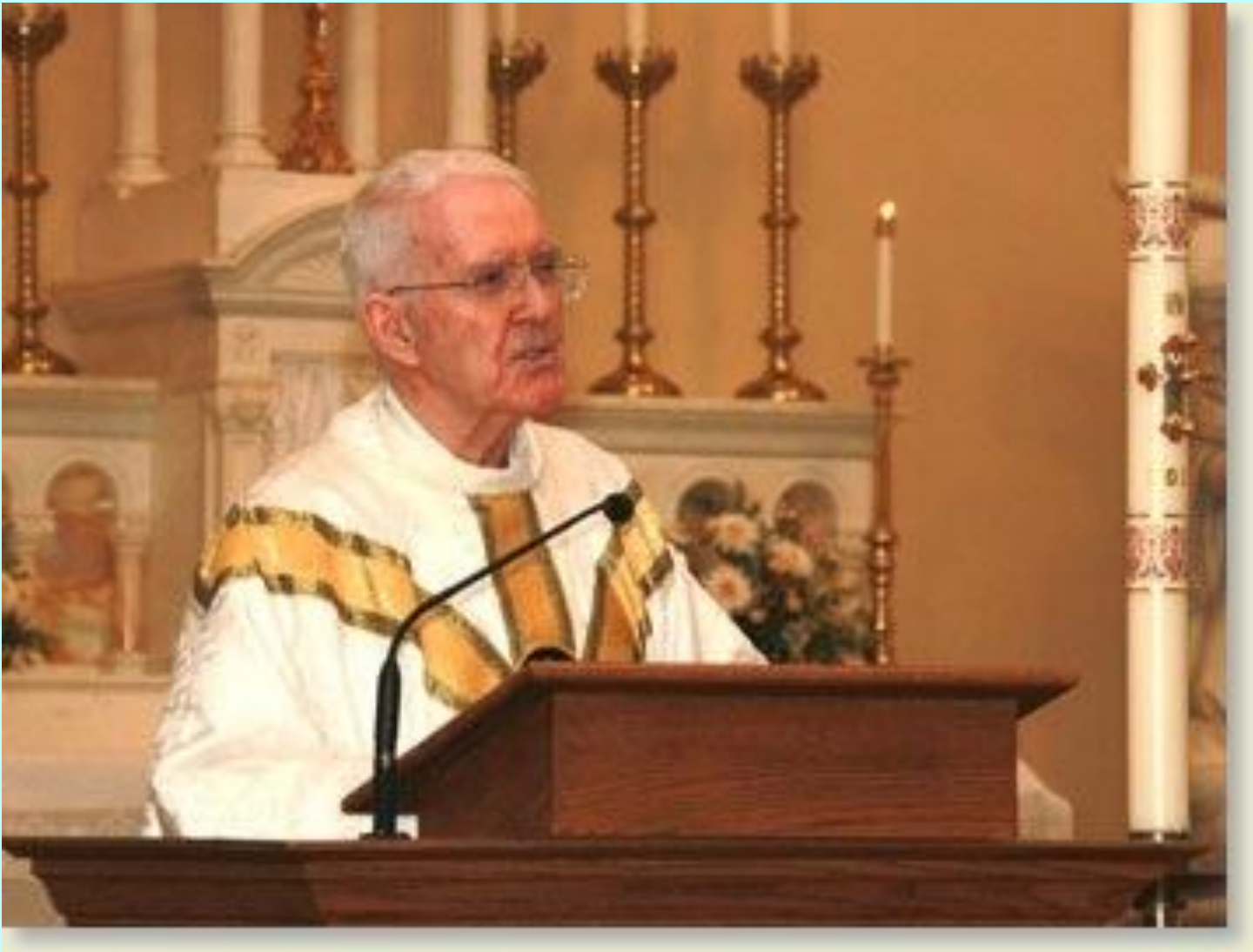


Summorum Pontificum And The Future Of The Liturgy

By Fr. Kenneth Baker



We had to wait a long time for the Motu Proprio, Summorum Pontificum, to be promulgated, but it was worth it. The document is well thought out and gives some precise juridical norms for the use of the traditional Latin liturgy of the Church. Over the next ten years this new legislation will have a profound effect on the worship of the Catholic Church.

A Motu Proprio is a special type of papal document which is the publication of a new law for the Church. This phrase means “on my own initiative” or something similar. This means it comes directly from the Pope who is the Supreme Pontiff and Vicar of Jesus Christ. It does not come from one of the Vatican Congregations run by a Cardinal. In this case the Motu Proprio is accompanied by a covering Letter explaining why the Pope is issuing the new legislation.

The first thing to note is that the letter is addressed to “My dear brother Bishops.” The letter is not addressed to the whole Church; it is not the law of the Church. The law of the Church is contained in the Motu Proprio.

The Pope divides the letter into two parts, addressing two fears: the first is the fear expressed by the French and German Bishops — that the document detracts from the authority of the Second Vatican Council. He rejects that outright: “this fear is unfounded.” And he uses the same expression for the second fear: that the use of the Missal might lead to “disarray” and “divisions” among parish communities. That is also “unfounded.”

He then introduces the two forms of the Roman rite, the ordinary and the extraordinary. He points out that it is not appropriate to speak of “two rites,” but that it is rather a twofold use of one and the same Roman Rite — there is one rite, with two equal forms. As you will see, this has very profound implications.

The Pope emphasizes that the ancient rite was never abrogated. In 1970, we were made to think that it was gone, and that only retired priests who had obtained special permission to say the Mass in private could say the traditional Latin Mass. That was a misrepresentation of the law of the Church, but it was almost universally adopted by the Bishops and religious communities.

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After making these points, the Pope goes into the deformations of recent years, and here he is very personal — he uses the first person singular. He says, “I am speaking from experience, since I, too, lived through that period with all its hopes and its confusion. And I have seen how arbitrary deformations of the liturgy caused deep pain to individuals totally rooted in the faith of the Church.” Here he is addressing the experience of all of us — the hootenanny Masses, the clown Masses — deformations which drove millions of people away from the Catholic Church.

Benedict next mentions Pope John Paul II, especially the Motu Proprio Ecclesia Dei (1988). In this document John Paul was trying to solve this problem for the people who had been alienated because they preferred the old liturgy. He wanted to assist

these people, and, in particular, he also wanted to achieve reconciliation with the Society of Saint Pius X. But the document is only in general terms. It contains no “precise juridical norms.”

In 1988 Pope John Paul II asked the Bishops to be generous in granting permission for the old Mass. Many, perhaps most, Bishops were not “generous” in allowing the traditional Latin Mass, so in this new document the Pope says in effect, “I have to step in and solve the problem with new juridical norms,” and he does that with this Motu Proprio: it is the new law of the Church.

With this document, Benedict is taking control of the traditional Latin Mass out of the hands of the Bishops and giving it to priests. He’s taking a giant step toward the Saint Pius X Society by granting their first demand that every priest be allowed to say the traditional Latin Mass. The “giant step” is that, in Article 2 of the Motu Proprio, Benedict says that every priest now has the right to say the traditional Latin Mass — he doesn’t have to ask the Pope, he doesn’t have to ask his Bishop.

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Remember that the second fear he mentioned was that the Motu Proprio would cause “disarray” and even “divisions” within the various communities. The Pope points out that there is only a small number of Catholics who are interested in the traditional Latin Mass at the present time, and so it is not likely to cause such divisions. He point out that neither liturgical formation or knowledge of the Latin language is found very often among priests — and that is especially true here in the United States. So only a small percentage of the faithful — to begin with — are going to be interested in this. Frankly, the French and German Bishops should not be concerned about divisions in the Church over the Latin Mass, since eighty or ninety percent of the Catholics in these countries don’t go to church anyway.

How can our priest learn how to celebrate the Latin Mass correctly according to the rubrics? Here is where the Priestly Fraternity of Saint Peter and the Institute of Christ the King come in, because they are in a position to train priests to celebrate the traditional Latin Mass. The Fraternity offered one week courses in June in the seminary in Denton, Nebraska, training diocesan priests who want to learn how to celebrate the traditional Mass. And they’ll offer more in the future.¹

The Pope underscores the fact that “the two forms of the Latin Mass can be mutually enriching.” But some traditionalists are concerned that endless tinkering might occur by the constant addition of new saints and new prefaces. Yes, Popes have done that in the past, but with all the changes that been wrought in the past 40 years, why bring that up? What we’re looking for here is stability — we want the liturgy that is fixed and permanent. We don’t want it changing every year.

With regard to the notion of the two forms as “mutually enriching,” I think it’s likely that the proper celebration of the traditional Mass on a wider scale in many parishes will bring about a more sacred celebration of the Novus Ordo Mass. After all, in the traditional rite, the priest is facing the east, he makes about fifteen genuflections, he uses very particular liturgical language — and the Latin has the sacred character of mystery. All religions have sacred language — for example, the Jews use Hebrew in the synagogue, even though it is not usually spoken. It brings home the message that there’s mystery here. We are dealing with the supreme majesty of God almighty, and that language of mystery brings it all home — we do not express it in the language of the street.

The Pope next states his basic reason for restoring the Latin mass: “I now come to the positive reason which motivated my decision to issue this Motu Proprio updating that of 1988. It is a matter of coming to an interior reconciliation in the heart of the church.” That’s essential to this whole thing — the Pope wants to bring back reconciliation and unity in the Church; he wants to bring back the Saint Pius X Society, and he wants to bring back the millions of Catholics who don’t go to church anymore.

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In recent months there have been many reports of opposition from mostly liberal individuals in the Church. Since the Latin Mass affects only about 1% of Catholics, why are they so opposed? They’re afraid it’s going to grow. Once people see the traditional Latin Mass and contrast it with the Novus Ordo, they realize what’s been lost. The sense of the sacred, the mystery of the Mass, the Latin, the facing east, the Gregorian chants, altar boys, communion on the tongue, kneeling at the communion rail, all of those things.

I like the passage where the Pope assures the Bishops that the new legislation does not lessen the authority of the Bishop, after he has taken all of this away from the Bishop. He says to the Bishops, “in conclusion, dear brothers, I very much wish to stress that these new norms do not in any way lessen your own authority and responsibility, either for the liturgy or for the pastoral care of your faithful.” So the Bishop’s job is to oversee and implement the pastoral care of the faithful in the liturgy. And in the next paragraph, he repeats it -- their “role remains that of being watchful that all is done in peace and serenity.” I love that, because what he’s saying is, you no longer have absolute control over the traditional Latin Mass, but you have to see to it that the priests who celebrate it are doing it right. That has been the role of Bishops for the last 400 years.

Now I propose to comment on the Motu Proprio itself. This new legislation solves a problem that has been causing division and heartbreak in the Church since the Novus Ordo was introduced in the 1970 by Pope Paul VI. The rapid, unprepared and unexplained imposition of the new rite was the occasion for the alienation of many Catholics who treasured the Catholic Latin liturgy.

Since 1970 groups of the faithful in many dioceses have asked the Bishop for a regular Latin Mass and have been denied. In 1984 and then again in 1988 Pope John Paul II tried to solve the problem and asked the Bishops to be “generous” in granting permission for the use of the 1962 Missal of Blessed John XXIII. Some Bishops did grant permission, but it was often restricted to once a month or in a remote part of the diocese that was difficult to reach. In San Diego it was relegated to a Mausoleum.

The new legislation restores the traditional Latin Mass to the status it had for 1500 years. It is now on the same level as the Novus Ordo liturgy. Benedict XVI has decreed that there is one Latin Rite with two forms — Ordinary and Extraordinary. What many call the English Mass is now the Ordinary form of the Latin Rite, and the traditional Latin Mass is the Extraordinary form. Every priest can use either form and from now on does not need the Bishop’s permission.

The most important point in the new legislation is that any priest can use the 1962 Missal “on any day except in the Sacred Triduum (that is, Thursday, Friday and Saturday in Holy Week) (Article 2).² In Article 5 the Pope says when a group of faithful request a Latin Mass from their pastor, he should “willingly accede to their requests for the celebration of the Holy Mass according to the rite of the Roman Missal published in 1962.” If the pastor for any reason refuses, then the people should inform the diocesan Bishop of the fact. Then the Pope says to the Bishop in Article

7: “the Bishop is earnestly requested to grant their desire.” This is a dramatic reform of how such things have been handled since 1970.

In the introductory paragraphs Benedict XVI refers to the Supreme Pontiff or the Roman Pontiff seven times. This is significant. He makes it very clear in the second paragraph that the liturgy of the church is determined by the Roman Pontiff and not by the local Bishops and their liturgical committees. He says therefore that the local church must be in conformity with the universal Church. In a certain sense after 1970, because of the many options and the power of the Bishops’ conferences, Pope Paul VI and John Paul II lost control of the liturgy. Now Pope Benedict is reminding the Bishops that only the Pope, the Supreme Pontiff, has the authority to determine the liturgical worship in the Catholic Church. This point is emphasized by the magisterial “We” and the strong language he uses when he says “We decree” (*decernimus*) and “We order to be firm and ratified” (*servari iubemus*). The responsibility of the Bishop is to see to it that the liturgy is performed according to the rules established by the Pope.

The same point is made in the covering letter when Benedict cites Vatican II’s document on the liturgy number 22: “Regulation of the Sacred Liturgy depends solely on the the authority of the Church, that is, on the Apostolic See and, as laws may determine, on the Bishop.”

Finally, to repeat the important point made above, the Pope says that what motivated him to issue the new *Motu Proprio* is to bring about “an interior reconciliation in the heart of the Church.” Thus, the purpose is to restore a sense of liturgical unity in the Church. By restoring the traditional Latin Liturgy of the Church to its rightful place, Benedict XVI, the Pope of Peace, hopes to promote peace and unity in the whole Catholic Church. For this we owe him our gratitude and our prayers.

Notes

See the Special Report from the Priestly Fraternity of Saint Peter on a program for the training of priests who wish to learn how to celebrate the traditional Latin Mass, “Training Today’s Priests to Celebrate the Traditional Mass,” *Latin Mass magazine* (Fall 2007), pp. 24-26). [Blog editor] [back]

As Michael Foley points out in his article, “*Motus Magnus: An Analysis of Summorum Pontificum*,” *Latin Mass magazine* (Fall 2007), p. 17, this is “a preasonable restriction, since this is the practice for all private Masses on those days (and note that it does not forbid public Tridentine services during the Triduum).” [Blog editor]