

Pope Benedict XVI faces uphill challenge in trying to resurrect Latin

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) Reviving a long-dead language might sound like a tall order for a church that's already weakened by widespread secularization and the fallout from decades of a painful child abuse scandal.

But Pope Benedict XVI seems convinced that revitalizing the study and use of Latin among priests and seminarians is a necessary step for the church's future.

On Saturday (Nov. 10), Benedict established a "Pontifical Academy of Latinity" tasked with "promoting the use of Latin" inside and outside the Catholic Church.

Ever since its earliest days, the church "has spoken and prayed in all the languages of humanity," the pope wrote in the letter announcing the creation of the new Vatican department.

But, he added, the church "has assiduously promoted the knowledge and diffusion" of Latin throughout the centuries, singling it out as "its own language, capable of universally transmitting the message of the gospel."

In fact, even as the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s authorized the translation of Mass and other church rites into local languages, Latin remains the official language of the church. The official version of papal documents and Catholic liturgical texts is still the Latin one, and cash machines inside the Vatican Bank still greet customers in the language of ancient Rome.

For Benedict, knowledge of Latin language and culture is "necessary" for those who want to study theology, liturgy or canon law. But among today's priests and seminarians the study of Latin is "more and more superficial," he denounced.

Benedict's push isn't just about being able to read the founding texts of the church's history and doctrine in their original versions, said the Rev. Roberto Spataro, the

secretary of the newly founded Academy.

He is convinced that a perceived crisis in Catholic theology is in part consequence of abandoning a thorough study of Latin.

"Ever since the knowledge of Latin got weaker among theologians, in the last 50 years, theologians have become more and more verbose. They can go on for pages and pages without actually saying anything, or even contradicting themselves," he said.

According to the scholar, studying the language of Cicero leads to a "discipline and a clarity of thought that is indispensable for theological reflection and liturgy."

He added that the church will not risk appearing anachronistic by pushing for a resurrection of Latin. "The church has always defended culture, every culture, throughout history. Why should it renounce tapping the vast heritage of Latin wisdom?," he asks.

Since 1992, a group of Vatican scholars has issued the "Lexicon recentis Latinitatis," which provides Latin translations of modern words, from dishwasher ("escariorum lavator") to taxi ("autocinetum meritorium") for papal texts. But throughout the world, the English version – and not the Latin original – is now widely used as the reference text when translating liturgical textbooks and church documents into local languages.

In October, Washington Cardinal Donald Wuerl spoke in Latin for his two major addresses at the Synod of Bishops, one of the few public events when Latin – and not Italian – is still used at a Vatican public event.

But even as Benedict called for reviving Latin as a "spoken language" too, many of the attending bishops scratched their heads as Wuerl spoke, relying instead on on-the-fly translations prepared by the Vatican press office.