Spirituality
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Fra' Giacomo Dalla Torre, right, is seen during an oath ceremony for the Knights of Malta in Rome's Santa Maria in Aventino church in 2017. (CNS photo/Order of Malta via EPA)



by Joshua J. McElwee

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The head of the Knights of Malta, an international religious order that operates in about 120 countries, has formally forbidden the use of the pre-conciliar Latin language Mass in the order's liturgical celebrations worldwide.

In a June 10 letter written to the order's superiors around the world, obtained by NCR, Fra' Giacomo Dalla Torre mandates that all of the community's masses be celebrated according to the ordinary rite, as promulgated in 1969 by Pope Paul VI following the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council.

Dalla Torre, who took charge of the order in 2017 after the resignation of his predecessor following a protracted public dispute with the Vatican, does not give specific reasons for his decision.

The head knight notes that Pope Benedict XVI's 2007 apostolic letter *Summorum Pontificum*, which allowed celebration of the Latin Mass under specific circumstances, "states that inside a religious institute the matter is to be decided by the Major Superior according to the norm of law and their particular statutes."

"I have thus decided ... that henceforth all the liturgical ceremonies within the Order must be performed according to the ordinary rite of the Church (rite of St. Paul VI) and not the extraordinary rite (Tridentine rite)," states Dalla Torre.

"This decision applies to all the official liturgical celebrations such as investitures, masses during our pilgrimages, memorial masses, as well as the feasts and solemnities of the Order," he continues, asking that superiors inform their subordinates of the order, "ensuring that it is immediately put into practice."

Benedict's decision to regularize use of the Latin Mass was one of the most controversial of his 2005-13 papacy.

Although supporters of the decision say it allowed Catholics to celebrate the Mass in the form they found most spiritually enriching, detractors say it essentially created a bifurcated faith community and ignored the reasons behind the Council's decision to reform the liturgy.

It is unclear how frequently the Latin Mass was being used in celebrations for the Knights of Malta.

In an email accompanying Dalla Torre's letter, one of the order's leaders said that it would not result in many changes in the U.S., but could in Europe. That leader suggested that American Knights pray for European Knights, "for them to accept the Grand Master's decision in obedience and for the unity of the Order."

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The Sovereign Military Order of the Knights of Malta, as it is formally known, is a prestigious lay religious order that was founded at the end of the 11th century to defend the faith and assist the poor. It also has status as an international sovereign entity, maintaining independent diplomatic relations with about 100 countries.

Although the order has traditionally operated in a rather quiet and diplomatic fashion, its former leader, Matthew Festing, undertook a months-long showdown with the Vatican in 2016-2017, openly resisting a Vatican investigation into his firing of one of his top officials.

Festing resigned at the apparent request of Pope Francis in January 2017. Dalla Torre was elected as temporary head of the order a few months later. He was made Grand Master, a life-long position, in his own right in 2018.

The official spiritual patron of the Knights of Malta is U.S. Cardinal Raymond Burke, known as a proponent of the Latin Mass.

While serving as the bishop of La Crosse, Wisc., from 1995-2004 Burke helped found the Canons Regular of the New Jerusalem, a religious community that follows the Augustinian Rule and celebrates exclusively in Latin. The group moved in 2011 from Wisconsin to the diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, West Virginia.

[Joshua J. McElwee is *NCR* Vatican correspondent. His email address is jmcelwee@ncronline.org. Follow him on Twitter: @joshjmac.]