

## Latin III at Westminster Academy

by Michael Johnson

It is my opinion that Latin, more than any other subject, fits what we do at classical Christian schools. When studying Latin, a student is exposed to basic language skills: grammatical principles requiring understanding and complex ideas that necessitate thought and interaction. With the right teacher involved, having a sense of history, rhetoric, and theology, Latin could possibly be the humanities side of the curriculum. All right, maybe that last sentence is a bit much. My task in this article is to write about my class, Latin III, at Westminster Academy, not give a polemic for Latin.

Each fall two sections of ninth graders begin their Latin III journey with me. My task in Latin III is to finish the *Wheelock's Latin*<sup>1</sup> text and move on to my favorite classical author, Marcus Tullius Cicero. (My task as well is making sure students are not turned off to Latin. Some students at Westminster Academy have had Latin since 2nd grade.) Cicero's *Catilinarian Orations* are available from various publishers. Westminster Academy has used Shapiro's *O Tempora, O Mores*<sup>2</sup> and Frerichs' *Cicero's First Catilinarian Oration*.<sup>3</sup> Both are commendable sources for students. The Shapiro text tends to be used in colleges and universities, while Frerichs' is used in high schools. Both texts have excellent notes and give students the rhetorical devices being used along with a thorough definition of each device. This is especially helpful if your Latin students are also taking rhetoric. If they are not, it provides

a great introduction to rhetoric.

An overview of my class is that it includes translating, papers, projects, and a recitation. The translation component in my class is a sight reading approach to Latin. (I offer my thanks to my three Latin colleagues at Westminster

republic!" It was quite a day. Another thing I do to help break some of the monotony is to have Thursdays be a day where I teach through Titus in the Vulgate. I go very slowly, detailing the character of elders and principles of leadership in chapter 1, the

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for giving me students capable of doing this.) After reviewing with them and giving context for my class, we begin a fast and furious pace. I call on students a number of times in each class period. This keeps each student engaged and, at times, a bit nervous but they are typically prepared since they know where I am heading. When I reach chapter 35 in *Wheelock*, I introduce the *Orations*. This also coincides with a three to five page paper I require them to write on the Roman Republic during the first nine weeks. After we begin translating the *Orations*, typically in the late second term, they write a paper on Cicero's life. During the third term, the students write a paper on Julius Caesar's life or assassination. The turn in date this past year was very close to the Ides of March, so of course we had to kill Caesar and parade his body around the entire facility with students yelling, "Caesar est mortuus" and "Long live the

character of the church in chapter 2, and the character of the gospel in chapter 3. This diversion gives students a break in the rigid schedule of translation and also puts them in the culture of the first century Roman Empire. Further, it gives a glimpse of godly character contrasting the questionable character of some historical figures we see in Roman history. We return to translating the *Catilinarian Orations* on Fridays.

After the Thanksgiving break, the other major component of my class begins: I require the Latin III students to do a major recitation of lines from the *Catilinarian Orations*. There are roughly 320 lines in the First Oration. I have the students divide the lines amongst themselves. Depending upon class size, students can have from 20-30 Latin lines to memorize. From this point onward, the students have deadlines (that they set) for class recitation. The first deadline involves only the first ten lines. On these days I allow them to wear togas. For the first few times reciting the lines, I am more interested in the memory

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component rather than delivery. The rhetorical benefits tend to be more evident after the memory element is perfected. Students can then add gestures and steps when

level? For one thing the model of education we offer encourages students to do these very things: memory, delivery, translating, writing, thinking, expressing their creativity.

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they are confident in their words. They reach a point where all 20-30 lines must be delivered with no more than five pauses or mistakes to pass. I also have "Top Ten Toga Days" where the students can practice their top ten lines to rhetorical "perfection." I allow them to wear togas on these days.

After real progress is made class wide, I then announce the date for the Marcus Tullius Cicero Prize. This competition involves all Latin III students and requires that they make As on the recitation and score at least a 90% on a comprehensive history exam on Cicero's life. This narrows the participants, typically, to a workable number. This last year there were ten contestants. We held the competition in the auditorium, lights lowered, spotlights on the speaker, togas, busts of Caesar and Cicero on columns, music from the *Gladiator* soundtrack. (Just to make it a bit interesting I had two students do a surfer dude and valley girl recitation. I could not help myself...it was hilarious.) The judges, two rhetoric and one history teacher, voted and named a winner. The winner received a bust of Cicero and his name on the Marcus Tullius Cicero Prize plaque. The entire student body was invited. Parents attended as well.

Why all the fuss? Why not just go through the text and get them ready for the next

short, it orders the mind. However, Latin need not be filled with drills and forms only. There is no teacher's manual that states learning Latin must be dull. If we are going to create an environment where students enjoy learning, we better be doing this for the study of Latin. There are enough detractors already bemoaning students learning a "dead" language. Our classical Christian schools have made learning Latin a priority. If that's true then the teaching of it should be equally a priority as well. If indeed Latin is "dead" to those who do not know much about it, it better be taught by a "live" teacher. That's the surest way to keep our students and their parents engaged.

### NOTES

1. Frederick Wheelock, *Wheelock's Latin*, 6th rev. ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 2005).
2. Susan Shapiro, *O Tempora, O Mores: Cicero's Catilinarian Orations* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005).
3. Karl Frerichs, *Cicero's First Catilinarian Oration with Introduction, Running Vocabularies, and Notes* (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 2000).

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