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The Congress for Living Latin: Another View

GOODWIN B. BEACH

AGHAST, WHEN I read in the April number of *CJ* Professor Ernst Pulgram's report on the Congress for Living Latin, held at Avignon in September, 1956, that anyone could have gained an impression so completely at variance with mine, I forthwith accepted the Editor's invitation to present "other sides . . . in the appraisal of this Congress," for I was present as the delegate of the American Classical League, the American Philological Association and of the Classical Association (of England) and read one of the four "Rapports de Base du Congrès."¹

Professor Pulgram states:² "Perhaps you have concluded that I am an enemy of Latin studies and wish to abolish Latin in favor of such practical items in the curriculum as 'Home Economics 35: Cooking for Boys,' . . . I am not, and I do not. I know Latin, I love Latin and I teach Latin. But I also know that Latin is not now and cannot be made to be, a 'useful' subject in the ordinary sense of our education which finds itself in hot pursuit of pragmatism, not even as useful as *Cooking for Boys*." Yet he could not strive more enthusiastically, were he an avowed enemy, to kill the subject. Were he such, it would be easier to tag him. In short, he maintains with all zeal that it is a dead language. I maintain that it is not, but that in the pursuit of "pragmatism," if properly taught, it can be a most effective instrument. That was the aim of the Congress.

But one more word on the undesirability of maintaining that Latin is a dead language, or should I use the modern jargon and say that it is "bad psychology"? In my talk I wrote: "ne obliviscamur discipulos, qui tenerae aetatis sunt, ad plenioram vitam spectare atque a rebus mortem olentibus

abhorrere." On this basis it is a disservice to insist that Latin is dead, especially since it is not dead.

Professor Pulgram does not tell of the genesis of the Congress, a very interesting point, but starts by saying: "The purpose of this Congress was 'the resurrection of a language allegedly dead.'" This appears as a quotation. I have searched the preambles and the talks and find no such statement. I do find the statement (in French):³ "Latin does not have to become alive; it must remain alive." True, again and again the word "renaissance" is used, but that does not mean that the renaissance subject is or has been dead. Webster gives the definition: rebirth or revival. Now anyone knows that when we say that somebody has been revived, there is no connotation of his having been brought back from the dead but from an unconscious state; that he has been resuscitated. Therefore revitalization or resuscitation would have been perhaps a more precise term. Let us therefore understand renaissance in this sense. That Latin needs resuscitation or revitalization is undeniable, and that begins with pedagogy. But of that anon.

II

The idea of the Congress was born in the mind of M. Jean Capelle, whom the Mayor's lieutenant in greeting the opening gathering called "l'âme de ce mouvement." M. Capelle, formerly rector of the University of Nancy, is now director general of education in French West Africa. He is, however, by profession a mathematician and engineer and was formerly on the staff of the Citroen Auto Works. Thus his opinion is of more weight than if he were a classicist with a subjective interest. While he was on the staff of Citroen, he participated in a meeting of engi-

neers in London attended by British, French, Italians, Germans, Russians and others. Because of language difficulties the meeting whose objectives, had there been a common tongue, could have been achieved in a half day, consumed three days. This troubled M. Capelle. He brooded long on the matter and wrote a very trenchant article entitled "Latin or Babel."⁴ Finally this Congress was called under the sponsorship of the French Department of Education, the University of Aix en Provence, l'Alliance Francaise and the City of Avignon. There were present delegates not only from the expected countries but also from New Zealand, South Africa, Turkey, Roumania, Syria, Finland, Venezuela; all told, 22 nations, 250 delegates. The Congress, therefore, was representative of not only Europe and the Free World in general but extended even to the Middle East and somewhat beyond the Iron Curtain. This meeting evidenced more than mere local interest, indeed the widespread feeling that a supra-national language, well developed, orderly, capable of precise expression, devoid of the jealousy that attaches to modern tongues, is needed. Such a congress cannot be written off as the ebullition of a few fanatics.

III

But now to take up the Professor's report item by item. He says that many members of the Congress started from the proposition that, whatever Latin was or was not, it was not a dead language. Then saying that the argument pointed to Latin's being the language of the Roman Catholic Church and occupying an important place in medical and pharmacological and juridical terminology, he denies that that makes it a *living* language. I do not maintain that use in terminologies makes it a *living* language, but its lively use in the Church surely keeps it from being a dead language.

I quote from his text: "Num pro demortua haberi potest," says one Congressist [ego is fui], 'ulla lingua qua

nihil non dici potest. Quid ergo? Num potest quidvis Latine dici?' " Then he says that this is not the point; that anything *can* be said in any language, with the aid of borrowings and neologisms, if necessary. Well, so what? Cicero writes:⁵ *aut enim nova sunt rerum novarum facienda nomina aut ex aliis transferenda*. Then, are we not in English afflicted daily with neologisms? Why not in Latin? Cicero did it, of course. Professor Pulgram goes on, "nothing is said in Latin that is either in substance or in quantity comparable to what is said in Italian and Malayan and Russian and Suaheli and a few thousand others." What under the sun that statement pretends to mean or to prove, passes my comprehension. However, I know naught of Malayan or Suaheli but I know that when in the formation of the UN the talk was of trusteeships, the Russians had no term for it. On explanation they had to invent a term. That was true of French. So one is led to believe from Professor Pulgram's statement that those are two dead languages. As the terms existed in Latin, I guess that leaves Latin by contradistinction alive. But to return to the quotation above taken from my talk, that was but my thesis; he omits my argument.

He then says that it is a fiction that Latin is the language of the Catholic Church (pity the poor Pope and the other prelates who have so long been deluded); that it is no more true than would be the assumption that the language of the Carmen Saliare was the daily language of the Salian priests. Of course not, nor was hocus-pocus, tontus talontus or eenie, meenie, mo ever anyone's language. Both corruptions. "That Latin," says he, "no longer is the real 'language' of Catholicism was recognized in France, a 'Latin-speaking' country, as long ago as 813 A.D., when the Council of Tours permitted the use of the *lingua Romana rustica*, that is, Old French, . . ." (hardly Old French, I say; the people called it Ladin) in the

ritual. From anything that I can learn, this is not so; for preaching, yes, but never in the ritual.⁶ Then he should look up the confusion that existed in South East France in the sixth century, when the upper classes spoke tolerable Latin, which the lower classes, who spoke a jargon, could not understand.⁷

When he says: "no one can seriously pretend that a man should learn Latin just to become a better scientist," I shall simply reply that he might be; surely he will be a better citizen, a better human being by being grounded in the best thought of the ages, by being or having been in touch with the greatest minds of all ages.⁸ Therefore he might become a better scientist. How about Einstein who above all else loved to read Plato in Greek?

Further on he says: "For better or for worse, the Congress spoke mainly French. . . . Whatever Latin was heard was read from manuscript. . . ." Aye, French was heard and too much. But why not have added that many were annoyed thereby, and a vote was passed that at the next Congress only Latin should be used? As to reading from manuscript, is not the custom followed here in our meetings, where speeches are read in *English* from manuscript? Did not those who spoke in French read from manuscript? They did, and in such fashion, as French lecturers seem wont to do, that they were far less intelligible than those who *read* their addresses in Latin. So why, unless in order to inject bias, have mentioned only those who spoke in Latin? If speakers in English read from manuscript, does that predicate the death of English? If in French, the death of French? Absurd—equally absurd to claim for this reason that Latin is dead.

Next he seems to take to task "One author, whose title was 'Latinam linguam in syntaxi, in stilo, in lexico renovemus' . . ." for writing "in as good Ciceronian Latin as he is capable of . . .", the while he "inveighs

against Classicism and Ciceronianism." Professor Avallone⁹ inveighs against a pedantic and spurious Ciceronianism that takes all the life out of the language (what Cicero would call the *sucus*) paying all attention to form and language, and little or none to substance, and relegates all other writers into the limbo of worthlessness. He calls for attention to other good writers, for the spirit of Erasmus, in short for wresting Latin from the dead hand of pedantry and for the revivification of the language. Surely praiseworthy! That making his plea "in as good Ciceronian Latin as he is capable of" should be held against him, is odd. What other Latin would he have used? Erasmus consciously did, I feel sure, the same. It is standard Latin. Medieval Latin or even Hog Latin would be unacceptable.

IV

Professor Pulgram says that "the world will have such a language [international] when it wants and needs it badly enough, in particular when the one world of the future finds its expression in one culture." One culture! God forbid. A world of robots, an ant-hill—naught of interest beyond one's little domestic orbit, no stimulation, no further development. But if every time a proposal is made to institute a supra-national tongue—and I agree with M. Capelle that Latin, alone devoid of supra-national jealousies, fills the bill—cold water is thrown on the idea, then never will there be such a language. Why for the nonce worry about those who are not "born in and nurtured by what we call the Occident"? Those who are, are forsooth of sufficient weight in the world to make the attempt worth while. Why assume that Arab and Indonesian would take as much umbrage to Latin as to English and French? Perhaps yes, perhaps no. This is just throwing cold water and seemingly for the sake of throwing cold water. *Clam si occasio usquamst, aquam frigidam subdole suffundunt.*¹⁰

V

Yes, the Congress voted for the restored pronunciation. There followed a rather belligerent (in spots) and foolish argument, as may happen in any meeting, on details of pronunciation. It was of no effect. I think Professor Enk, who turned to me and said disgustedly, "just arguing details," expressed the general feeling. Italians admitted to me that the restored is probably the correct method but that it was hard for them. Understandable. One participant stated, but disclaimed any official sanction, that, if all others agreed to adopt the restored pronunciation, the Vatican probably would do so as well.

As to the resolutions, which Professor Pulgram says "were just written up, I do not know by whom, with the hope . . . that they represent the majority view of the assembly"—well, I know. Committees were chosen to adopt resolutions on the main topics: Pronunciation, Grammar, Pedagogy, New Words. Those committees were made up of the speaker on the topic and a group of four to six international scholars. These committees worked hard and long. I know that ours did and I beheld others at work. In our committee Latin was spoken. When asked whether I understood French, I replied: "Francogallice non intellego. Mecum Latine loqui necesse erit." These resolutions were presented to the assembly. Participants had a chance to discuss them and the committee to defend them. Mention has already been made of the discussion over pronunciation. I was asked to come forward to speak on the resolution on pedagogy. I said: "si haec vota vobis placent, contentus ero." Whether pleased because I was so brief, I know not, but the assembly laughed and unanimously adopted them.

Who ran the Congress? The instigators, of course. Who else? Somebody had to run it. It was run fairly and above board. Anybody had a chance to

air his opinion. Had nobody taken the lead, it would have been a formless, fruitless jamboree. In short, the procedure differed in no wise from that of a well-run meeting in this country.

That "nothing was done for Latin, really," I dispute. Attention was paid to the Congress throughout Europe in newspaper articles and on the radio. One evening the Italian short-wave radio was given over to a report, and apparently to a very circumstantial report. This was heard in Hartford and, undoubtedly, elsewhere. I believe that something was done for Latin.

It was voted that a second Congress should be held in 1958 and the invitation was given that it be held in Brussels at the time of the World's Fair. That vote was unanimously adopted, as well as the vote that Latin alone be used.

Let us hope that more Americans will attend that Congress and come home enthusiastic and inspired.

Hartford, Connecticut

NOTES

¹ Special Supplement to *CO*, October, 1956.

² *CJ* 52 (1957) 304.

³ Report on the Congress, *Observations Generales*, p. 18.

⁴ Translated in *CJ* 49 (1953) 37-40.

⁵ *Acad. Post.* 1. 7. 25.

⁶ The Council of Tours, A.D. 813, ordains (canon 17) that each bishop have a good collection of homilies, which he shall translate, that all may understand them, in *rusticam Romanam linguam aut Theotiscam* (Old High German); C. J. Hefle and Dom H. Leclercq, *Histoire des Conciles d'après les documents originaux* (Paris, 1910) vol. 3, part 2, p. 1143. The most ancient document attesting the existence in Gaul of a *lingua Romana* distinct from the Latin is The Acts of the Councils of Tours and of Rheims of the year 813; the priests are there bidden to use the vulgar language, when they *preach to the people* the word of God; *ibid.*, p. 1263. For samples of these languages, see the "Serment de Strasbourg," the oath sworn between Charlemagne's grandsons, Louis 2nd and Charles the Bald in 842.

⁷ Henry G. J. Beck, *Care of Souls in S.E. France in the Sixth Century* (Rome, 1950) pp. 11, 60, 264 and note, 269-70 and notes.

⁸ For a beautiful and comprehensive description of the value of the Classics, read John Buchan (Lord Tweedsmuir), *Pilgrim's Way* (Cambridge, Mass., 1940) pp. 24-27.

⁹ Report of the Congress: Riccardo Avallone, p. 118.

¹⁰ *Plaut. Cist.* 1. 1. 36.