

Editorial: The Church needs a pastoral approach to understand, move forward with 'Traditionis Custodes'

With his decision to drastically [restrict the celebration of the 1962 missal](#) of Pope St. John XXIII – called by Pope Benedict XVI the “extraordinary form” of the Roman rite, and colloquially known as the Traditional Latin Mass – Pope Francis has stunned parts of the Catholic world and has introduced a new chapter in the unfortunate post-conciliar “liturgy wars” that seem never to die.

While most Catholics attend what has commonly become known as the “ordinary form” – that is, the Mass promulgated by Pope St. Paul VI in response to the reforms of the Second Vatican Council – a growing number of people, especially young people, many with families, have come to know and love the traditional form of the Mass, which was never abrogated when the post-conciliar liturgical reforms were introduced. Despite his stated goal of unity within the Church, Pope Francis’s apostolic letter *motu proprio*, [Traditionis Custodes](#), has pained, confused and even angered communities that have worshipped according to the 1962 missal especially since 2007, when Pope Benedict XVI made it more widely available.

The same stated goal [of unity within the Church](#) was the professed purpose behind the actions of Francis’s two immediate predecessors in recent decades where decisions regarding the 1962 liturgical books were concerned. In a 2007 [letter](#) released to all bishops upon his promulgation of *Summorum Pontificum*, his own apostolic letter issued *motu proprio* that greatly liberalized the use of that form of the Roman liturgy, Pope Benedict XVI said his decree was fueled by

the obligation “to make every effort to enable for all those who truly desire unity to remain in that unity or to attain it anew.” In making the extraordinary form more accessible, Benedict hoped to bridge what he termed a “rupture” that took place among some in the implementation of Vatican II. He hoped that wider permission of the older form of the liturgy would keep traditionalists tethered to the Church and allow for a mutual enrichment of both pre- and post-Vatican II missals.

Pope Francis, however, argues that this effort “to recover the unity of an ecclesial body with diverse liturgical sensibilities” was “exploited to widen the gaps, reinforce the divergences, and encourage disagreements that injure the Church, block her path, and expose her to the peril of division.”

The concerns of Pope Francis are real. For some Catholics – though certainly not all – the extraordinary form has become associated less with worship and more with a certain damaging ideology that extends well beyond religion. This ideology is often wrapped up in agenda-laden politics, promoted by fringe publications and websites, and disdainful of any efforts of the Church toward reform and renewal, including the conclusions and implementation – in many ways still a work in progress – of the Second Vatican Council. This is no small problem within the Church, and we agree with Pope Francis that “to doubt the council is to doubt the intentions of those very Fathers who exercised their collegial power in a solemn manner *cum Petro et sub Petro* in an ecumenical council, and, in the final analysis, to doubt the Holy Spirit himself who guides the Church.”

At the same time, the abrupt and immediate manner with which *Traditionis Custodes* was promulgated leaves the Church with [loose ends, open wounds and many questions](#). What challenges, for example, might Pope Francis’s decree present over time for all aspects of diverse liturgical practice that are part of the Church’s tradition – of which unity with the Church and

communion with Rome has always been an underlying principle? We think of the many other diverse rites within the Church, particularly in the East, which celebrate the liturgy according to unique and specific traditions. We also think of the geographical and cultural celebrations of the Roman rite, with their uniqueness of expression. We think of the other diverse forms of the Latin rite, less practiced but still permitted by Rome. One thing that is abundantly clear is that unity within the Church cannot and should not mean monolithic and homologous forms of worship, and, as Church history teaches us well, attempts to bring about unity through homogenization is a path fraught with danger and suffering.

Finally, careful and thoughtful pastoral practice is essential to maintaining unity within the Church. Pope Francis has rightly spoken and written frequently throughout his pontificate of the importance of accompaniment, dialogue and synodality. Yet in the sharply drawn conclusions of *Traditionis Custodes*, its immediate effectivity and its sometimes harsh tone, Pope Francis does not seem to follow his own advice.

A more balanced pastoral approach could go a long way, too. Pope Francis writes that he is “saddened by abuses in the celebration of the liturgy on all sides” – including, of course, the Roman rite celebrated in most parishes daily around the world. These same abuses are a reason why some Catholics have gravitated toward the extraordinary form. An additional document focused on recommended changes, oversight or encouragement to celebrate properly and with due reverence what Pope Francis has called “the unique expression of the *lex orandi* of the Roman rite” might help to soften the blow.

As the Church navigates this particular change in direction, and the new challenges to unity that come with it, we pray that charity may prevail among all Catholics. And we pray that the unity of the Church so greatly desired by Pope St. John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis – the unity willed

by Christ himself at the very first Mass – might triumph over the temptation of division.

Our Sunday Visitor Editorial Board: Gretchen R. Crowe, Scott P. Richert, Scott Warden, York Young