

Report from Rome by Lorenza Saini

Back to the classics

Some Italian parliamentarians open a flank against the counterculture: relaunching the study of Latin and Greek.

Around 1800, at the University of Berlin, a philosophical debate pitted the brothers Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt against Friedrich Savigny and G.W.F. Hegel. Since the Faculty of Sciences was dominated by the rival faction, von Humboldt told a teacher at the Greek Faculty at the beginning of the summer that next autumn, he should give classes in mathematics, especially constructive geometry. The teacher protested, but he received the following response: "Since you have an excellent mastery of Greek and Latin and you know the literature in depth, you are also an expert in mathematics." He became one of the most prized mathematics teachers.

We have not yet reached that level; the false split between humanistic studies and natural sciences has not been confronted fully in Italian and European pedagogy, but some things have begun to move. In July, a motion was presented in Italy's Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of Parliament, calling for reviving the teaching of Latin. It is sponsored by a large group of parliamentarians of many parties. On Oct. 2-3, a conference was held by the Latin Union, on "Latin for an Intelligent Europe," which was opened by Public Education Minister Gerardo Bianco, a strenuous defender of the classics.

In early November, a meeting took place between Minister Bianco and the relevant committee of the European Parliament, and in December the education ministers from all the European Community countries are to meet. In January, Italy's Parliament is slated to debate last summer's pro-

Latin motion.

The Latin Union conference was attended by men of science and culture as well as parliamentarians. The speeches related the question of a unified Europe to the role of Latin as the common tongue of Europe from the Roman Empire to the Carolingian Empire, and from jurists to Christian philosophers such as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas.

In his keynote, Minister Bianco recalled the ups and downs of Latin teaching from the early 20th-century reforms which proposed to abolish it in the secondary schools, to the "anti-democratic" label during the 1960s student protests. The result was the "loss of the sense of historical continuity and unified feeling in Italian and European civilization, which has its basis in Latin-ness; the incapacity to be able to reflect critically on the language and its origin, from which insecurity of expression and difficulty in dominating the logical-linguistic whole are derived."

The secretary general of the Latin Union stressed, "Intoxicated with television, advertising slogans, the jargon of animated cartoons, European children are, for the most part, incapable of using 'I maintain,' 'complementary,' 'nonetheless,' 'with the reservation that,' 'consequential,' or even to distinguish between 'occasion' and 'opportunity.' A little Latin would do good to this society of ungrammatical communication which risks, in the end, losing the instrument of organized thought."

Prof. Peter Wulfing, of Cologne University in Germany, drew interesting comparisons of the pedagogical

approaches of various European areas. In the north—Scandinavia, England, and the Low Countries—more weight has been given to the study of classical civilization. They no longer translate from Greek or Latin, but read ready-made translations, and the percentage of students who choose to complete classical studies by learning the actual language is low. Then there is "Mrs. Thatcher's economic liberalism, an adversary to be taken very seriously. It pretends to be free of all ideology, manifests great respect for ancient languages . . . and eliminates us when we are a bother or need money."

Central and Southern Europe, albeit with differences, have kept up a "predilection for descriptive access to the language . . . and a love . . . for the style and the rhetorical means of the ancient texts, as well as for the language itself." In Eastern Europe, a real "struggle for the survival and teaching of Latin has represented a memory of pre-socialist middle class culture."

Secondary education director Romano Cammarata confirmed that Italy will keep Latin in the reformed high schools. After various experiments, "we have taken stock, and from now on we will proceed on a single track. Latin will be present in the classical, normal, scientific, and linguistic high schools. In the second year of the classical high schools, Greek study will also begin."

Conference participants passed a final resolution that "the Latin language must still have a fundamental role not only for humanistic-literary studies and professions, but also to facilitate the learning of other modern languages . . . and it remains important even for those who pursue scientific and medical professions, as well as for scholars of law and philosophy."