

Summorum pontificum: The Widening of Hearts and the Broadening of Minds

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The long-anticipated release by Benedict XVI on 7 July 2007 (07-07-07!) of the apostolic letter *Summorum pontificum*, issued *motu proprio* on the use of the 1962 Roman Missal, was greeted in some quarters with jubilation, in others with apprehension, and in still others with undisguised hostility. The Pope himself well knew beforehand the full range of emotions that would color the reception of this document. He therefore issued a second letter to accompany and to clarify various points of *Summorum pontificum*.¹

While the aim of this companion letter is instructive, its tone is pastoral. The Holy Father sets out to allay two fears and to raise a positive point of clarification. Addressing the fear that *Summorum pontificum* might undermine the liturgical reform mandated by Vatican II, the Pope reminds his readers that the edition of the Roman Missal approved by John XXIII in 1962 and used during the council was never juridically abrogated and, furthermore, that it can now be used as a *forma extraordinaria* of the liturgical celebration. Those who have remained attached to the *usus antiquior*, or who have come only more recently to appreciate its distinctive qualities, can look forward to a wider use of the 1962 missal.

Second, the Pope dismisses the fear that the earlier usage might introduce “disarray or even divisions within parish communities” on the grounds that far fewer priests today have the liturgical formation and knowledge of the Latin language required to celebrate the liturgy according to the 1962 missal. Hence the missal of Paul VI, which John Paul II updated in 2002, will remain the ordinary form of the Roman Rite. No one attached to the use of this new missal is being asked to

1 Benedict XVI, Letter to the Bishops of the World to Present the *motu proprio* on the Use of the Roman Liturgy Prior to the Reforms of 1970: “News reports and judgments made without sufficient information have created no little confusion. There have been very divergent reactions ranging from joyful acceptance to harsh opposition, about a plan whose contents were in reality unknown.”

forsake it. Nevertheless, it must be mentioned that the celebration in Latin of Paul VI's *novus ordo Missae* is far rarer than either the New Rite of Mass in English or the "Tridentine" Latin Mass. This indeed presents a particularly striking irony, given the assurances of the Second Vatican Council that in the renewed liturgy, Latin would still be retained as the language of the Roman Rite with the faithful "able to say or sing together in Latin those parts of the Ordinary of the Mass which pertain to them,"² and that, other things being equal "pride of place" was to be held by Gregorian Chant. Sacred polyphony likewise received special mention in *Sacrosanctum concilium* 116.

Finally, having striven to allay the two fears mentioned above, Pope Benedict XVI explains his positive reason for issuing the *motu proprio*: to achieve "an interior reconciliation in the heart of the church." Observing that at critical moments in the long history of the Church, her leaders have failed either to maintain unity or to regain reconciliation before the hardening of divisions, the Pope points to the promulgation of *Summorum pontificum* as an obligation "to make every effort to make it possible for all those who truly desire unity to remain in that unity or to attain it anew." It is at this point that the Pontiff quotes the Second Epistle to the Corinthians in making his appeal: "Our mouth is open to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide. You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. In return ... widen your hearts also" (2 Cor 6:11-13).

To return briefly to the *motu proprio* itself, it is worth noting which of the *summi pontifices*, his predecessors, that Benedict XVI singles out for special mention as popes who made it their constant concern, "to ensure that the Church of Christ offers a worthy ritual to the Divine Majesty." This after all, is the aim of the sacred liturgy: to glorify God and to sanctify His people. St Gregory the Great (reigned 590-604) enjoys pride of place in the list of pontiffs dedicated to the judicious formation, faithful celebration, and generous promotion of the liturgy of the Roman Rite. Gregory, in view of his role in structuring and conserving the order of Mass as well as the Hours, is rightly regarded as the architect or Father of the Roman Rite.³ Outstanding likewise by reason of his "great pastoral zeal" is St Pius V (reigned 1566-1572)

2 *Sacrosanctum concilium* 54, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2, *Trent to Vatican II*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo et al., English ed. Norman P. Tanner (London UK: Sheed and Ward and Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990) p. 831.

3 See Klaus Gamber, *The Reform of the Roman Liturgy: Its Problems and Background*, trans. Klaus D. Grimm (San Juan Capistrano CA: Una Voce Press, 1996 and Fort Collins CO: Roman Catholic Books, no date). Joseph Ratzinger wrote the Introduction to the German edition.

who “renewed the entire liturgy of the Church, oversaw the publication of liturgical books amended and ‘renewed in accordance with the norms of the Fathers,’ and provided them for the use of the Latin Church.” Other pontificates marked by intense liturgical reform and renewal, and mentioned in particular by Pope Benedict as formative of the Roman Rite, include those of Clement VIII (1592-1605), Urban VIII (1623-1644), St Pius X (1903-1914), Benedict XV (1914-1922), Pius XII (1939-1958), Bd John XXIII (1958-1963), and Paul VI (1963-1978). By mentioning these popes from various eras of liturgical and theological renewal, Benedict XVI stresses yet again his now axiomatic “hermeneutic of continuity.” The sacred liturgy, when celebrated faithfully in every age, expresses and imparts the same faith of the Church which remains ever ancient and ever new.

What the Church stands to gain by a generous application of *Summorum pontificum* far outweighs what she stands to lose. After all, as the Pope himself indicates, much of the Church no longer has the wherewithal to conduct with confidence and coherence the ancient liturgical rites that once constituted her proudest patrimony. Is it really the mind of the Church that a usage so adept at conveying the transcendent beauty of the Holy Eucharist be consigned to oblivion? Clearly Benedict XVI thinks not.

It is beyond the scope of these brief remarks to identify the precise roots of the twofold fear of compromising the liturgical movement and of introducing divisions into parishes and like communities. The fears arise perhaps from a perceived loss of control by those who heretofore have come to be regarded as the “liturgical establishment.” Obviously both the circular letter *Quattuor abhinc annos*,⁴ issued in 1984 by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, and John Paul II’s 1988 *motu proprio Ecclesia Dei adflicta*⁵ met sufficient resistance to “a more generous and liberal use” of the 1962 edition of the Roman Missal that a clearer and more emphatic statement had to be made by the successor of St Peter. Such a statement is *Summorum pontificum*, together with its companion letter. Perhaps, too, the very notion that priests of the Latin rite, in Masses without the people, need the permission of neither the Apostolic See nor their local ordinary to use the rite of Mass according to the 1962 edition of the Missal irks superiors concerned with exercising control over the presbyterate.⁶

4 *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* [henceforth AAS] 76 (1984) 1088-89.

5 AAS 80 (1988) 1498.

6 See *Summorum pontificum*, article 2.

In the letter accompanying *Summorum pontificum*, Benedict XVI introduces at least one important change from the arrangements of the indult granted by *Quattuor abhinc annos*. According to the 1984 indult, “There must be no interchanging of texts and rites of the two Missals [1962 and 1970].”⁷ Now, Benedict suggests that the two forms of the usage of the Roman Rite can be mutually enriching: new saints and some of the new Prefaces can and should be inserted in the old Missal. Might this suggest that Benedict plans in due course to renew the 1962 edition, adding new Prefaces and intercalating new saints’ feasts on the calendar? This would be consistent with his vision, expressed time and again, in favor of a reform of the reform.

The sacred liturgy cannot remain fixed once and for all, like an insect trapped and preserved in amber. The integration into the “Tridentine” missal of new saints’ feasts and Prefaces drawn from the Church’s great patrimony of eucharistical formulae would furnish a splendid example of the “organic development” of the liturgy.

If bishops and other local ordinaries recognize the legitimate aspirations of their clergy and faithful to avail themselves more amply of the “older usage” of the Mass of the Roman Rite, then they will see to it that seminarians and those in formation will be given appropriate exposure to the study of the Latin language so as to guarantee a competent and reverent celebration of the sacred mysteries according to the dynamics of the missal being used. The discipline of grammar can prove a spiritually purifying exercise when entered into with the right disposition. Students’ English vocabulary increases when they study even the rudiments of Latin grammar. Their rhetorical skills generally improve – even when writing in their own vernacular. Latin opens for students a whole culture that lies at the roots of Roman history and of western civilization. We cannot love what we do not know. Hence the need to instruct priests of the present and future generations in the older rite of Mass if it is to remain an expression of the Roman Rite. Fear, suspicion, and apprehension are the offspring of ignorance. Where, however, Pope Benedict XVI’s appeal to an opening of hearts will give rise to a greater respect and a deeper appreciation than has hitherto been shown for the rich liturgical heritage of the Roman Rite, there it seems reasonable to expect that such an opening of hearts likely will lead in turn to the broadening of minds.

7 *Quattuor abhinc annos*, article d.