceeded to take the group on a tour of Rome. He was also a nudist.

But behind Foster’s eccentricity lay an acute sensitivity. He believed that he was wilfully misrepresented by journalists, and would only speak to them on condition that they met him “without notes, recordings or written statements”.

In his last years, he continued to protest against the diminishing status of Latin. He joked that bishops now wrote to him for translations of the Ave Maria, and maintained that Latin was not simply a language, but also a vessel of history and culture. The Church’s abandonment of Latin, he once said, was “like abandoning Mozart and Beethoven”.

In 2009 he retired to Milwaukee, and in 2015 (with Daniel McCarthy) published *Ossa Latinitatis Sola ad Mentem Reginaldi Rationemque: The Mere Bones of Latin According to the Thought and System of Reginald*. Students from the City’s Jesuit university, Marquette, would visit him for lessons and he continued to teach, free of charge, until the week before his death.

Father Reginald Foster, born November 14 1939, died December 25 2020