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A traditional Latin Mass is celebrated July 1 at Immaculate Conception Seminary in Huntington, New York. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)



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Pope Francis is a patient pastor. Until he isn't.

His new apostolic letter, *Traditionis Custodes*, in which Francis communicates "the firm decision to abrogate all the norms, instructions, permissions and customs that precede the present [document] and declare that the liturgical books promulgated by the saintly Pontiffs Paul VI and John Paul II … constitute the unique expression of the *lex orandi* of the Roman Rite" is the ecclesial equivalent of ripping off the Band-aid in one pull. It was also the only real option.

Four years ago, on the 10th anniversary of *Summorum Pontificum*, Pope Benedict XVI's apostolic letter granting greater access to the Tridentine rite, I noted that it was clear the pope's hopes had not been realized. I wrote:

> There are those who have made the extraordinary form the symbol of an ecclesial agenda that certainly runs counter to much of what Vatican II achieved. If you spot a bishop who likes to don the cappa magna, or a seminarian with a biretta, you can bet that they likely are inclined toward a triumphalist view of the church and a more rigid theological stance than the council required.

I also noted that Benedict:

> totally failed to perceive the potential for the development of websites with a kind of cult following, sites that are ostensibly devoted to the extraordinary form of the Mass but that also serve as a conduit for a crimped, theologically unsophisticated form of Catholicism, combined with right-wing political agitprop. Fr. John Zuhlsdorf and Church Militant and Rorate Caeli all traffic in this nasty brew.

It turns out that I was not the only one who perceived that the situation had miscarried. A priest who was close to Benedict told me that when the pope issued *Summorum Pontificum*, "he never intended to start a movement, still less an ideology!" But that is what happened.

Francis, in his letter accompanying the new document, issued *motu proprio* (on his own initiative) on July 16, notes that at the time of the 10th anniversary of *Summorum Pontificum*, he asked the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to send out a questionnaire to the world's bishops about the implementation of the document. Having gotten the replies, the pope felt moved to make the decisive step to greatly restrict the celebration of the old rite and to again leave it to the local bishop to decide when and where it may be celebrated.

If you doubt that the pope really understands the nature of the problem, look to Article 4 of the new letter. It states: "Priests ordained after the publication of the present Motu Proprio, who wish to celebrate using the *Missale Romanum* of 1962, should submit a formal request to the diocesan Bishop who shall consult the Apostolic See before granting this authorization." Seminarians who are asking older priests to teach them how to say the old rite need to be more focused on improving their bedside manner for hospital visits.

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Two passages in Francis' letter to the bishops accompanying the new *motu proprio* stand forth. The first points to the way some exploited the pastoral solicitude of Benedict and St. Pope John Paul II:

> Regrettably, the pastoral objective of my Predecessors, who had intended "to do everything possible to ensure that all those who truly possessed the desire for unity would find it possible to remain in this unity or to rediscover it anew," has often been seriously disregarded. An opportunity offered by St. John Paul II and, with even greater magnanimity, by Benedict XVI, intended 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.

It is not given to any of us, including popes, to look into the future. Benedict was not wrong to hope that people would accept his gracious indult and not abuse it, but the hope proved wrong. They did abuse it.

The second passage from Francis' letter that stands out for its doctrinal clarity is this:

> In defense of the unity of the Body of Christ, I am constrained to revoke the faculty granted by my Predecessors. The distorted use that has been made of this faculty is contrary to the intentions that led to granting the freedom to celebrate the Mass with the *Missale Romanum* of 1962. Because "liturgical celebrations are not private actions, but celebrations of the Church, which is the sacrament of unity," they must be carried out in communion with the Church. Vatican Council II, while it reaffirmed the external bonds of incorporation in the Church — the profession of faith, the sacraments, of communion — affirmed with St. Augustine that to remain in the Church not only "with the body" but also "with the heart" is a condition for salvation.

These words, it seems to me, put the pope's theological finger on the problem exactly: Aficionados of the old rite like to talk about how that rite uniquely conveys the sense that each Mass is a part of the one eternal sacrifice of Christ, and the thanksgiving to which the Eucharist is our response, but then they insist on their right to have a private Mass.

If the Eucharist is, as Vatican II taught, the source and summit of the Catholic faith, then we know that when the celebration of the Eucharist fails to serve the unity of the church, something is wrong, and it isn't ever the fault of him whose sacrifice we commemorate. The gifts of the Spirit, too, never fail. The failing is in us, in our lack of charity, or in our inability to perceive the moral and religious obligation to promote unity.

In the short term, I fear Francis' decision will aggravate the divisions within the church in the United States. But the choice was forced on him by those who, as he said, exploited *Summorum Pontificum*. The sting that follows pulling off a Band-Aid lasts but a minute. The church's thanksgiving for the sacrifice of Christ is eternal.

The sting will be real in certain circles and all of us should be kind to those for whom this decision will be hard to bear. Then, in service of the unity that the Eucharist

both builds and celebrates, we can move forward together.

Read this next: Francis reimposes restrictions on Latin Mass, reversing decision of Pope Benedict

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