

Experiencing the beauty of the Latin Mass firsthand

The world is a beautiful but messy place, infused with grace but wounded by sin, clouded by ambiguity and often disfigured by cruelty and darkness.

But at St. Mary's Church in Providence, Rhode Island, the outside world seemingly melts away every Sunday morning amid an enchanting mix of sacred polyphony, incense and ancient Latin prayers.

"The first time I came here, I was astounded by just how beautiful the Mass was," said Paul Paille, a 27-year-old Providence resident who works in finance. In his left hand, he held his own 1962 missal for the traditional Latin Mass.

"When you first start going to the Latin Mass, you're like, 'What's going on? I don't know all the prayers. I don't know what the priest is saying. It's all so foreign,'" Paille said. "It definitely took me about three or four months to get used to what was going on."

Paille has been attending the Latin Mass – also known as the Mass in the extraordinary form – since January, not too long after the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter (FSSP), at the invitation of Bishop Thomas J. Tobin of Providence, established an apostolate at St. Mary's Church on Broadway.

Extraordinary growth

In a little more than a year, the FSSP – a society of apostolic life that specializes in celebrating the Church's traditional Latin liturgy – has seen its Providence apostolate grow to more than 300 parishioners. The FSSP apostolate in Philadelphia, also established last year, already has 400 parishioners.

That kind of rapid growth has been seen in other FSSP apostolates throughout the United States. In its annual October census, the FSSP reported that its first North American apostolate in Dallas, established in 1991, has seen its Sunday congregation grow by 24 percent in the past year. Some FSSP communities are looking to acquire or build larger churches to accommodate the growing demand for their traditional Catholic spirituality.

“It has been standing room only at the 9 a.m. and 11 a.m. Masses, with last week perhaps the largest number we have seen,” said Father Robert Boyd, a diocesan priest who a few years ago joined the FSSP’s apostolate in Pequannock, New Jersey.

Various Catholic observers and sociologists who study religion offer differing reasons for why traditionalist Catholic communities are growing at a time when the Church, especially in its historic strongholds in the Northeast and Midwest, is losing members, prompting bishops to shutter Catholic schools and close or merge parishes.

Some argue that the FSSP and other traditionalist communities offer a safe haven for Catholics living in a culture that is becoming increasingly hostile to traditional Christian beliefs on marriage, the family, sexual morality and the human person.

But for Catholics such as Paille, who grew up attending a regular English-language Mass, the beauty and reverence they find in the Latin Mass – of which Pope Benedict XVI permitted the wider celebration in his 2007 apostolic letter *Summorum Pontificu* – is what draws them to the traditional liturgy.

“The reason why I go is because there is something here that I don’t think you get in the new Mass,” Paille said. “Here, it’s very focused on Christ, where in the *Novus Ordo* [Mass in the ordinary form] it’s more about the community. ... I want the Mass to be focused on the sacrifice of the Mass, which is

really what it's about, not the people," Paille added.

Firsthand experience

I have attended Mass in the vernacular all my life and find it to be very Christ-centric, but one can understand the attraction to the traditional liturgy presented at the Mass in the extraordinary form, which I did in early November at St. Mary's in Providence.

The first impression I had in attending the sung High Mass at 10 a.m. was the elaborate ceremony, how the priest-celebrant's every movement at the altar seemed to be imbued with symbolism rooted in the Trinity. I was able to appreciate this even though I wasn't always successful in following along in a booklet that explained the liturgy.

Of course, there are obvious differences between Masses in the ordinary form and the extraordinary form – the priest faces the altar, not the congregation, and many of his prayers are not audible; one New Testament reading and a Gospel passage were chanted in Latin and later reread in English just before the homily. But the basic structure of the Mass is familiar, and hearing the Gloria, Kyrie Eleison, the Credo, Hosanna in Excelsis and Agnus Dei sung in Latin made me think how great it would be if more English-language Masses incorporated some Latin on Sundays.

In some Catholic circles, traditionalist communities are seen with suspicion and stereotyped as being insular, judgmental and hostile to outsiders. I didn't receive any dirty looks during Mass, especially since most of the people I saw were so deep in prayer that they likely didn't even notice the *Novus Ordo* Catholic fumbling through his booklet.

"My experience is that everybody here has been charitable and welcoming toward newcomers," Paille said.

Observing the FSSP community at Mass also made me realize that

I was witnessing a liturgy that would have been pretty familiar to my ancestors in Portugal. Most women, though not all, wore mantillas (lacy headcovers). The congregation was a mix of young and old, with many young adults and families with children, including crying babies.

The homilist climbed into the elevated pulpit and delivered a homily on the necessity of sanctifying grace for salvation and how good works done in a state of mortal sin “are not enough to open the gates of heaven.” The priest spoke without a microphone; I wondered why, and then I remembered that in the days before electricity, a priest needed to amplify his voice without the aid of audio equipment.

Also, looking up at St. Mary’s arches and its high-vaulted ceiling, I had the insight that this magnificent Gothic Revival structure was specifically built for the drama of the Latin Mass. The Irish immigrants who built St. Mary’s in 1869 did so with the Latin Mass in mind – a Mass that serves as a reminder of God’s majesty and the glories that await the faithful in heaven.

I still find Mass in the ordinary form to be edifying and more in line with my own spirituality, which I would describe as being rooted firmly in the Second Vatican Council. But the Catholic Church is a big tent, and there is plenty of room for different spiritualities, including for our brothers and sisters who own a Latin missal.

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