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LATIN IS NOT DEAD

Professor Speaks of a Conference to Celebrate Papal Documents Backing Church's Official Language

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On Feb. 22, 1962, Pope John XXIII signed the apostolic constitution "Veterum Sapientia," on the study and use of Latin, as a result of which he hoped, among other things, that an Academicum Latinitatis Institutum would be created.

The institute was founded later by Pope Paul VI with the apostolic letter "Studia Latinitatis" of Feb. 22, 1964, entrusting the Salesians with the task of "promoting its prosperity."

Half a century later the Pontificium Institutum Altioris Latinitatis is organizing a conference to be held Feb. 23, titled "Veterum Sapientia: History, Culture and Timeliness." The congress will examine some important episodes in the history of the institute and will also consider the challenges today regarding the study of classical languages.

ZENIT spoke with Father Roberto Spataro, a teacher in the Faculty of Christian and Classical Literature of the Pontifical Salesian University, about the forthcoming congress.

ZENIT: Professor Spataro, how did the idea for this conference come about and what are its objectives?

Father Spataro: The congress is being held on the 50th anniversary of the promulgation of a solemn document, the Veterum Sapientia, unfortunately quickly, unjustly forgotten.

We intend to re-visit that document and to show how it is still very timely in proposing the need that in the Church, especially among priests, that the great ethical, spiritual and religious values be known that the ancient world developed and that Christianity perfected, thus constructing the foundations of contemporary civilization.

ZENIT: Many believe that Latin is a "dead language." What is your opinion?

Father Spataro: This is truly an unfortunate expression. I wonder how a language can be defined as dead in which Seneca, St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and generations of scientists, from Galvani, inventor of electricity, to Gauss, the "prince of mathematicians," wrote.

How can one hold as "dead" a language that is studied today by so many persons, and nourishes lofty and noble thoughts? Not forgetting that it is the language of the Holy See and that the liturgy in Latin attracts in ever increasing numbers the faithful, many of them young people.

ZENIT: In recent times, instead, it seemed that Latin was dying out: Seminarians did not study it any longer and it was not used in the liturgy. What is your Institute doing about this situation?

Father Spataro: In recent years, tentative beginnings have taken place within the Catholic Church in terms of renewed interest in the study of Latin. Among these are the birth of new religious communities and lay movements that have understood well how a most precious patrimony belongs to the Tradition, to the life itself of the Church, of liturgical, canonical, magisterial, theological expressions whose content is comprehensible only in its linguistic form, namely, Latin. Hence, our Institute wishes to teach a greater number of clerics and lay people to be able to appreciate this patrimony, so that every Church is able to have access to people who love the way in which truth, beauty and harmony are united in this language.

ZENIT: It seems that in many parts of the world there is a renewal of interest in Latin. Is this true?

Father Spataro: It is true! Some time ago, a distinguished German university professor told me that in Germany there are more than 800,000 students in high schools and university institutes who study Latin. In our Institute, for example, we receive students from China, sent by their Universities, because they feel the need to know European civilization and its cultural origins expressed in Latin.

ZENIT: What are the reasons for this renewed interest?

Father Spataro: Talking with professors and students from all over the world, I have come to believe that there is a desire to study Latin so as to access a world, a *res publica litterarum*, of a very high spiritual level. The present economic and financial crisis is no more serious than the ethical and the anthropological. Young people in so many parts of the world study works written in Latin, from Cicero to Cyprian to Erasmus of Rotterdam, and are tired and disappointed by "bad teachers" of the contemporary age, and want to acquire for themselves pure, true thought. The study of Latin makes it possible to reacquire this "spiritual innocence."

ZENIT: Even in Italian Middle Schools there is a return to the study of Latin.

Father Spataro: Latin is a very pleasing language to learn, with one condition: that the method is abandoned that morbidly reigns in schools, imposed by a German philology beginning in the 19th century. If taught, instead, with methods of the great humanists -- for example, that which was practiced for centuries in the Jesuits' schools, or the "nature-method" taught in 150 hours -- a student, without excessive toil and especially without boredom, is already able to read the classics. There is need of a new generation of teachers that know this method and adopt it enthusiastically because it works miracles!

ZENIT: Are there examples of the success of this method?

Father Spataro: Certainly! An example is the Vivarum Novum Academy, an institution with which our Faculty has collaborated for some time and that operates in Rome. Young people from all over the world go there, for one or two years, to study Latin and Greek. They arrive without knowing a single word of the language of Caesar or Plato and after a few months they are able to speak fluently in Latin, acquiring at the end of the course a true knowledge of the humanistic civilization, that is, of the genuine values of man that come from the *Veterum Sapientia*.

[Translation by ZENIT]