

## **The Agatha Christie Indult**

**Is this THE story of the Millennium? The 1971 'English' Indult - a Recollection.**  
Alfred Marnau.

There were many Catholics in the middle to late 1960s who had become very uneasy with the developments and proposed changes in the liturgy following the Second Vatican Council. While being deeply unhappy with these changes, it proved to be very difficult to mount any kind of positive resistance because the changes had been introduced gradually and, in some ways, in a piece-meal fashion, over a period of time. The Latin Mass Society had been started in 1964, even before the Council had ended, but at that time it was still very much finding its feet and there had been certain promises that Latin would be retained and that the Canon of the Mass, for example, would remain unchanged, as would Latin, as in the traditional manner. It soon became obvious that this was not to be and as early as November 1965 the officers of The Latin Mass Society sent an appeal to Pope Paul VI that "the discontinuance of the use of the Latin tongue in parts of the Mass has proved a grave spiritual privation and a source of great anguish of soul". The petition also requested "that, side by side with the continued employment of the mother-tongue, the Mass may frequently and regularly be celebrated wholly in Latin".

### **A time of confusion and turmoil.**

It was a time of great confusion and turmoil, the form of the Mass seemed to be changing by the month, and no sooner had one novelty been introduced then it was replaced very quickly by something else. A number of priests took the opportunity to introduce their own whims and fancies, which only exacerbated the problem, and many priests cast aside their vows and left their ministry. Such was the maelstrom of confusion that faced those who were trying desperately to cling on to the Mass of their heritage and prevent the great traditions of the Church being cast aside as unwanted goods which had outlived their purpose.

It was the introduction of the new rite of Mass in the early 1970s, and the instruction that the old had to be discontinued that concentrated our minds wonderfully and gave us a focal point on which to mount a specific course of action. It was that proposal that made us wake up to the fact that the Mass, our beloved Mass, had been vandalised

to such an extent as to pass belief, although it still took some time for us to realise what had been done. I was waiting for someone to tell me that the whole disaster was a joke, a try-on, and that at any day now the priests would return to the Mass for which they had been ordained. We were all naïve and naïve for quite a long time, but when I realised it was not a joke I became active. I was very much a new hand at this sort of thing - gathering signatures - and some people thought I was mad to get involved. After all, I was until a few years earlier, a rather lapsed Catholic, and was one of those whom the destruction of our most precious spiritual and cultural heritage, manifested in the destruction of the liturgy, brought back to the Church; to be counted, to say No, to what we considered a return to barbarism and blasphemous vandalism. Yes, there were such, and some were not even Catholics, lapsed or otherwise, but alarm bells began to be heard by thoughtful men and women.

I had been a member of The Latin Mass Society only since December 1969 and I can recall discussing with Iris Roper, Bernard Wall, Professor Alexandra Zaina, and Geoffrey Houghton-Brown, my plan to write to prominent people and ask for their support in trying to save the old Mass. After this discussion and the approval of all concerned I went to work in early 1971 with my late wife Senta and was also supported and helped by my private secretary. I contacted a number of well-known personalities and spoke personally to Graham Greene, Harman Grisewood, Kathleen Raine, Cecil Day Lewis and others, but most of the signatories agreed to help after responding to letters to them. There were some that were contacted and declined to help, including a famous Catholic actor who was content with the new Mass, but most were more than happy to be associated with such an important initiative. Because the changes were imminent, and there was some urgency in getting the appeal to Rome, we had to move quickly. We had no particular deadline date in mind but we knew that we could not afford to wait too long. After about three weeks, Senta and I had fifty-seven signatures and we thought that would suffice; especially considering the kind of people that had put their name to the appeal.

When the appeal had been prepared I informed Cardinal Heenan and gave him a copy, but the original was sent direct to the Pope with the help of my good friend Mgr. John MacDonald who was based at the Beda College in Rome at that time. Many members, especially those in London, will remember Mgr. MacDonald with affection and others will remember him from The Latin Mass Society's video recording of Solemn High Mass on 31<sup>st</sup> August 1986 at St. Mary of the Angels, Bayswater. The Cardinal readily agreed to help and to do what he could and I think he acted independently.

On 6<sup>th</sup> July 1971 The Times published the text of the appeal and included a list of all the signatories. It informed its readers, "The following appeal to preserve the Roman Catholic Mass in its traditional form has been sent from Britain to the Vatican. Similar appeals, ecumenical and non-political, have been made from other countries". Interestingly, among the signatories were the Anglican Bishops of Exeter and Ripon.

### **The appeal to Pope Paul VI in 1971.**

The text of the appeal letter is as follows:

"If some senseless decree were to order the total or partial destruction of basilicas or cathedrals, then obviously it would be the educated - whatever their personal beliefs - who would rise up in horror to oppose such a possibility. Now the fact is that basilicas and cathedrals were built so as to celebrate a rite which, until a few months ago, constituted a living tradition. We are referring to the Roman Catholic Mass. Yet, according to the latest information in Rome, there is a plan to obliterate that Mass by the end of the current year. One of the axioms of contemporary publicity, religious as well as secular, is that modern man in general, and intellectuals in particular, have become intolerant of all forms of tradition and are anxious to suppress them and put something else in their place. But, like many other affirmations of our publicity machines, this axiom is false. Today, as in times gone by, educated people are in the vanguard where recognition of the value of tradition is concerned, and are the first to raise the alarm when it is threatened. We are not at this moment considering the religious or spiritual experience of millions of individuals. The rite in question, in its magnificent Latin text, has also inspired a host of priceless achievements in the arts - not only mystical works, but works by poets, philosophers, musicians, architects, painters and sculptors in all countries and epochs. Thus, it belongs to universal culture as well as to churchmen and formal Christians. In the materialistic and technocratic civilisation that is increasingly threatening the life of mind and spirit in its original creative expression - the word - it seems particularly inhuman to deprive man of word-forms in one of their most grandiose manifestations. The signatories of this appeal, which is entirely ecumenical and non-political, have been drawn from every branch of modern culture in Europe and elsewhere. They wish to call to the attention of the Holy See, the appalling responsibility it would incur in the history of the human spirit were it to refuse to allow the Traditional Mass to survive, even though this survival took place side by side with other liturgical reforms." Signed: Harold Acton,

Vladimir Ashkenazy, John Bayler, Lennox Berkeley, Maurice Bowra, Agatha Christie, Kenneth Clark, Nevill Coghill, Cyril Connolly, Colin Davis, Hugh Delargy, +Robert Exeter, Miles Fitzalan-Howard, Constantine Fitzgibbon, William Glock, Magdalen Gofflin, Robert Graves, Graham Greene, Ian Greenless, Joseph Grimond, Harman Grisewood, Colin Hardie, Rupert Hart-Davis, Barbara Hepworth, Auberon Herbert, John Jolliffe, David Jones, Osbert Lancaster, F.R. Leavis, Cecil Day Lewis, Compton Mackenzie, George Malcolm, Max Mallowan, Alfred Marnau, Yehudi Menuhin, Nancy Mitford, Raymond Mortimer, Malcolm Muggeridge, Iris Murdoch, John Murray, Sean O'Faolain, E.J. Oliver, Oxford and Asquith, William Plomer, Kathleen Raine, William Rees-Mogg, Ralph Richardson, +John Ripon, Charles Russell, Rivers Scott, Joan Sutherland, Philip Toynbee, Martin Turnell, Bernard Wall, Patrick Wall, E.I. Watkin, R.C. Zaehner.

The publication of the appeal on the 6<sup>th</sup> July was followed three days later by a rather lengthy article from Clifford Longley in *The Times* in which he said:

"A plea for the preservation of the traditional Latin Mass - threatened by extinction by the end of this year - is to be made to the Vatican by Cardinal Heenan, Archbishop of Westminster. There has been mounting pressure in Britain for such a step for some time, transcending the divisions between progressive and conservative factions in the Church, and supported by a considerable body of opinion outside the Roman Catholic communion. From the beginning of the new liturgical year in December it will no longer be permitted to celebrate in Roman Catholic churches the so-called Tridentine Mass, whether in the vernacular or in Latin. A new form, with a set of four basic variations and known as the *Ordo Missae*, will be obligatory in spite of widespread misgivings both at the passing of the old and at details of the new. Cardinal Heenan is to ask the Vatican authorities - and, in effect, the Pope himself - to leave it up to individual bishops whether the Tridentine rite can be used on special occasions or not. The new forms would continue as the standard, but the Tridentine tradition could be kept alive in certain churches and cathedrals, and the settings of the Mass by the great classical composers would not become, as is now feared, mere museum pieces without a contemporary religious significance."

Mr. Longley went on to say,

"Resistance to these changes has not come only out of nostalgia for the old and venerable. A theological argument has been raging for some time over the validity and orthodoxy of parts of the new rite, and in England the Latin Mass Society has resolved to boycott it completely on the grounds of conscience. One variation, the Second Eucharistic Prayer, was said to be so silent on the subject of sacrifice as to render it acceptable to non-conformist churches. Generally, however, the Latin version of the Ordo Missae has been accepted as an improvement on the Tridentine for everyday use."

After a rather lengthy examination of the problems surrounding an acceptable English translation he continues:

"For this reason, therefore [the possibility of hearing the Credo and Gloria occasionally in the great cathedrals of Europe], Mgr. John Humphreys, Secretary of the English hierarchy's Liturgical Commission, feels that to mourn the passing of the Tridentine Mass on the grounds that it will be a serious loss to western culture is misplaced. Permission to revert to it on such special occasions as Mass in an old people's home or a meeting of the Latin Mass Society would, he considers, be a reasonable concession for a five or ten-year period. Although the quarrel with the new order of Mass has provoked much criticism of the language chosen, both in the original Latin and in ICEL's translations, and some bitter theological wrangles from some more conservative quarters, the fact remains that the Roman Catholic Church is coming to the end of a momentous period of change in its most sacred worship with astonishingly little damage. This fundamental renewal of its spiritual well-springs could lead to incalculable benefits, not least the revitalization of Roman Catholic parish life."

### **A natural and inevitable consequence.**

Well, it is a fact that this prophecy of revitalization that many predicted for the new order has failed miserably but many of us warned at the time that this would be the natural and inevitable consequence. You cannot sever the traditions of centuries, embark on a completely new venture, and expect life to continue with equilibrium. Life is simply not like that. The hierarchy in general may have been aware at that

time at what was in the air but I cannot recall any of them making any public comment. At that time, in the midst of all the turmoil of the day, we did not consider producing the appeal on expensive parchment or on a scroll, we simply presented it on Latin Mass Society notepaper with the then new, but now very familiar logo, which had been designed and supplied by a friend of Iris Roper.

This had been an entirely new venture for us and in those days we had no experience in how to present a petition to a Pope. The appeal was entrusted to Mgr Macdonald and no-one who had had any involvement with preparing it had travelled to Rome, nor was there any particular presentation ceremony. Mgr. Macdonald's contact in the Vatican had left it 'on the table' for personal petitions to the Pope.

Towards the end of 1971 two most important, and perhaps contradictory, events happened within very close proximity. The first on 26<sup>th</sup> November, when The Universe informed its readers on its front page:

"As from this Sunday, the first in Advent, it is forbidden to offer Mass in the Tridentine rite anywhere in the world. In very special circumstances old or retired priests may apply to their own bishop for permission to use the rite, but for private use only." (Because this kind of information was the norm, the laity were conditioned into accepting the new Mass as a *fait accompli*. In fact, the old Mass had never been forbidden and this was revealed some 15 years later in December 1986 when a commission of cardinals, set up by Pope John Paul II, confirmed that this was so and proposed the granting to all who seek it the use of the Roman Missal according to the 1962 edition).

This front page story in The Universe was somewhat contradicted by The Times less than a week later when, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1971, it informed its readers with the headline, "Pope sanctions traditional Latin Mass in Britain". It explained that Pope Paul VI had given permission for the traditional form of the Latin Mass, known as the Tridentine rite, to be used on special occasions in England and Wales with the consent of the local Roman Catholic bishop. "This concession was obtained by Cardinal Heenan, Archbishop of Westminster, at a recent private audience with the Pope and news of it has been passed to such bodies as the Latin Mass Society who have been campaigning for the right to retain the Tridentine form.....Cardinal Heenan's approach to the Pope on this question came after the publication of an open letter, signed by many non-Roman Catholic artists, musicians, and intellectuals, in July. The letter pointed out that the Tridentine rite, which takes its name from the

Council of Trent in the sixteenth century, was one of the basic art forms of European culture on which had been based many settings of the Mass by great classical composers. The disappearance of the rite, they complained, would impoverish cultural life."

Cardinal Heenan had, indeed, secured a personal audience with the Pope, who, on the 30<sup>th</sup> October 1971 had granted the request. The story goes that Pope Paul VI was reading quietly through the list of signatories and then suddenly said, "Ah, Agatha Christie!" and signed his approval. It has since been known, informally, in traditional circles as the Agatha Christie Indult. Mgr. Annibale Bugnini, of the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship, conveyed the decision officially to Cardinal Heenan on 5<sup>th</sup> November 1971.

In his letter, Mgr. Bugnini informed Cardinal Heenan that Pope Paul VI, by letter of 30<sup>th</sup> October 1971, had given special faculties to the Secretary of the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship to convey to His Eminence, as Chairman of the Episcopal Conference of England and Wales, that it was permitted to the local Ordinaries of England and Wales to grant that certain groups of the faithful may on special occasions be allowed to participate in the Mass celebrated according to the rites and texts of the former Roman Missal. The Missal to be used on these occasions should be that published by the decree of the Sacred Congregation of Rites (27 Jan.1965), and with the modifications in the *Instructio altera* (4 May 1967).

### **No publicity, please.**

Mgr. Bugnini added a personal letter to the official text of the Indult which perhaps indicated his own mind on how restrictive he wished the indult to be applied. He said: "Under separate cover you will have received the letter expressing the mind of the Holy Father regarding Your Eminence's request of 29<sup>th</sup> October 1971. His Holiness knows well that Your Eminence will ensure that this permission is granted with that prudence and reserve that the matter requires. It is also very desirable that the permission be given without too much publicity. As I write I am reminded about this time last year we celebrated the canonization of the Forty Martyrs. That canonization remains one of the best liturgical celebrations I have seen in St. Peter's, a fine blend of the old and the new".

On 22<sup>nd</sup> November Cardinal Heenan wrote to Mr. Geoffrey Houghton-Brown, the Chairman of The Latin Mass Society, and informed him that at the last bishops' meeting he had reported on a private audience he had with Pope Paul. He had expressed sorrow that some Catholics opposed to reform of the liturgy had spoken offensively of the Holy Father. He said, however, that he had sympathy with the few Catholics who, while loyally accepting the reforms, felt certain nostalgia for the old rite. The Pope had not regarded this attitude as unreasonable and would not absolutely forbid occasional use of the Roman Mass (according to the decree of 1965: amended 1967) provided all danger of division is avoided. In his diocese, he said, he was quite willing for the old rite to be used on special occasions.

A meeting of the committee of The Latin Mass Society took place in London on 27th November 1971 to discuss the letter from Cardinal Heenan to the Chairman. The feeling of the committee was one of dismay that the Cardinal had said that some Catholics had spoken offensively about the Holy Father thus, perhaps, linking the Society in some way to these offensive remarks. The Chairman had drafted a reply and the committee agreed unanimously that it be sent. The letter, which was sent on 28 November 1971 was as follows.

"My Lord Cardinal: I have shown your letter to the Committee of the above Society who are most grateful to Your Eminence for the trouble you have taken in Rome on behalf of the Roman Missal. The Committee, however, was greatly astonished at the contents of the letter. We hope that Your Eminence expressed no sorrow on behalf of the Latin Mass Society for having "spoken offensively" of the Holy Father, because this Society has always spoken of His Holiness with the respect due from Roman Catholics to the Vicar of Christ.

My Lord Cardinal, it is the opinion of this Society that the use of the customary Missal cannot be forbidden. The Pope has never rescinded the Bull, Quo Primum, nor the right of immemorial custom, both of which give priests a perpetual right to use, both in public and in private, the Tridentine or the Roman Missal. The Society is most grateful to Your Eminence for letting us know that you are willing to allow the use of the Roman Missal in the churches of the Westminster Diocese on special occasions. Your Eminence may rest assured that the Society will urge the use of the Roman Missal as often as possible."

The Committee discussed whether the letters be sent to the Press, both Catholic and national, in view of the first page story in The Universe about the Latin Mass being "unlawful" and "forbidden throughout the world" from the first Sunday in Advent but there were objections on the grounds of breach of confidence. Considerable discussion followed on both the ethics and the expediency of the whole matter of publicising the information and it was finally decided to make the substance of the letter known, initially to The Universe, refuting its story, and to The Times as a sequel to its earlier information that the Cardinal would be seeking permission of the Pope for the retention of the Tridentine Mass.

**More hostile then than now.**

There was no particular response from the English and Welsh bishops who, it seems from memory, were more hostile then than now except for Bishop Gordon Wheeler and Bishop Alexander, still with us, of Clifton, who I recall as being courteous and a gentleman.

Those of us who fought for the retention of the old Mass had a very rough ride in those early days. In comparison, things are now unbelievably improved. We never thought that we would have so many Masses celebrated in England and Wales, or France, or even in the U.S.A. In other 'old Catholic countries' the situation is still disastrous. In fairness and honour, it must be said for Cardinal Hume that not only did he accept Cardinal Heenan's Bishop's Conference decision to allow the old Requiem, but that no other Archbishop throughout Europe would have followed the policy of his predecessor and allowed a monthly Mass in his cathedral to continue (the monthly Mass in the crypt), let alone two Solemn High Masses a year at his High Altar! Let us always remember that with gratitude. Deo gratias.

.....

**Addendum:** At their Low Week Meeting in 1974 the English and Welsh Hierarchy, responding to an appeal to Cardinal Heenan from The Latin Mass Society, "recognised the right of Catholics to leave instructions regarding the rite to be used at their Requiem Mass", and they informed the clergy of their decision. This was another concession gained by The Latin Mass Society in ensuring that the traditional rite of Mass would continue to be available after the introduction of the new liturgy. The fact that some bishops individually refused legitimate requests for a 'Tridentine'

Requiem was to their shame but it does not invalidate the fact that the Society obtained another concession whereby the old Mass would continue to be celebrated in parish churches in England and Wales.

**NOTE:** The Committee of The Latin Mass Society urges members to ensure that your wishes regarding your Requiems are known and understood. You should include specific instructions in your wills and inform your executors. It may also be prudent to inform your parish priests.