

‘Nulli secundus’: Recovering U.S. priest leaves hole in Latin office

VATICAN CITY - The Vatican’s Latin letters office has been struggling lately with a big hole in its roster - U.S. Father Reginald Foster, considered by many the world’s finest Latinist, has been away for more than a year.

Father Foster, a 69-year-old Carmelite and one of the Vatican’s most colorful characters, is recuperating from health issues in his native Milwaukee. He said in a phone interview in September that he’s slowly getting better and hopes to return to Rome, but doesn’t know when that will happen.

For now, the baton has been provisionally passed to another American, Father Daniel Gallagher, a Michigan native who was once one of Father Foster’s best students. He has been working half-time in the Latin office since June.

“Of course, I’m not anywhere near worthy to stand in for him. But then again, nobody is. He’s one of a kind,” Father Gallagher said. People in the office are still anxiously awaiting Father Foster’s return, he added.

When Father Gallagher began filling in for Father Foster, he found his office furnished as sparsely as a monastic cell - a phone on the floor, a photo of the pope on the wall and a Lewis and Short Latin dictionary on the desk. Father Gallagher said he’s left that pretty much unchanged.

Father Foster came to Rome to study in the 1960s and was summoned to the Vatican in 1969 when word of his academic achievement spread. By then, the office once known as Secretary for Briefs to Princes had been renamed more prosaically as the Latin Language Department of the First Section of the Secretariat of State. No longer headed by a cardinal, it had lost some of its luster, but it remained the real communications hub at the Vatican.

Over the last four decades, even as Latin declined as the common language of the church, the Latin section has continued to translate and publish virtually everything that comes off the pen of the pope and much more - everything from congratulatory

letters to papal bulls. Father Foster did much of the heavy lifting, but he never really adopted the Roman Curia style. For one thing, he showed up for work in a trademark blue workman's outfit, purchased annually at J.C. Penney.

Today, the office's seven Latinists have a steady stream of work, and sometimes they fall behind. When Pope Benedict XVI's latest encyclical, "Charity in Truth," was published in July, for the first time in memory no Latin text was released. The Latin team was still working on the document, and the Latin version was published only at the end of August - after it had been sent by DHL to Father Foster for corrections.

Although it was reported that the delay in the Latin translation slowed down the encyclical's release, insiders say that wasn't the case. That in itself confirmed what everyone at the Vatican has known for some time: that although the Latin version of documents is still considered "definitive," it is not being used as the basic text for translations into other languages. That role has been taken over by Italian or English.

Pope Benedict has spoken about the importance of Latin in the church, and the Vatican is committed to keeping its Latin letters section. But church officials know that a renaissance in Latin depends largely on teachers, and that's where Father Foster has been especially missed in Rome.

Father Foster began teaching in 1973, and his were not ordinary classes. Known as "Reggie" to his students, his approach was to throw them into the language and let them swim, disdaining grammatical textbooks, tests and rote memorization. His Latin was a living language, and he reminded anyone within earshot: "Latin is not reserved for experts! Every bum and prostitute in ancient Rome spoke Latin!"

Father Foster's method was unorthodox in other ways. He would announce to his increasingly large classes at the beginning of the academic year that if any students were there only to fulfill an academic requirement, he'd sign whatever piece of paper they needed and they could leave. He didn't want them wasting valuable space in his classroom.

Nor was he bothered that a good percentage of his students were not registering and paying for his classes at the Pontifical Gregorian University. That led the

Gregorian to bid goodbye to Father Foster and his small army of students in 2006. Undaunted, the Carmelite found a benefactor and a headquarters for a new Latin academy in central Rome. Meanwhile, his summer classes held “sub arboribus” (under the trees) drew Latin teachers from all over the world.

Father Foster’s serious health problems began when he broke his thighbone in 2008. After a fitful recovery, he was hospitalized with an infection early in 2009 and had heart surgery. He returned to Milwaukee last spring, where he has been in physical rehabilitation.

His students have suffered his absence, waiting for news and hoping for his return. Carmelite superiors, meanwhile, have offered to host his international academy at the Teresianum theological faculty in Rome, which is also Father Foster’s residence. That’s something Father Foster wants to happen, the sooner the better.

“I’m very excited about that. My dream is to get back and start teaching again,” he said.