

A move toward praying together in the Mass



Action taken by Pope Francis to restrict celebration of the Mass in Latin came as no surprise to some, while a great surprise to others. Still, why these restrictions?

The pope himself answered the question. He acted to enhance a sense of unity among Roman Catholics, and he has reasons to worry about disunity. It is everywhere. It involves not only formal Catholic worship but basic beliefs and fundamental standards for behavior.

The liturgy has constantly evolved. Latin, for example, was not the first, and requisite, language of the Mass. The Mass was celebrated in the styles and languages of a particular congregation, in the beginning.

As a result, eventually the so-called Eastern rites of the Church came to be, with which many, maybe most, Catholic Americans are unfamiliar, although these rites exist indeed today in this country.

The idea was that people pray the Mass, not coincidentally pray during the Mass. To pray the Mass, its language had to be understood. Pray the Mass was an ideal actively pursued long before the Second Vatican Council was imagined. Pope St. Pius X was a great champion of this ideal.

Pope Pius XII was another. Years before the council, Pius XII radically changed the ceremonies of Holy Week to make them more accessible and expressive to people in the pew. He made other important changes.

When the Second Vatican Council assembled, the purpose was to

return to the early days. It is ridiculous to say that, in its reflections on formal worship, or liturgy, which inspired Pope St. Paul VI when he decreed the current ritual, invention or novelty was the intention in anyone's mind. Read the council's records.

Understandably, it was hard for many Catholics to adjust. After all, they loved the Mass in the form that they knew, and God bless their love. It was not easy to separate incidentals from essentials.

Dioceses undertook programs of instruction about the changes and the history of worship in the Church, why this was done, or when did that come into practice – all about the essence of the Mass.

Since then, successive popes have made accommodations for Catholics deeply attached to the old.

A phenomenon has been occurring, however, among persons too young ever to have seen the Mass in the old days. It is true of American seminarians and young priests, maybe those in foreign countries. Priests often talk about this fascination. Bishops do not know how to handle it. Neither do authorities in seminaries. This reality quite likely is behind the special mention in this papal document to priests ordained after July 16, 2021, the date of the document's publication.

The question repeatedly comes to mind: Why do young priests, or some young Catholics, speaking more broadly, find the old appealing? They never saw it. They were not alive when the world's bishops, at the council, debated the good, and frankly the bad, points of the old.

Today's seminarians and young priests overwhelmingly are fervent and dedicated. God bless them, may their tribe increase, but it seems plausible to say that they see that not everything in the Church is well. Otherwise, people would jump on board and happily stay on board.

This fact is brazenly evident. People who are the Church are going their separate ways in so many regards. In a word, they are not convinced, not simply in the certain matters – abortion, cohabitation outside marriage, capital punishment, or going to confession.

They are not convinced about the identity of the Church or about why they need the Church, or even God.

This recent document is about the liturgy. It really is about Catholics being together, thinking together, acting together and, in that precious moment of the Mass, praying together.

If Catholics truly were together, what a fantastically beautiful world this would be!

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