Opinion
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by NCR Staff

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Two recent opinion pieces at NCR have caused a stir within our readership. The first, entitled "The Latin Mass becomes a cult of toxic tradition," says that the practice of Latin Mass needs major reform. The second, entitled "Traditional Latin Mass best expresses the reality of Christ's sacrifice," argues just the opposite, that Latin Mass is a "deeply peaceful experience." Letters to the editor are edited for length and clarity.

I write this letter in response to a recent article posted by Zita Ballinger Fletcher titled "The Latin Mass becomes a cult of toxic tradition." There were many things within this article that deeply bothered me, but there's one I wish to address.

I'd like to respond to what was said about the supposed sexism that exists in the Latin Mass community. The defense of this was the modesty that is "commanded." It's true that this is encouraged in our churches, but not because of discrimination. These ideals of modesty are biblical. In Timothy 2:9, he's speaking of how we ought to worship so that we're pleasing to God, and he says "women should dress modestly, with decency and propriety." This standard, however, is not just for women; men are also discouraged from covering their head or wearing informal clothing.

Veiling was also very attacked in this article. Corinthians 11:5 says, "But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head." Though this Bible verse is reason enough, there is an even more beautiful reason. Everything in a Catholic Church that is sacred, is veiled. The idea that the veil is an oppression of women is very incorrect; it shows the sacredness of a woman.

As a 19-year-old traditional Catholic woman, I was deeply offended by the way this article portrayed us. It made it sound as though all the women of this community are uneducated and not able to make a decision like this on their own, and are easily pushed around by men. I found it incredibly narrow minded and, dare I say, sexist.

MARY CLARE LINSCOMB

Wahoo, Nebraska

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I'm writing this letter to respond to the article by Zita Ballinger Fletcher, "The Latin Mass becomes a cult of toxic tradition," of which I greatly disapprove. I was raised in the beauty of the Latin Mass, and so wish to explain why Zita is wrong.



Firstly, her claim that there is sexism in the Latin Mass community is very silly. I am a 16-year-old girl and I feel most respected as a woman at my Latin Mass parish. As for veiling, Catholics have always believed that all sacred things should be covered. For example, the tabernacle where our Lord is kept and the altar on which is made the most perfect sacrifice is veiled. The veil is by no means a symbol of women's oppression by men, or meant in any way to hide women. It is simply meant to show how sacred women are.

Lastly, Zita attacks us for "placing the power in the priest's hands." Does Alter Christus ring a bell? The priest is in the place of Jesus Christ and we as lay people are not. Therefore God places that power in the priest's hands. Unfortunately, Zita has given a false representation of the Latin Mass. It is the Mass that the saints of old attended, and nothing Zita or anybody else says will change my mind about it. Contrary to the narrow mindedness Zita displays in her article, I encourage every Catholic to try the Latin Mass.

BERNADETTE LINSCOMB

Wahoo, Nebraska

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Zita Ballinger Fletcher's excellent title promised a forthright and cogent description of everything that is wrong in parts of the Catholic Church and she didn't disappoint. It was the best I have read so far in the NCR and the glaring truths she depicts will no doubt leave traditionalists spluttering.

Her concluding three paragraphs which remind us how the heart of the church can and should be are, indeed, heartening.

Pope Francis has said that reforming the church will be like "cleaning the sphinx with a toothbrush."

Fletcher wasted no words, every one of them was illuminating. She used her "toothbrush" deftly.

VIVIENNE DRAY

Gravesend, United Kingdom

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I am sorry that Zita Ballinger Fletcher felt she has only had negative experiences at the Latin Mass. Mine have been quite the opposite. I've found Latin Mass attendees to be earnestly seeking to deepen their devotion and only wishing to experience the fullness of Catholicism in the Mass as experienced by the saints.

Many young Catholics, such as I, feel as if they've been handed a watered-down Mass stripped to the bare essentials, with vague and varied interpretations ranging from inspiringly holy to of questionable illicitness. I stopped regularly attending the ordinary form not long after I was received into the church; it felt too similar to the Lutheran worship in which I was raised.

I do find it disheartening to see someone assert that people like me and my fellow parishioners must attend the extraordinary form because we want to oppress women. Are we not permitted the desire to join the saints in heaven? But I suppose this comes down to how one interprets the role of the church and her priests: to answer to the demands of the laity, as Fletcher implies, or to minister to the faithful and nobly aid us in a lifetime of sanctification?

I do not expect a priest to "value my feedback as a believer." He spent years studying in seminary, I did not. He offers up the holy sacrifice of the Mass, I do not. Yes, he is supposed to be of service, but to my soul, not my ego.

CHRISTOPHER SCHENK

Edgewood, Washington

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I am writing regarding the article written by Zita Ballinger Fletcher.

I am not sure if this was written as some sort of parody or a joke. I do not have the time to go through the points but if you are a Catholic paper, it is strange that this letter was published with all the commentary that clearly seems to be born out of ignorance of Catholic liturgy, with sometimes deceptive information and possibly straight lying done by the author.

There is absolutely something wrong with a Catholic paper publishing what amounts to a propaganda piece written by an agent of the diabolic. I may sound harsh but I absolutely find it strange that any knowledgeable Catholic could think otherwise. I do not attend a Latin Mass and I understand the friction that exist between those who attend the novus ordo and those who attend the Tridentine Mass, however, this straight ignorant and blatant lying presentation in this article can only be considered abominable.

Praying for you and hoping that the Lord can bring some healing and reconciliation here.

EWART HARRIS

Oakville, Ontario

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I feel compelled to write in response to an article I read this morning through your website. I have heard through many people that NCR is fair and thoughtful in the way that it discusses topics surrounding the faith and events in the world, but this article completely altered that well-earned view.

As a lifelong Catholic, I found the Latin Mass as a single woman at the age of 28 (four years ago) and it had a profound effect on my faith, deepening and strengthening it. I found in all of the communities that celebrate Mass in the extraordinary form the reverence and devotion to living the faith that I had found so lacking in my mainstream Catholic churches. I chose to veil out of love for our lord in the eucharist after years of prayerfully considering it and was not forced by a "chauvinistic" man to do so as this article so vehemently implies.

I honestly thought this article was a parody with how intensely angry and condemning it was toward a group of Catholics that take their faith seriously and from whom enormous amounts of vocations are flowing.

SARAH FITZPATRICK

Portland, Oregon

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Zita Ballinger Fletcher's opinion piece seems over the top. I am familiar with Catholic traditionalists — I am not one of them and I resist them where I can — but her experience exceeds anything I have heard of. Where did these events take place? What country, what state, or what diocese?

If true, these things are appalling, absolutely appalling. We have a bigger job than we thought we did. God help us.

EDWARD F. READING

Walla Walla, Washington

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About four years ago, I lamented to a friend that I was becoming more and more aware of "the sense of the sacred" at our English Mass liturgies. He suggested I try the Latin Mass.

I am old enough that I received all of the sacraments of initiation according to the rites prior to Vatican II. Thankfully, we have several Masses available in the Cleveland area. As I started to attend, I noticed that there were some women who dressed as you describe, but it is a minority. I wear fashionable clothes and I prefer a hat to a veil.

The biggest bonus was that I rediscovered the sense of the sacred. Contrary to your assessment, the priest does not have his back to the people. He is facing the Lord and leading us toward the Lord. The Mass prayers (read in English side by side with the Latin) are awesome and inspiring. When you attend a Latin Mass, there is no chit

chat. People use their time to pray.

Last December, Cardinal Raymond Burke came to our parish to celebrate a solemn high pontifical Mass for the feast of the immaculate conception. There were hundreds in attendance and you could hear a pin drop as we waited for the Mass to begin.

I don't know where the author attended the Latin Mass. There are some unusual sedevacantist chapels out there. Her mindset is disposed to find negative aspects of the the Latin Mass to reinforce her biases. She should broaden her horizons.

KITTY MURRAY

Avon Lake, Ohio

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The article by Zita Ballinger Fletcher on the traditional Latin Mass errs by approaching the sacred liturgy as a matter of preferences and styles. One unhappy result of the manufacturing of the novus ordo in the late 1960s is precisely the introduction of just such an approach. The sacred liturgy cannot rise above a subjective, man-centered experience if such an approach rules the day.

No communicant has the ability or right to receive communion in the hand at a Latin Mass. That practice is not permitted in the older rite, which must be followed by both clergy and laity alike. The exception of reception on the hand exists only in the novus ordo. Fletcher was mistaken to demand this of a priest at a Latin Mass. She compounded that mistake by confronting the priest later.

Fletcher has difficulty submitting herself to the sacred liturgy, but rather seems to expect the worship of God to obey her preferences. That is a mentality that is out of order. It would be salutary for all Massgoers to gain an appreciation and a posture by which all of us — priest and laity — must be obedient to and submissive to the reality larger than each of us: the worship owed to God.

(Fr.) STEPHEN V. HAMILTON

Edmond, Oklahoma

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After spending around a dozen disapproving paragraphs discussing chapel veils, Zita Ballinger Fletcher writes, "I decided to sit in on the [Latin] Mass. Unsurprisingly I found myself surrounded by veiled women who entertained themselves in between kneeling bouts by casting disapproving glances at my leggings and earrings."

There is obvious tension between the ordinary form and extraordinary form communities. Much of this tension is due to real and well-intentioned disagreement upon the benefits and shortcomings of their respective liturgies. As someone who frequently attends both, I find many of these discussions edifying and helpful to my own spiritual growth.

But instead of edifying discussion, this article offers only a list of the personal shortfalls in the extraordinary form community. I find her article similar in form and tone to those articles found on Church Militant or Novus Ordo Watch, dedicated to listing the liturgical abuses of a particular parish, or chronicling how the authors was denied communion on the tongue. These articles are just two sides of the same coin of judgment. There is little spiritual benefit in either.

There are holy people in both communities. There are sinners in both communities. Pride, the queen of all sins, has a home in both, and we all need to do our best to fight it with charity, the queen of all virtues.

NATHAN BIRD

Chattanooga, Tennessee

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The author clearly has issues with the church but still, the tone of the article was set when she referred to the Latin Mass as a spectacle. Catholics shouldn't be referring to Mass, in any form, as spectacle, as if it's some sort of show the priest dreamt up to suppress women rather than a liturgy which nurtured the faithful for more than 1,000 years and continues to do so.

I've attended the old Latin Mass for more than 40 years and while we have our share of nuts and questionable motives, most of my fellow parishioners are honest, sincere and faithful Catholics. Many of us are drawn in by the mystery and the music and the beauty of the liturgy.

I believe the author of the article has a real ax to grind. It's not worthy of your periodical.

KEVIN F. FLYNN

Lincoln Park, New Jersey

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The piece by Zita Ballinger Fletcher on the traditional Latin Mass is simply calumnious. The fact that so many young people choose the Latin Mass might tip her off that they're experiencing something she misses, and one would expect a reporter to interview some to discover the appeal.

It's sad for Fletcher that she's had negative experiences at Latin Masses, but to generalize that it's "toxic" — much less a "cult" — simply shows her ignorance, active imagination, and bitter prejudice. Your decision to publish such an unfair characterization calls for self-reflection as well.

I hope your readers will attend traditional Latin Masses and draw their own conclusionsI can say that women here are welcome to wear red, don't have to veil, and aren't "dominated" by men. Actually, every Latin Mass I know of is growing; our parish now has five Sunday Masses, several standing room only.

Maybe that explains Fletcher's calumnies: she's afraid of the growth of traditional worship. It's certainly not "extinct," contrary to her claim. Indeed, there is reason to believe that it represents the future of Catholicism.

KRISTI IACHETTA

Richardson, Texas

Advertisement

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Zita Ballinger Fletcher's article represents a new low in applying the machinations of contemporary polemics to the Catholic faith. One wonders if she would repeat her claims of the the Latin Mass' inherent misogyny to the faces of the women who choose to attend it. Furthermore, is she aware of the reasons they choose to veil at Mass or the biblical basis for veiling?

Most of the article does not merit direct response, but I am reminded of a few facts worth pondering. The demographics of Mass attendance paint a surprisingly youthful portrait of Latin Massgoers compared to parishes at large. Populations of Latin Mass parishes are rising even as Mass attendance overall continues to decline. Moreover, many Catholics have not succumbed to this toxic "either-or" attitude and attend both forms of the Mass.

To back Fletcher's arguments is to take on a sizable contingent of the faithful based on a few bad experiences purported as representative of the whole. It is to label their actions objectively wrong and morally suspect, including (though it isn't an issue of gender as Fletcher claims) those of many women and many young people, the future of our church. Her points will stand or fall on their own logic but to stand by them one should realize how high the stakes are. Sooner or later, the bluff of the demagogues must be called, be they blindly Tridentine or in this case blindly progressive.

LUKE PONCE

Steubenville, Ohio

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I found both viewpoints on the Latin Mass inadequate. While I disagree with her process, I support Zita Ballinger Fletcher's frustration with sexism, authoritarianism,

and pompous men that go hand in hand with the Latin Mass. Sexism is not an abstract theory but a force of personal harm, one that has deeply damaged my relationship with God and the Catholic Church. I prefer to not attend a Mass at all, rather than go to one that will leave me angry and agitated. We who are disgusted with sexism in the church can best influence those we disagree with through lives of justice, flourishing, and love, instead of angry debates after Mass.

Jane Stannus' essay was also flawed. When she asked the reader to imagine "the perfect ceremony of love's rite," I saw sunlight, fresh air, animals and plants, dancing, members of all nations in varied tribal dress, not Latin Mass. The author fails to see how the sensory details she loves represent a particular culture and era which cannot singlehandedly depict the fullness of the coming of God's reign, details which represent both the holiness of God and the unholiness of the church's hoarding of wealth. I also reject the atonement theory as a form of idolatry that depicts the first person of the trinity as vengeful and bloodthirsty.

We can respect the good intentions and differences of our sisters and brothers in Christ. The universality and catholicity of our faith allows for many expressions of worship.

TRACEY HOELZLE

Cincinnati, Ohio

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I was impressed by the sincerity and deep reverence in Jane Stannus' article. It is clear she is spiritually fed deeply each time she participates in the Latin Mass experience.

Please allow me to say that for myself, I find the experience foreign and off-putting. I am 76-years-old and grew up many years before the changes of Vatican II came into being.

As a child at that Mass, I felt in awe most certainly, but the other powerful feeling was of fear. I had fear of being found not good enough to be loved by God. He was perfect, the priests, and altar servers were so perfect, and they were allowed to view the Christ in eucharist — and here was me, just a little sinner, not ever good enough to gaze upon the Christ. This caused me to eventually stop going to Mass, until I

married, became a mother and wanted to provide an opportunity for my daughters to experience the faith. By that time, the novus ordo of Mass was the norm.

My experience bringing my little girls into a community where we were all around the table of the Lord's supper, the priest was the go-between saying the same words that Jesus spoke as we witnessed his sacrificial offering for us, was one of safety, of finally being home, and my heart filled with joy, my eyes with tears.

In walking up, bowing my head in reverence, and extending my hand to receive the host, I felt Christ touching me with his hand. As I placed it into my mouth, it was my choice, my decision, and my deepest desire to become one with him through this sacrament.

I am glad NCR published Stannus' article. I believe that there are as many ways for the Lord to reach us, as there are stars in the sky, many more ways than we may even realize. The Latin Mass is how he reaches Stannus. The novus ordo is how he reaches me. There is room for both in our community of faith.

MARY WUDTKE

Chicago, Illinois

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Jane Stannus makes a beautifully expressed assertion, based on an opinion, fortified by an aesthetic intuition, judgement, and analysis? So much for a little objectivity.

As a 74-year-old born Catholic who well remembers the Latin Mass, served the Latin Mass and was over 20 when it slowly faded away; I feel that what is going on here, as expressed also in Zita Ballinger Fletcher's article, is a firm confirmation that there is no "best" when it comes to the central sacrament and ritual of our faith. There are certainly times when we have all wished that the celebration of Mass in whatever form was better than what we experienced.

I remember so many Latin Masses growing up that were mundane at best and deplorable at worst. I know that Fletcher's assertions are also very subjective. Although my own experience with Latin Massgoers is they are a grim and unhappy lot with a pinched and sour aspect. Would that even an occasional smile might brighten those gloomy facades.

The box has been opened; and what was once inside, cannot be put back. If it is to be high church and low church, Latin or the vernacular — so be it. You can't force us back into either slot; the consequences of trying have not been pleasant. So, God help us to live with both.

KEVIN BARRY

Key West, Florida

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What is the "reality of Christ's sacrifice"? If we are to accept the author's view, is it "theatre" writ large? Is it the awe that is evoked by " wish of silk and the stiffness of brocade, the glow of candlelight, the warmth of hardwood … the sheen of marble columns … clothed in ceremonial dress … intense drama unfolding" and all in Latin? It includes the rapt attention of an awed audience which is overwhelmed by it all and submits to its earthly authors and "actors." So much for the "upper room."

It is "right and just," as the author attests, to revere the sacrifice of the victim, and to respect the civilizational role of rite and ritual. It is however not, in my opinion, the "most magnificent thing this earth has ever witnessed." What is, and what is "the perfect ceremony of love's rite" is the acknowledgement of and participation in the resurrection of Jesus Christ after having been tortured and executed.

That, sadly, is what has been overshadowed, obscured and (no pun intended) buried by the specific kind of theatre advocated by the author and others, as well as the intrinsically associated clericalism of the traditional Latin Mass.

We, at least most of us, are aware of that now. I was not then. Some still are not. Some others have a personal vested interest in restoration. I am convinced that the traditional Latin Mass is primarily associated with clericalism and the manner in which theatrical awe reinforces that clericalism. So, what reality is best expressed?

DENNIS MacDONALD

Bedford, Nova Scotia

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