



Parvis Imbutus or the Ideal Way to Learn Latin

by Julie Collorafi

Boy Reading by Eastman Johnson

The old prep school motto *Parvis imbutus tentabis grandia tutus* (Having been steeped in little things, you, being safe, shall attempt great things) illustrates the need for consistent, incremental learning in the elementary grades as a foundation for intensive, accelerated studies on the secondary and collegiate level.

Accordingly, my guiding philosophy in the development of my Latin program *Little Latin Readers* has been to extend the study of a standard, well-respected high school Latin grammar text, *Henle Latin I*, over several elementary grades, so that students entering high school will be familiar and comfortable with basic Latin grammar and vocabulary and will be prepared to transition smoothly and easily to a secondary level Latin program such as *Henle Latin I-IV*.

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as a child: Lucretius, Cicero, Marcus Aurelius, Plutarch. In high school I was fortunate to have a Latin teacher who was young and enthusiastic. Mr. O'Brien was so enthusiastic, in fact, that he would often fling open the door and slide into the room on the wooden floor in a grand flourish. Depositing his books on the desk with a thump, he would begin class on a

high note of excitement. He laughed and cajoled us into learning our paradigms; and the fun did not diminish even when we were scanning lines of *The Aeneid* in senior year, impelling me to continue on for two more years of Latin in college.

The facility with grammar, composition, and vocabulary

gained from my Latin studies were substantial assets in further academic pursuits, and I was eager to share the benefits of Latin with my six home-educated children.

So it was, with standard Latin manual in hand, that my fourth and fifth grade sons and I fearlessly

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launched our journey into the arcane mysteries of declensions and conjugations one bright September afternoon some years ago.

Our first two weeks studying first declension endings passed by with barely a hitch but the snags began with the introduction of the second declension; I found myself becoming concerned when I saw that the third declension was coming at us fast and furious around the corner. While Son No. 1 is blessed with near photographic memory and is a quick study, his eagerness was fading, and the more phlegmatic Son No. 2 was sinking fast.

As excellent as the textbook lessons were, the realization dawned that the material needed to be separated into smaller components with plenty of opportunities for practicing each concept, *à la* Saxon Math. My sons were big Yankee fans at the time, and something clicked when I heard the legendary Joe Torre describe his winning strategy: "Small bites, one step at a time." So every Latin class would begin with my newly created practice worksheets of declension paradigms and comprehension and translation activities.

A few years later while teaching *Henle Latin* at a homeschool co-op, it was clear that the students' progress was being hampered by a lack of rudimentary knowledge of sentence structure and grammar. Seeing that Father Henle used a few examples of sentence diagrams in his lessons, I decided to introduce sentence diagramming to my Latin students and was delighted to see how quickly connections and understanding developed and the enthusiasm they had for decoding sentences in this fashion.

One of the mothers suggested I write my own elementary Latin program, and so the idea for my series was born. Because I was in the midst of teaching my younger children to read using *Bob Books* and *Little Angel Readers*, it seemed that the

combination of a small-format reader and workbook was the ideal system. I was also inspired by the *Bastien* piano method which employs several books at each level, laying out music theory and performance into the ideal “small bites,” *gradatim* (by degrees), striving for a reasonable mastery of each concept before moving on to the next.

Therefore the first primer of my program, *Puella Romana*, introduces the first declension; the second, *Britanni et Galli*, introduces the second declension; and the third, *Civitates Europae*, introduces the third declension. The use of verbs is confined in the primers to intransitive verbs, and nominative, genitive, and ablative endings are introduced. In this way, the range of endings is kept very small and more attention may be fixed upon the conceptualization of Subject-Verb agreement, along with *Being Verbs* and *Predicate Complements*. For the sake of variety a number of prepositional phrases and the genitive of possession are also included in the primers.

The recent addition of drill books with the primers offers more detailed grammar explanations and vocabulary enrichment. For each lesson, a Latin quote from Scripture or the writings of the saints is presented for memorization. The drill book includes diacritical markings and study of the pronunciation and accent rules so the student will become more adept at pronunciation.

On the fourth through seventh levels, starting with *Italia* and ending with *Sancta Missa*, the fourth and fifth declensions are added, along with more advanced grammatical concepts. The diagramming of sentences begins

in the fifth level, *Vita Mariae*, and continues throughout. An eighth level, *Fides Patrum Ecclesiae*, is currently in the works and will be available in the next school year. Upon completion of all the levels, students will have been introduced and have extensive practice with all the material in *Henle Latin I*.

From that point, the student is well prepared to take off like a rocket with a high school Latin program, having a firm grammatical foundation, having been steeped and saturated (*imbutus*), if you will, in the little things (*parvis*) in the elementary grades, much like

the conventional study of English.

Perhaps a note of caution is in order: For those cruciverbalists and puzzle fans out there, the study of Latin may be addictive. A recent study of the famous Baroque painting of *Our Lady, Undoer of Knots*, (*Maria, Qui Solvit Nodos*) caused me to realize

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how my enduring interest in Latin is due to a real delight in decoding Latin sentences – similar to my happy satisfaction in unraveling and detangling a knotted, snarled mass of yarn or filling out a crossword puzzle. Just as I delight to see the transformation of a lumpy, hopeless mess into a smooth, orderly ball, ready for the next knitting project, so also I am eager to tackle and unravel a seemingly incomprehensible jumble of words.

The thrill of sorting, sequencing, and solving is of course not the only motivation for Catholic students to study Latin. Since it is the language of the *usus antiquior*, even a rudimentary knowledge of grammar and vocabulary and, at the very least, familiarity with the pronunciation rules is of

great benefit to those who attend the traditional Latin Mass. A knowledge of Latin is also of great benefit in deciphering and enjoying the treasures of Catholic culture – Latin hymns, poems, and chant, the translation of which however beautiful (cf. Adrian Fortescue’s *Latin Hymns*), cannot replace the profundity of the original. Because of its precise definitions and capacity for nuance, Latin is also useful in the study of theology, patristics, canon law, and philosophy, the main corpus of which is preserved in that tongue.

It might be, as for myself, that learning to read the words of Sacred Scripture from the pen of Saint Jerome, in the *Biblia Sacra Vulgata* is the ultimate thrill in knowing Latin. Considering that the Vulgate was the most influential text in Christendom for over a millenium and was the source of inspiration, the *fons et origo*, for Gregorian chant, the great medieval cathedrals, Western European literature, Renaissance art, and polyphony is motive enough to treasure its phraseology and wording.

So, consider placing your child on the path of gentle, incremental Latin instruction, reinforcing and consolidating his/her knowledge base at every step, and forming a solid groundwork for rapid progress in later grades.

Gradibus ascendimus! (By degrees, we go higher.) ✠

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