

Pope Benedict XVI and the “old Latin Mass”: Towards an Undivided Liturgical Tradition

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Since its release, much has been said about *Summorum Pontificum*, the “Motu Proprio” document by which Pope Benedict XVI has allowed for greater use of what has often been referred to as the “Tridentine” Mass—that is, the old Latin Mass, as practiced throughout the Roman Catholic Church after the Council of Trent and through the Second Vatican Council. Given the considerable confusion and heated polemics that have arisen over this topic, it is my hope here to offer a commentary on the reasoning behind the Holy Father’s decision, by answering some of the major questions that might arise.

Why does Pope Benedict feel the need to “reconnect with the past”?

As a young and brilliant theologian present at the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, and later as a leading Vatican official, Joseph Ratzinger had a first-hand opportunity to witness the joys and hopes of the Council, from the formulation of its documents to their implementation. Now, as Pope Benedict XVI, he has taken a special and very important interest in carefully correcting the widespread misconception that Vatican II was a complete break or rupture from the Church’s past—a view espoused by some overzealous persons, proponents and detractors of the Council alike.

Benedict has spent his still-young pontificate promoting instead a “hermeneutic of continuity” between the pre- and post-conciliar Church. “Hermeneutics” involves the lens through which one interprets and understands a document or teaching. So, embracing a “hermeneutic of continuity” means that we are to interpret the Council’s documents as being in harmony with the tradition of the Church. This emphasizes that sacred tradition does not simply become irrelevant within a divine institution grounded in history. This approach is contrary to a “hermeneutic of rupture” or discontinuity, which wrongly interprets the Council as having significantly altered the nature and teaching of the Catholic Church. A hermeneutic of rupture attempts to recreate the Church solely according to the ideals of a given age.

Why is this sense of continuity important for the Church’s liturgy?

The Holy Father has upheld this hermeneutic of continuity in his teaching on the Church’s sacred liturgy, which Vatican II’s “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) describes as “the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed” and “the font from which all her power flows.” The sacramental presence of Christ in the Church’s worship transforms the world, while finding its source

in the Incarnation itself. The Christ whom we encounter in the sacred liturgy of our own day is the same historical Jesus who lived in Nazareth and died in Jerusalem, and who will be with us until the end of time (Matthew 28:20). Our worship must always reflect and proclaim this fact.

The Latin title of the Pope's Motu Proprio speaks of this continuity in Christ. "*Summorum Pontificum*" comes from the first line of the document: "Up to our own times, it has been the constant concern of *supreme pontiffs* to ensure that the Church of Christ offers a worthy ritual to the Divine Majesty." In the Motu Proprio and his accompanying letter, Pope Benedict is firmly establishing that his action is consistent with the work of his predecessors. The Mass with which we are widely familiar today is from the revised "Missal of Pope Paul VI," which was published after the Council. (The Missal is the liturgical book from which the "Order of Mass" is prayed.) In making provisions for wider use of the 1962 Missal published by Blessed Pope John XXIII, which was the last Missal released before the Council, Benedict is actually promoting a hermeneutic of continuity with respect to the Council's revisions.

Why are some saying that this is a reversal of Vatican II?

Unfortunately, many media outlets and commentators have given a largely uninformed portrayal of the Holy Father's decision to allow for greater use of the 1962 Missal. It has been described ominously as "a repealing of the Second Vatican Council," or as the forced return of a stodgy and unproductive approach to piety. But these accusations are typical examples of the hermeneutic of rupture, for such reporting disregards the fact that the old Missal was prayed faithfully and fruitfully for centuries.

Moreover, precisely because the Holy Father reaffirms that the liturgical reform after the Second Vatican Council is a natural development and not a spontaneous liturgical revolution, it is quite mistaken to understand *Summorum Pontificum* as a reversion to pre-conciliar times. Pope Benedict himself assures us that "this fear is unfounded." His decree is not an imposition on the clergy and the faithful. Instead, it grants greater freedom in response to a growing desire to bring the older liturgy into more direct contact with the new.

For these reasons, Pope Benedict has given the faithful some helpful new terminology. The Missal of Paul VI is to be known as the "ordinary expression" or "form" of the Mass, while the Missal of Bl. John XXIII is the "extraordinary expression." Yet, in the Apostolic Letter, he is adamant that they are not separate Rites, as though they belonged to two separate manifestations of the Roman Catholic Church. Rather, they should be understood as a "twofold use of one and the same" Roman Rite—two ways by which a united community of believers enters the one holy sacrifice of the Mass.

Part 2

Is greater openness to the old form of the Mass meant mainly to satisfy radicals who reject the reforms of Vatican II?

The broad permission given in *Summorum Pontificum* is not, as some have argued, designed primarily to cater to small groups of radical “traditionalists.” To the contrary, the Holy Father explicitly mentions two groups as having a legitimate and influential affinity for the old Missal—members of the older generation that had “deep, personal familiarity with the earlier Form;” and “young persons” who “have discovered this liturgical form, felt its attraction and found in it a form of encounter with the Mystery of the Most Holy Eucharist, particularly suited to them.”

Pope Benedict, who turned 80 in April, recognizes the increasingly widespread interest in time-honored forms of piety among young Catholics, who have integrated into their own lives such familiar elements of the faith as Eucharistic adoration, frequent confession, and regular praying of the Rosary. This has happened precisely because these practices are “traditional,” not in an outmoded or negative sense, but in a timeless sense.

Summorum Pontificum, then, is a truly pastoral document. It seeks to establish a much-needed sense of continuity, while working to amend what has often been a marginalization of those who have a particular—yet properly oriented—attachment to some of the older treasures from two millennia of Catholic tradition.

Is the new form of the Mass being neglected in this Motu Proprio?

Nothing could be further from the truth. It is important to keep in mind that the Mass we have grown to know over the last four decades, the Mass from the Missal of Paul VI, is now referred to as the ordinary form precisely because it will remain the most common means by which the Church prays. Practically speaking, this fact is clear, especially given the relatively small number of priests currently able to pray the old Missal of Bl. John XXIII.

At the same time, this designation of “ordinary form”—as the normative form of worship—conveys a certain primacy with respect to discussion of the liturgical tradition as a whole. It may seem strange to think that *Summorum Pontificum* and its accompanying letter, already so well-known for their focus on the older form of the Mass, may actually carry an even stronger focus on the newer form. But this may indeed be the case, if one reads Pope Benedict with an appreciation for his hermeneutic of continuity.

The Masses celebrated before and after the Council seem so different. How can they be related?

There are certainly considerable differences between these two ways of praying the Mass, the ordinary form and the extraordinary form. The extraordinary form always had to be prayed entirely in Latin, parts were sung or spoken in different ways by the priest, and there were certain prayers that were cut or modified in the new Missal. Nonetheless, the Pope is emphasizing that liturgical continuity and similarities can become more evident in the future, as the two forms interact.

In fact, the text of Vatican II clearly envisions an approach to liturgical reform that builds upon the solid foundation of what Pope Benedict reverently refers to as the *usus antiquior* (“the more ancient use”) of the Mass. Indeed, the revised Missal still owes most of its rich content to the old Missal. Benedict writes, “There is no contradiction between the two editions of the Roman Missal. In the history of the liturgy, there is growth and progress, but no rupture.”

How does Pope Benedict envision the interaction between these two ways of praying the Mass?

Ultimately, the identity of the ordinary form depends in large part upon a visible continuity with the extraordinary form. Pope Benedict’s observation, as seen in his letter, is that the new Missal has not always been celebrated as it was intended. He speaks of his personal experience in witnessing excessive “creativity” and “arbitrary deformations in the liturgy” over the years, which have “caused deep pain” to the Church’s spirituality. But even when extreme liturgical problems are not present, the Holy Father believes that much could still be done to bring our worship more in line with what the Church intended at the Second Vatican Council. Through *Summorum Pontificum*, the Holy Father envisions the older form of the Mass exerting an influential pull on the newer form, but without superseding it. And, to an extent, the reverse is also true—Pope Benedict even allows for approved vernacular readings to be integrated with the Missal of Bl. John XXIII.

Perhaps the most profound couple of lines in the Pope’s letter on *Summorum Pontificum* are these: “The most sure guarantee that the Missal of Paul VI can unite parish communities and *be loved by them* consists in its being celebrated with great reverence in keeping with the liturgical directives. This will bring out the spiritual richness and the theological depth of this Missal.” Notice Pope Benedict’s desire that the ordinary form of the Mass “*be loved*” by all worshipers. How wonderful that this Pope, once considered by some as a rigid character, has become the premier theological exponent of love through his teachings! (One need only think of his encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*—“God Is Love.”) In the liturgy, a wholehearted and participatory love can only flow from recognition of and longing for the Mass’s timeless splendor.

Part 3

Is the participation of the faithful in the liturgy still important?

Vatican II's document on the liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, includes a much-quoted statement about the great need for "full, conscious and active participation" on the part of all the faithful. The importance and relevance of this exhortation cannot be understated; and Benedict himself has acknowledged certain deficiencies in the practice of the older form of the Mass, with respect to the understanding and participation of the laity. This was certainly one of the reasons behind the liturgical reforms.

However, there is no such thing as a perfectly executed earthly liturgy, and the implementation of the new Missal has seen the ideal of participation sometimes taken too far in the other direction, with the result being that participation is often understood in an overly superficial sense. Benedict suggests that both extremes indicate possible problems in the people's knowledge and approach to the liturgy, rather than serious problems with the liturgical books themselves.

What does Pope Benedict say about active participation and the importance of one's approach to the liturgy?

An excellent reflection on the relationship between participation and liturgical integrity can be found in *Sacramentum Caritatis* ("The Sacrament of Love/Charity"), the Apostolic Exhortation released early in 2007 as a follow-up to the 2005 Bishops' Synod on the Eucharist. In this beautiful document, the Holy Father speaks of the "*ars celebrandi*," which is "the art of proper celebration." The *ars celebrandi* is informed by continuity and tradition, for it "is the fruit of faithful adherence to the liturgical norms in all their richness; indeed for two thousand years this way of celebrating has sustained the faith life of all believers." So, to follow what the Church prescribes is to follow the liturgical mind of the Body of Christ, which has a breadth and memory far deeper than the wisdom of any individual.

The Pope further teaches that there is no tension whatsoever between the *ars celebrandi* and the "full, active and fruitful participation of all the faithful." Rather, "the primary way to foster the participation of the People of God in the sacred rite is the proper celebration of the rite itself." When the focus is firmly on Christ, then participation is at its height, for our worship must ultimately be a participation in Christ. And partaking of Holy Communion is our greatest act of assent and membership, for it is the sacramental means of our union with God. One cannot be more "active" than within this transformation of our bodies and souls.

External and visible participation is certainly important, because we are incarnate beings and because Christ took on human flesh. This external participation serves a higher purpose—to be a vehicle towards a deeper interior disposition. Exterior participation should never appear as an end in itself. Elements such as liturgical music and actions should never be taken up as art for art’s own sake, but as a manifestation of an underlying spiritual reality. This is the heart of proper worship.

Do the heightened solemnity and silence in the old form of the Mass have anything to offer for participation in the new form?

It is Pope Benedict’s hope that the relationship and interaction between the ordinary and extraordinary forms of the Roman Rite will advance the previously mentioned truths about the *ars celebrandi*. In particular, he emphasizes the practice of solemnity, which may be best described as the manifestation of a deferential respect and awe while in the presence of God. The significant degree of solemnity demonstrated and fostered in many celebrations of the old Missal had a very positive effect on piety and reverence among the faithful. In reflecting upon the decrees of his *Motu Proprio*, the Holy Father expresses his sincere hope that, with the two forms of the Roman Rite “mutually enriching” one another, the celebration of the new form of the Mass “will be able to demonstrate, more powerfully than has been the case hitherto, the sacrality which attracts many people to the former usage.”

This sacrality, which is a deep sense of solemnity and a deep sense of the sacred, was cultivated in large part by the periods of silence that characterized the older form of the Mass. This key component was not abolished at the Council. Vatican II’s *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, even in the midst of promoting active participation, maintains that “at the proper times all should observe a reverent silence.”

Reverent silence should not be understood as doing nothing. To the contrary, the celebration of the older form of the Mass requires silence as an essential instrument of contemplation that encourages a profound regard for divine mystery. The new Missal also provides for substantial periods of silence, and an increased appreciation of this contemplative element (perhaps learning from how it is used in the extraordinary form) might greatly enhance parts of the celebration of the ordinary form of the Mass. Indeed, even before *Summorum Pontificum*, we had been seeing a renewed emphasis on the value of sacred silence in the liturgy. Of course, sacred music and spoken prayers can also contribute to an engaging sense of solemnity; but a good balance brings a certain fullness to the liturgy.

The Pope is gently and wisely reminding us that the authenticity of the new Missal’s claim to organic development from the old can be more firmly established and manifested through its more consciously dignified celebration, always with an eye towards the character of the old Missal.

Part 4

Why would the Pope promote the use of Latin in the liturgy?

Of course, the role of Latin in the liturgy has been a chief preoccupation of many critics of the *Motu Proprio*, given that the extraordinary form of the Mass is prayed entirely in Latin. But really, the use of Latin is nothing new, for the “typical edition” of the Missal of Paul VI has always been in Latin, with approved vernacular translations. In speaking of the new Missal, the major 2004 liturgical document, *Redemptionis Sacramentum* (“The Sacrament of Redemption”), reiterated that, with pastoral exceptions, “priests are always and everywhere permitted to celebrate Mass in Latin.”

It is an unfortunate misconception to think that the Second Vatican Council did away with the Latin language in the prayer life of the Church. During and since the Council, numerous Church documents have emphasized the value that Latin holds. The Council’s “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,” *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, expresses that “the use of the Latin language is to be preserved.” In 2001, the Vatican’s Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments released its fifth instruction since 1964 on “the right implementation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council.” Called *Liturgiam authenticam* (“authentic liturgy”), this instruction states that consideration should be given to including “at least some texts in the Latin language” even in vernacular editions of the new Missal.

Even the recent and popular “Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church” includes an appendix of Latin prayers that Pope Benedict has urged all the Christian faithful to learn. An increased engagement with the extraordinary form of the Mass might restore a basic level of familiarity with the dynamic use of the ancient Latin language in the Church’s prayer.

What is the value of liturgical music in Latin?

Vatican II maintains the value of Latin in sacred music: “The Church acknowledges Gregorian chant as specially suited to the Roman liturgy: therefore, other things being equal, it should be given pride of place in liturgical services.” *Liturgiam authenticam* echoes this praise, stating that special consideration should be given to “the priceless treasury of Gregorian chant,” for such chant “has a great power to lift the human spirit to heavenly realities.”

Pope Benedict’s Apostolic Exhortation, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, also reaffirms these words on the widespread employment of Gregorian chant, while strongly encouraging the use of Latin as a serious solution to the language barrier found at international liturgies. Basic Latin prayers and chants can be universal precisely because they are simple yet

beautiful in nature. With increased use and in conjunction with English translations, they are not hard to learn or to understand. The recent rise in popularity of chanting some Mass parts in Latin, such as the *Sanctus* and *Agnus Dei*, demonstrates the fundamental appeal of such a contemplative liturgical practice.

What can be expected from the Pope's emphasis on liturgical continuity?

Pope Benedict takes such things as ritual solemnity, Latin, and the overarching “art of proper celebration” very seriously, because the upholding of these fundamental traditions is vital to a healthy liturgical outlook of continuity. In large part, the Holy Father acknowledges that we have not yet seen this continuity between old and new in practice on a universal scale; but he is full of hope.

It is powerful to consider that a recovery of a sense of undivided liturgical continuity within the Roman Rite may be necessary for the Church of today to have a very evident connection to the life and spirituality of the same Church of centuries past. This is certainly not to say that we will suddenly see the old Latin Mass spring up everywhere, or that we will see immediate development in the celebration of the new Missal. Any growth in either the ordinary or extraordinary forms of the Mass depends largely on an increased awareness of the Holy Father's vision by clergy and laity alike. But with prudent initiative, the reforms of the Council—which are synonymous with Benedict's liturgical vision—may finally come to fruition as the Roman Rite gradually achieves a sort of harmony. It will certainly take many years, but such is the patient yet steady life of the Catholic Church.

How should we approach the future?

More than anything, *Summorum Pontificum* represents, as the Pope says, a movement towards “an interior reconciliation in the heart of the Church.” Liturgy and theology cannot be a battleground for polemics or agendas of any kind. Ideology is fleeting, and is incompatible with the faith, which is ultimately an encounter with Jesus Christ—He who “is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Hebrews 13:8). By virtue of this encounter, the liturgy itself becomes a tremendous instrument of catechesis and evangelization. The encounter occurs through Christian love and within the sacred tradition entrusted to us, and its beauty does not change from one generation to another.

Therefore, we Catholics can confidently look to the future of divine worship with hope and thanksgiving, for the Holy Spirit has provided us with a wise shepherd in Pope Benedict XVI, and the same Spirit will continue to provide for the future of the Church. It may take time for a transcendent continuity to show, and for the Church to rediscover her liturgical identity within the received tradition. But the Holy Father has already given us the answer: “Let us generously open our hearts and make room for everything that the faith itself allows.”