How Latin continues to thrive in a modern world, more than a century and a half after its death

By: LAN DAVIES-LEONARD

For centuries, the Latin language was a force on the world's linguistic stage. Isaac Newton's famous book "Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy" was etched in Latin, so too were the masterpieces written by Cicero, Caesar and Vergil, even philosopher Rene Descartes composed works in Latin during his time.

After dominating the world during the shift from BC to AD, Latin quickly fell out of touch and as Rome fell, the language tumbled with it. As the educational system failed in Europe from the 5th century onward, despite being the educational language, Latin faltered as fewer individuals attended school. The renaissance in 1400 breathed new life into Latin as people across Europe embraced the classical writings and adopted Latin dictions and until the 1900s, academia required a comprehension of Latin as a written language.

By the 1960's, Latin was tossed into the wind by most, including the Catholic Church, who despite having many of its roots in the speech, decided the language was no longer obligatory. Student's too lost interest in the dead language.

The survival of a dead language works by

Students perspectives of Latin

"I know a lot of people who five years from now they're not going to remember any Latin, but at least they'll understand proper English better."

-Taylor Tyrell, Latin student

"In any liberal arts, humanistic education, Latin is a key piece and would be relevant to a well-rounded, interdisciplinary education."

-Madison Schreiter, former Latin student

"Latin is awesome, everyone should take it. No, probably not everyone, it's for a specific type of person."

-Taylor Tyrell, Latin student

"Our language is based so much in Latin and Greek that it will always benefit people to understand how our language works by understanding Latin."

-Taylor Tyrell, Latin student

Latin student perspectives of Latin

"Enrollments are not as high as they once were," said Dr. Nicholas Kauffman, a lecturer of classical civilizations at Gonzaga University.

"One of the challenges is to properly articulate the value of Latin in its written, read or spoken format."

-Dr. Kauffman

Decision which Oosterhuis believes are made by administrators with poor understanding of the classics.

"One of the important things to know is that it rarely makes financial sense to close a classics department," he said. "Classics departments are cheap. I don't have a lab, I don't require any equipment, I don't need graduate students or teacher assistants. I need a whiteboard and some markers.

"Beyond being relatively cheap to fund, some students find Latin an unspoken language, that seeks a different level of fluency and doesn't stress intimidating pronunciations like modern languages, to be an attractive benefit."

However, this does not mean the language is easier to learn. Fr. Krall described his first experience learning Latin in high school "horrible" and "terrible," it wasn't till his time at the seminary that the language began to make sense. "Learning Latin involves a whole different kind of thinking," Kauffman said. "The way you learn stuff as children is way we learn stuff as children is substantially."

"If you show up all gung-ho it is also is easier to forget along the way. If you show up all gung-ho in Latin and expect it to be as easy as Spanish, you're going to be disappointed, so it requires some buy-in from students." Kauffman said. However, for the expanded challenge, the rewards are substantial.

"The way you learn [Latin] allows you to start reading actually interesting text a lot sooner, so it's a harder language, but you don't have to bother with learning how to comprehend the way that bathroom, or 'can I phrase that with stock medium rare' " Kauffman said. After one year of studying you can read something that someone wrote over 2000 years ago and you can read it in his own words, which is almost a magical thing"

Additionally, students consistently professed a better understanding of grammar, syntax and how languages, including the English language, work after studying Latin.

Latin boasts strong ties to religion, including the history of the Catholic church, a linguistic relationship to botany, a foundational connection to choral music and being the root to much of the English language, in addition to being a necessity for studying classical civilizations, that assure the value of a Latin class can vary greatly between enrolled students. Latin's existence as the origin for many academic arenas ensures the language won't go extinct.

Additionally, Latin enthralled niche groups of scholars beyond academia with Latin conferences, online communities, a Latin Wikipedia and contemporary news sites in Latin, all which assist in keeping a dead language relevant in the modern world.

"Latin is on the upswing in this country," Oosterhuis said.