

**After-Dinner Remarks at the President's Dinner with Graduates,  
their families, faculty, and members of the Board of Governors of  
Thomas Aquinas College  
Santa Paula, California**

May 14, 2021

**Encomium to my Favorite Teacher:  
Reverend Father Reginald Thomas Foster, O.C.D.  
*Non pro schola, sed pro vita!***

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Reverend Fathers, faculty, staff, students, graduates and their family  
and friends, beloved brothers and sisters in Christ:

While my formal Commencement Address will not be until tomorrow,  
I do have a title for my after-dinner remarks: "Encomium to my Favorite  
Teacher." Before I tell you who my favorite teacher was, I have to give you  
some background information.

First of all, you should know that I spent twenty-nine years as a  
student in formal academic learning, with twenty-eight of those years spent  
in Catholic schools. The only year I went to public school was kindergarten,  
simply because my parish did not have a kindergarten! I attended grades  
one through eight at St. Casimir Grade School in Chicago. I entered seminary

in high school, attending Quigley Preparatory Seminary South for four years. For college seminary, I went to Niles College of Loyola University for four years. I attended major seminary at St. Mary of the Lake Seminary in Mundelein, Illinois, for four years. After ordination, while serving as a parish priest on the south side of Chicago, I went to DePaul University College of Law for three years, where I earned my degree of Juris Doctor in civil law. Later I was sent to Rome to study canon law, where I spend three and a half years for my licentiate and doctorate in canon law. After I was appointed Bishop of Springfield in Illinois in 2010, I went back to school for another year and a half to obtain my degree of Master's in Business Administration at the Mendoza College of Business at the University of Notre Dame. All of that adds up to twenty-nine years of formal education, which does not even include my four summers of intensive language studies, two of them at Middlebury College in Middlebury, Vermont: one summer for Spanish before I was ordained a priest and another for Italian before going to Rome to study canon law. I also studied Spanish in Cuernavaca, Mexico, during the summer after my ordination as a priest, and two summers in Poland: one summer at the Catholic University of Lublin and the other at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. So by now it should

be clear that I highly value formal education! When I completed my MBA at Notre Dame in 2013, I was sixty years old, and I told my six brothers and two sisters that I was finally finished with my formal academic education. My younger sister said she did not believe me; she was sure that I would be going to medical school next! No, I don't think that is going to happen!

So if you include the four summer language programs, that's almost thirty years of formal education! Obviously, I have had a lot of teachers in all those years, many of them outstanding, some average, and a few less than stellar. So who was my favorite teacher of them all? The fact that I am calling this talk an *encomium* should give you a hint. Yes, my favorite teacher was my Latin teacher, the late Reverend Father Reginald Thomas Foster, a Discalced Carmelite Friar from Holy Hill Monastery in Wisconsin. Or as he was known by his students, he was simply "Reggie," a shortening of the name he took in religious life, *Reginaldus*.

Thomas Foster was born in 1939 as a son of a plumber in Milwaukee. He became interested in both priesthood and Latin at an early age. After he graduated from grade school, he decided to enter St. Francis Minor Seminary, a Catholic high school for students who intended to become

priests. During the summer between freshman and sophomore years of high school, he decided he wanted to be a monk and entered the Carmelites.

An article entitled, *Latin Fanatic: A Profile of Father Reginald Foster*, by Alexander Stille, which appeared in the Autumn 1994 issue of *The American Scholar*, describes how Reggie fell in love with Latin:

As the idea to join the Carmelites crystallized, so did Foster's consuming passion for Latin. Even though his first-year Latin course was taught according to the old method of memorization, he was totally absorbed by it; he took the textbooks home during his summer vacation, learned them backwards and forwards, and returned to school ready for advanced Latin. "That whole training in English grammar I had had with the nuns, of analyzing things linguistically, switched over and blossomed in Latin," he says. In the fall of 1955, at age fifteen, Foster left Milwaukee for the Monadnock Mountains of New Hampshire, where the Carmelites had their training seminary. Waiting for him, when he got off the over-night train from Chicago to Worcester, Massachusetts, was a young Carmelite monk named Conrad Fliess, who immediately struck up an animated conversation in Latin. For Foster, it was like a revelation: suddenly this mysterious ancient language, which he had studied in silence, leapt off the page and came to life. The two men rattled on in Latin all the way back to New Hampshire in the seminary van. "He was all wild for Latin," Foster says. "We had Latin plays and had to write Latin compositions every week. He saw right away that I already knew Latin very well, and so he tutored me. We were great friends and remained so until the end of his life. Meeting this man changed my whole deal, my whole approach to Latin."

In 1962 Foster began his theology training in Rome. He describes what it was like in Rome in those days: “All priests knew Latin,” he said. “It was hard in those days. If you said, ‘I want to be a great Latinist,’ you were competing with everybody in the class, and in every class around the world. When I see some of my old colleagues, we still converse in Latin. It used to be totally normal. Now it seems like some divine gift. Anyone who knows some Latin is a man with one eye in the land of the blind.”

At the age of thirty, Foster was appointed Latin Secretary in the Department of the First Section of the Vatican Secretariat of State. His job included composing the Pope’s official correspondence letters to bishops and archbishops—and translating Vatican communiqués, ceremonial speeches, decrees, and decrees, and encyclicals. He would do this job in the mornings at the Vatican. In the afternoon, he would teach Latin at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, which is where I studied with the world’s greatest Latinist for three and a half years.

Some more background information about me: I was also introduced to Latin at an early age. I was born on August 5, 1952, and nineteen days later I was baptized. In that era, of course, my baptism was in Latin. My interest in priesthood also began at an early age. My mother says I was about

four years old when I started talking about being a priest. I used to play Mass as a little boy. My older sister dressed up like a nun and my younger brothers would be the altar boys. Other children from the neighborhood attended my Masses in my make-believe church in our family's dining room, dedicated to the Sacred Heart. I used oyster crackers for hosts and grape juice instead of wine. By the way, I did take up a collection—but we used Monopoly money! Of course, since it was prior to the Second Vatican Council, my pretend Masses were celebrated in Latin. As an altar boy at my parish church a block away from home, I learned my prayers in Latin: *Introibo ad altare Dei, ad Deum qui laetificat juventutem meum.*

At the age of fourteen, I entered high school seminary, where I studied Latin for four years. I still remember what my first-year Latin teacher wrote on the blackboard on the first day of Latin class: *Non pro schola, sed pro vita.* We were not just learning Latin for school, but for life. In the classes I teach as an Adjunct Professor of Law at Notre Dame Law School, I always exhort my students to approach their studies with this same motto: *Non pro schola, sed pro vita.*

When I graduated high school in 1966, however, the ecclesiastical landscape had changed. The Mass was now being celebrated in the

vernacular, and seminary classes, which previously had been taught in Latin, were now all in English. So it seemed that Latin would be a thing of the past in my life, which it pretty much was until I was sent to study canon law at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, where the classes in canon law were still being taught in Latin. Although I had excelled in my high school Latin classes, where I typically got my best grades compared to other subjects, it had been seventeen years since I had graduated high school, so my Latin was a little rusty, to say the least. What to do?

The advice I got from priests who preceded me in studying canon law at the Greg told me there was only one solution: the person I needed to go to was Father Reggie Foster. So I did. I arrived a month early before my canon law classes started and began going to class every day at the Carmelite Monastery at the Teresianum, where Reggie lived. After that one-month intensive refresher in Latin, I attended class with Reggie at the Gregorian University twice a week for the next three and a half years.

Thanks to my four years of high school Latin, I was able to enter Reggie's program at the Third Experience. As with most things Reggie did, there was a reason behind the term "experience." These were not "levels" or "grades." Studying with Reggie could only be called an experience. He

offered five experiences, the second being conversational Latin. After completing experiences three, four, and five, I went back to do the second experience, since my doctoral defense would be entirely in Latin. Although I wrote out my half-hour presentation in advance, the next hour of questions and answers would be entirely spontaneous, so I would need to be conversant in Latin.

My doctoral defense in canon law was attended by many people, two of whom were very significant figures in my life. One was my Archbishop, His Eminence Joseph Cardinal Bernardin. The other was my Latin teacher, Father Reginald Foster. I was more nervous about conducting my oral defense in Latin with Reggie in the audience than I was about doing so in the presence of a Prince of the Church!

So what was it like studying Latin with Reggie Foster? His classes were open to anyone who wanted to study Latin. The last part of what I just said was key: you had to *want* to study Latin. On the first day of class, he would ask who was there simply to fulfill some language requirement for some other degree program. He would invite those people to come up and have him sign whatever form was required, and he would show them the door. If

you did not want to study Latin for its own sake, he told you to get lost in no uncertain terms. *Non pro schola, sed pro vita.*

In class, I employed a strategy I learned playing hockey: sometimes the best defense was a good offense. In other words, I sat front and center, practically right in Reggie's face. As a result, he usually left me alone unless I volunteered to answer a question. On the other hand, he would sniff out people who were trying to hide behind their books in the back of the room.

Reggie did not use a textbook; he just taught from his infamous homework assignments. Of course, he did not call them homework, but *ludi domestici*, or domestic games. Each *ludus* was a legal size eight and a half by fourteen-inch sheet of paper, with every space filled with type in the smallest font possible, containing a passage in Latin from various epochs of time, from early classical Latin, through the Middle Ages, to the most recent document to have emanated from the Vatican. After translating the passage, there would be a series of questions to answer about various grammatical points of the text. Each homework sheet took me several hours to complete. Remember, my full-time studies were in canon law. So after listening to lectures in Latin all morning, I would spend much of the rest of the day working on what became my daily pastime, doing the *ludus domesticus*.

We also had field trips. Every year on the Ides of March, we would gather with Reggie at the statue of Julius Caesar at the Roman Forum, where we would sit and read Suetonius' account of the assassination of Julius Caesar – in Latin, of course!

No description of Reggie Foster would be complete without describing his appearance. Instead of a Carmelite religious habit or a priest's clerical garb, he would wear a blue bus driver's outfit. I mean, *always!* I never saw him wear anything else. Reggie explained that he wore that outfit to identify with working people. He took his vow of poverty seriously.

One year I was returning to Rome in September after summer vacation. My flight from Chicago O'Hare to Rome stopped in New York. Apparently, Reggie had been in New York for a few days' vacation and was also returning to Rome. As I was seated on the plane during our stop in New York, I looked up and saw Reggie boarding the plane. I started to get up to greet him and I said, "*Salve Pater!*" He waved at me and said, "*No, no, esto te in tuo loco!*" In other words, "No, don't get up, stay in your seat!" I could see the other passengers looking at him and wondering, who is this guy in the bus driver's outfit and what language is he speaking?

Shortly after finished my studies in Rome, I returned to serve in the Chancery of the Archdiocese of Chicago. It was on a Friday afternoon that Cardinal Bernardin came to my office with a parchment in his hand. He said it was from the Vatican and he understood it to be a letter from Pope John Paul II congratulating him on celebrating his twenty-fifth anniversary of ordination as a Bishop. The Cardinal would be celebrating a Mass for his Silver Jubilee as a Bishop that Sunday afternoon, and he asked if I could translate the document so it could be read in English in the Cathedral on Sunday. I said, "Sure," and then closed my door to translate the document. When I had finished my translation, I took it to Cardinal Bernardin and told him, "Yes, this is a letter from Pope John Paul II to you, congratulating you on celebrating your twenty-fifth anniversary as a Bishop, written in Father Reginald Foster's best Ciceronian Latin!"

I was later told by a colleague who was still studying in Rome that Reggie had mentioned in class that he had to write a congratulatory letter for the Pope to send to the Cardinal in Chicago, and described how he threw in a few stylistic features that he knew I would recognize, assuming I would be the one to translate it, which of course I did! So on paper, and for posterity,

it was Pope John Paul II writing to Cardinal Bernardin; in reality, it was Reggie Foster writing to me!

Speaking of Pope John Paul II and Ciceronian Latin, I remember the time when Reggie was describing the first time he wrote a document for Pope John Paul II. It came back signed in Latin, "Joannes Paulus II," spelling Joannes with a very large "J". Reggie said, "I sent it back to the boss with a note, 'There is no "J" in the Latin language.' It came back to me with a note, 'There is now!'"

This past Christmas morning I received a phone call from Milwaukee Archbishop Jerome ListECKI, telling me that Reggie Foster had died. His obituary in *The New York Times* read, "Reginald Foster, a former plumber's apprentice from Wisconsin who, in four decades as an official Latinist of the Vatican, dreamed in Latin, cursed in Latin, banked in Latin and ultimately tweeted in Latin, died on Christmas Day at a nursing home in Milwaukee. He was LXXXI." Reggie would have been pleased with the Roman numerals!

Father Reginald Thomas Foster was unquestionably the most eccentric teacher I ever had, but he was also the best!

*Gratias tibi ago, Pater Reginalde, non pro schola, sed pro vita. Requiem æternam dona ei, Domine, et lux perpetua luceat ei. Requiescat in pace. Amen.*