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Known for his homework sheets created on a manual typewriter, Discalced Carmelite Fr. Regi

Known for his homework sheets created on a manual typewriter, Discalced Carmelite Fr. Reginald Foster is seen working in his Vatican office in January 2007. The Vatican Latinist and teacher of Latin died Dec. 25, 2020, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, at age 81. (CNS/Chris Warde-Jones)

by David Mihalyfy

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Papal Latinist Reginald Foster passed away on Christmas Day, at the age of 81, after a life unusual in its fullness and even somewhat tragic in its byways. Born to a Wisconsin plumber, Foster had a love of Latin and the church that led him to become a friar of the Order of Discalced Carmelites, a translator under four popes and an instructor at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome; famously, he offered free advanced lessons to all comers during *Aestiva Latinitas* ("summer Latin"), first for years upon end in Rome, and then later in life in Milwaukee, to which he retired and where he died.

An enthusiastic classicist told me about Foster's program my freshman year of college, and though I only had high school Latin and a vague desire to develop it, I always thought that his existence was the one of the most marvelous things in the world. Later, during a history of Christianity doctorate at the University of Chicago, I found a summer to study with him in 2010, during his first years back in Milwaukee.

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His big personality dominates any discussion of him, but to me the most defining feature of his character was his incredible kindness. You didn't necessarily encounter it at first; my first contact with him was these oversized mimeographed sheets of Latin excerpts and questions, sent to me as part of my application, then later returned, thoroughly marked up in red pen. Only later, after you met the man in person, with his lower and forceful and frayed voice that he threw into a teacherly stage presence with endless reiterations of the word "friend," did you get a better sense of him, as well as find out that the entry examination was always ever intended to scare off the unserious.

In my own case, I hadn't known that yet and had called him up in a dither after one of the strangest experiences in my life delayed my beginning his program. Several months of inconclusive consultations about a strange rash had eventually led to a biopsy, with results delivered the day before my departure.

"Mr. Mihalyfy, are you sitting down?" the internist asked as soon as I reached him, and after fishing around for whether I'd ever been a missionary, he went on to explain that I had a couple two-centimeter worms living in my body, probably in a major vein somewhere around where my left leg met my torso, and that their eggs had been collecting in my smallest and most delicate capillaries.

Wearing his trademark blue workman's uniform, Discalced Carmelite Fr. Reginald Foster take

Wearing his trademark blue workman's uniform, Discalced Carmelite
Fr. Reginald Foster takes a walk near the Vatican post office in January 2007.
(CNS/Chris Warde-Jones)

"We could even identify the subspecies from this hook we could see on one egg!" he said, before threshing out with me that I'd probably gotten them a few years earlier while visiting a friend in the Peace Corps in Benin. A pill would kill them, no long-term effects on me, but right after getting this news, I had to cold call this stern Latinist I'd never talked to, explain all that and request an exception for starting his program on time. Suddenly knowing these things were inside of me was quite jarring, and beyond his cultivated image as a stickler, too, I wonder now if I was walking too much on eggshells around authority figures due to an unhealthy atmosphere at my doctoral program.

In any case, he was surprisingly commonsense and direct and comforting, and upon my arrival the next week he explained to the class — in Latin — about my parasite problem, pausing now and then to translate sentences or isolated words like *vermiculi* ("little worms"). In retrospect, what else should I have expected from someone so loved by his students and who'd done all the Latin on the Vatican's ATMs!

It would be a mistake, though, to look at him with his career and all the respect that was given him, and to think that he fit in with the church hierarchy or the academy. From everything I could tell, he simply didn't.

Although Pope John XXIII loved his Latin, too often it's become the province of strange people in love with a past that simply never was — the type of person who throws an Amazonian devotional statue into the Tiber, for example, rather than those like Pope Francis who can stop and reflect that traditional church garb might also look funny to some. Academically, his method of Latin instruction combining all eras has not gained serious traction, though it very well should.

Be that as it may, nothing stopped his great vitality that roped people in and that he kept pumping out into the world in ways great and small. After my summer learning from him, I sent him a few letters here and there, mentioning texts that I had been reading and teaching in private tutorial lessons for spare cash, and he was more than happy to share his knowledge and perspective — including, to my surprise, about Pope Benedict XVI's resignation announcement, on a postcard written during the ensuing conclave:

> Benedict XVI's resignation was the work (content AND Latin) of himself and Cardinal Sodano alone during the night. It is scholastic — Aquinas style with a bit of spaghetti, one or two real mistakes, some typos, some bad vocab. + ideas. But tolerable in general. He read it too fast, too muffled to be understood by those present.

"Tolerable in general." Who else could evaluate the Latinity of Joseph Ratzinger, if not him! He was good and he knew it, never overbearing, but not underestimating his skill, either, however much he might lighten up his undeniable competency by christening less capable work as "spaghetti" in his most distinctive word of criticism.

Others now remember Foster teaching in the basement of his nursing home, prior to his death. Whatever exactly happened to take him out of Rome, it does not seem to have been easy for him.

The way that I would like to remember him most of all is not in the classroom, though, but in a graveyard on Holy Hill, on a field trip that we took out of Milwaukee in his attempt to replace the historic sites around Rome, where you'd read Augustine and Monica's double vision in the *Confessions* with him at Ostia itself, or whatever at wherever was appropriate. Now, it was just little day trips, and while we were there to look at the basilica, he wanted to go to the Carmelite graveyard down on the side of the hill and look for people he knew.



The amphitheater in Ostia, Italy, the ancient Roman port city where Augustine of Hippo, on his way back to Africa, shared a vision with his mother Monica before she died. (Wikimedia Commons/Foeke Noppert)

"Oh, Brother so-and-so!" I remember him saying with just this pure look of joy, coming across someone from his order that he hadn't thought of for years. Although

my own great-aunt was a nun, a Felician, it wasn't really until that moment that I truly got how much people leave their families and find a new one through religious life, in this case with all those others who love Teresa of Ávila. "She wouldn't just sit around and pray all day, like the other namby-pambies you read about," he once said about his attraction to her. "She did things!"

And, in his way, so did Reginald Foster. What did he do, in ways that went beyond that of an ordinary teacher, if not got out into the world and leave behind spiritual children? The great love for him among them attests to that, even if not all of them or even he himself would quite think of it in quite that way. They squabbled and they vied for his attention and they're now off all around the world in ways that he wouldn't expect or even necessarily approve of, but they're there and they come from him, and it really did all come out of this strange sort of love that he drew out of them and that drew them all together.

And now, that man is gone.

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