



LATIN

in the Modern World

By Katie Bahr

Sunlight fills a classroom at School Without Walls, a public magnet school in Washington, D.C., as a group of high school students discuss love and heartbreak. Members of an AP Latin class taught by Jane Brinley, M.A. 1999, are working together to translate 20 lines of Virgil's epic poem, *Aeneid*, from its original Latin. Brinley, in the front of the room, leads the teenagers as they gradually piece together an ancient breakup scene between Dido, the queen of Carthage, and the Trojan hero Aeneas.

"What arguments does Dido make in the passage we just read?" Brinley asks the group. "Their shared love?" a male student answers. Brinley pushes further. "They're married," she says. "So it's way more than they liked each other and they went out for a while. That's a pretty powerful appeal."

"Do they ever really explicitly say that Aeneas felt the same way as Dido?" a female student asks.

"Interesting question. Let's look at that," Brinley says.

Though the words they are reading date back to the Roman Empire, the emotions expressed are as relevant as ever. Students give nods of recognition as the passages become clearer — a whole world of literature has just become accessible to them, and it's all thanks to their skills in Latin.

That feeling of discovery is one Brinley is familiar with. It's one she has known since she first began studying Latin in high school and one that she carried with her as an undergraduate at the University of Chicago. Years later, when she decided to be a teacher,

her love of learning Latin brought her to Catholic University, where she earned a master's degree in Latin and Greek.

Brinley believes learning Latin is valuable for students in many ways. Studying Latin helps them build vocabulary and logic skills, but it also trains them to look at the bigger picture of the world in which they live. Her students ruminate on age-old questions posed by writers like Caesar, Cicero, Virgil, and Horace. And they learn to find links between the past and the present in a unique way.

"We live in a world that is surrounded by the influence of Latin and the Roman Empire and the ancient world," she said. "People who want to be fully informed, critical participants aware of the important things, are open to studying Latin and they are enriched by it."

A LINK THAT TAKES US BACK

The study of Latin and Greek has been a fixture at Catholic University since the 1890s, when Rev. Daniel Quinn came to the University as a professor of Greek.

"In a sense, he was the founder of the department and one of the original faculty at the University," said Professor William Klingshirn, chair of the Department of Greek and Latin.

In those years, Latin was a required subject in most secondary schools and it was assumed students entering university would already have a working knowledge of it.

"People didn't question that it was required because it's the link that takes us back to the formation of Western civilization," Klingshirn said.

In 1898, a School of Letters was established at Catholic University. Among the six departments in the school were three with Classical paths: Comparative Philology and Sanskrit, Latin Language and Literature, and Greek Language and Literature. In 1918, the Latin and Greek departments merged into one.

Nearly a century later, Klingshirn believes Latin and Greek are closely linked, each filling in gaps the other cannot.

"If you want to go back to the beginnings of Western civilization, you go back to Latin, but you also have to go back to Greek," he said. "You can study just Greek or just Latin, but if you want to know something very profound about the origins of Western civilization, you have to do both."

Much has changed for the study of Latin since the early years. In the mid-1970s, Latin fell out of fashion. Most high schools stopped offering it and critics called the subject outdated and irrelevant, a dead language.

In recent years, the criticism has given way to a resurgence as more experts point to the benefits of studying Latin. Studies have shown that Latin learners earn higher SAT scores in both the verbal and mathematics portions. The language helps students learn about sentence structure, grammar, and vocabulary since 60 percent of all English words are derived from Latin. Learning Latin can also help students pick up other Romance languages as many Spanish, French, Italian, and Portuguese words are derived from Latin.

In CUA's Latin and Greek department, undergraduate students can choose from three majors: Classics, Classical Humanities, or Classical Civilization. The department also offers two master's programs, a Ph.D. program, and a certificate. It graduated five undergraduate students this year and has a thriving graduate program with more than 15 students. Many more students minor in Greek and Latin or use the classes to fulfill their foreign language requirements.

Klingshirn believes there are many reasons people study the subject. Some enjoy reading source materials in many disciplines from the

dawn of Western civilization. Some get into Latin for its practical benefits, like an increased understanding of vocabulary or to meet job demands. Still others are drawn to the puzzle-like work of translating Latin and Greek works.

"The cool thing about Classics and one of the things that kept me in it was I felt like it could open up any world I wanted," Klingshirn said. "To understand the ancient world completely, you have to use every form of knowledge that we have."

STUDY THAT'S GOOD FOR THE SOUL

The students who major in Latin at CUA vary widely, Klingshirn said. Many are pursuing jobs in education as high school teachers or college professors. Others end up in law or government jobs, or working in archeology, theology, or museum studies. Klingshirn has known students who thrive on Latin's logical side and double major in mathematics and Latin.

Jane Brinley, M.A. 1999, leads a group discussion during a Latin class at School Without Walls, a public magnet school in Washington, D.C., where she teaches.





Shannon Ells, B.A. 2014, a Classical Civilization major, poses during an archeological dig in Greece.

Recent graduate Shannon Ells, B.A. 2014, of Brick, N.J., was drawn to the Greek and Latin department because of her interest in archeology. A Classical Civilization major, she spent her four years studying the history, culture, and languages of ancient Greece and Rome in order to develop the base of knowledge she will need as an archeologist.

During her time at CUA, Ells was able to study abroad and participate in archeological digs in Israel, Rome, and Greece. Next year, she will begin a two-year classical archeology graduate program at the University of Arizona. She believes her background in Greek and Latin has prepared her for a life of study.

“I think I’m a better speaker and a better writer because of this major and I think that it just shows I have very wide-ranging transferable skills that are verbal skills, writing skills, analyzing skills,” she said.

Kevin Oriani of Long Island, N.Y., another Class of 2014 graduate, was interested in Latin from childhood, thanks to a word game he used to play with his father. At CUA, Oriani was active in The Classics Club and studied abroad in Rome and Germany. In the future, he hopes to get a job teaching Latin at a high school and eventually pursue graduate study in theology.

Oriani says Latin has helped him better understand English grammar and enabled him to pick up other languages more easily. His



CUA alumna Irene Murphy (fourth from left) smiles with her students from St. John's College High School while participating in a field trip to CUA's antiquities collection in McMahon Hall.

Latin skills also have enabled him to read source materials in other subjects, like religion and philosophy.

“A lot of times, it’s easier to see how the author’s thought process works in the original language,” Oriani said. “It can be very difficult to express the same relationship between their ideas in English, either in literature or in philosophy. When you’re able to read it in the original language, it’s much easier to get into the author’s mind.”

Oriani says he is encouraged by the resurgence of interest in Latin in recent decades. A few summers ago, he even attended a Latin language conference at the University of Kentucky, where all participants agreed to speak only in Latin.

“I think that Latin is a lot less stuffy than people think it is and I’m really happy to see that it’s coming back in style,” he said. “There’s a lot to be gained in studying Latin, both in the ways that it’s useful and also in the ways that it’s good for the soul.”

THE VOICES OF THE PAST

In her classes, Brinley teaches students to connect the world of ancient Greek and Latin scholars with the realities of modern life.

“The ancients ask really interesting questions — questions that everyone should be

asking in their day about what it means to be human and what human excellence is,” she said.

She encourages students to listen to Latin language news podcasts and to search for references to the ancient world in *The Washington Post*. During a meeting of the school’s Latin Club this year, she even led a discussion of the Roman influences on the popular young adult dystopian fiction franchise *The Hunger Games*.

Brinley has taken her students on field trips around Washington to give lessons on Greek and Roman influences in architecture and to plays related to ancient civilizations at the Shakespeare Theatre — this spring they saw *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. Earlier in the year, she led a group of students on a field trip to Rome.

“It was really fun to read Latin with the kids there on site and even my (beginner) kids were able to recognize the things they had learned in just the first few months,” Brinley said. “The voices of the past were really accessible for them.”

CUA alumna Irene Murphy is also a strong believer in studying Latin. She fell in love with the subject when she was in middle school and went on to study classic literature as an undergrad at Loyola University Maryland in Baltimore. In 2011, she earned her Master of Arts from CUA in Greek and Latin.

While at CUA, Murphy can remember translating Greek papyrus fragments during a class with Sarah Brown Ferrario, associate professor of Greek and Latin, and the late Rev. Frank Gignac, then professor and director of biblical studies in the School of Theology and Religious Studies.

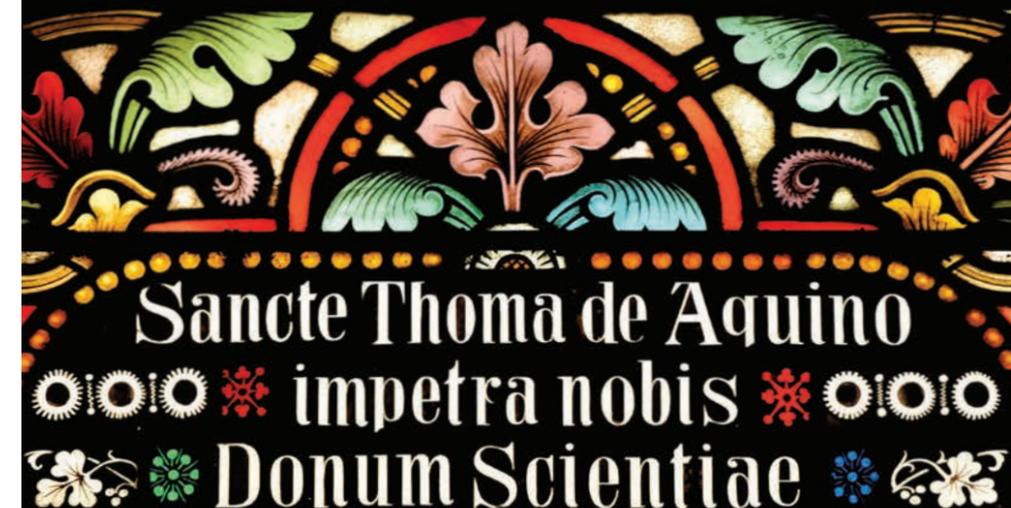
“That really blew me away,” Murphy said. “It’s incredible the things you get to read: from grocery lists to student texts practicing their writing and their grammar to letters home all the way to selections of poetry.”

Now, as a Latin teacher at St. John’s College High School in Washington, D.C., Murphy hopes to pass on that same kind of experiential learning to the next generation. At her school, she runs a Latin club and leads Latin vocabulary competitions that pit classes against each other to win homemade baked goods. Over spring break, she took a group of students on a field trip to Italy and Greece, where they visited museums, attended Masses, and put their knowledge into action.

In May, she took a field trip much closer to home — the antiquities collection at Catholic University — hundreds of ancient objects ranging in origin from Egypt to Mycenaean Greece to Roman Britain. According to Klingshirn, the collection, which is housed in McMahon Hall, was donated to the University in the 1950s.

In contrast to the ornate pieces normally found in art museums, the pieces in CUA’s collection are everyday objects that probably would have belonged to typical working-class families. During their visit, Murphy’s students were allowed to handle the various pieces, including containers, pieces of pottery, and clay items used for religious purposes. Students could closely examine each piece’s decorations and texture to figure out how it might have been used.

Murphy believes that by learning about the ancient world students gain a new perspective on the world around them. What starts with memorizing vocabulary and translating sentences can lead to a deeper understanding of history and the cultural remnants of the classical world that still remain today. Students can develop a passion for digging deeper and looking back to see our modern world with new eyes. **CUA**



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PRESERVING THE RICHES: LATIN AND THE CHURCH

Though Latin is most closely associated with the Classical period, the language can still be found in many arenas of the Catholic Church. In 2012, Pope Benedict XVI baffled journalists when he announced his retirement in Latin. The Latin Twitter page for Pope Francis has more than 260,000 followers around the world. And according to a 2012 article in *The Guardian*, the Vatican bank — the Institute for the Works of Religion — even has Latin-language ATMs.

Pope Benedict XVI is a particular fan of the language. In 2008, he issued a letter to bishops that encouraged use of the Tridentine Mass, the Latin-language liturgy used prior to 1970.

To further promote study of the language, Pope Benedict established a new Pontifical Academy for Latin in 2012. One of the jobs of the academy is to publish a scholarly journal, *Latinitas*, which is written partially in Latin. William Klingshirn, chair of Catholic University’s Department of Greek and Latin, is included on the journal’s board of editors.

In an apostolic letter at the time, the Pope wrote, “In today’s culture, the danger of an increasingly superficial knowledge of Latin may be noted in the context of the widespread weakening of humanistic studies. This is also a risk in the context of the philosophical and theological studies of future priests.”

Klingshirn believes Latin is especially helpful for priests and students interested in canon law, as official Church documents and papal encyclicals are often issued in Latin. For this reason, the University offers several Latin classes especially for canon lawyers.

“It’s called the Roman Catholic Church with good reason,” Klingshirn said. “It started very early in Rome and the Church has used Latin as its official language for a very, very long time.”