Opinion
News
Vatican



A priest elevates the Eucharist after consecrating it during a Latin Mass. (Creative Commons/Andrew Gardner)



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Despite the recent decision of Pope Francis to curtail celebration of the Latin Mass, we are not going to see it disappear anytime soon for a simple reason: Local bishops can and will still permit it.

Francis' new rules on the old liturgy were laid out in *Traditionis Custodes* on July 16.

Unlike his predecessor, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, Francis is no fan of the pre-Vatican II liturgy. Like Pope Paul VI and most people in the church, Francis welcomed the liturgical reforms enacted by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and believed the old liturgy would gradually fade away as Catholics who were raised with it died off.

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In 1981, a survey of bishops by the Congregation for the Sacraments and Divine Worship found that only 1.5% of the bishops said their priests and people were in favor of making greater allowance for the Tridentine rite, as the old, pre-conciliar Latin Mass is called. (The post-conciliar version approved by Paul VI was written in Latin but then translated into the vernacular for common use around the world.)

Benedict, though, had experienced great spiritual nourishment in the old liturgy and hoped that allowing its greater use would foster church unity, especially with those

who found change difficult. But he also wanted to provide the old liturgy to those young people who were attracted to it.

When local bishops were reluctant to allow widespread use of the old liturgy, Benedict sidelined them, giving every priest the right to celebrate the old Latin rite even if his bishop opposed it.

Benedict also went a step further. He declared that the new and old liturgies were of equal standing in the church. Thus, there was no need for the old liturgy to fade away as anticipated by Paul VI.

Benedict's hope to foster unity failed. Those who went into schism because of the council, like the Society of St. Pius X, would not come back simply because they were allowed to say the old Mass. They are still in schism despite the efforts of Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis.

There are others who remain in the church but who champion the Latin Mass as a symbol of their rejection of all the reforms that came from the Second Vatican Council. These ideologues argue that the new Mass is an abomination, that ecumenism is a betrayal of tradition and interreligious dialogue is satanic. They believe that only they are the true church and everyone else is in error.

By bolstering these dissidents, Benedict's efforts for church unity backfired. This view was confirmed by a detailed consultation with the world's bishops by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

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Congregations that celebrate the old Mass today have become rallying centers for those fomenting opposition not only to the council reforms but to Francis' papacy. Not only do they oppose the reforms, they also spread their dissent to those who simply come to find spiritual nourishment in the old liturgy.

The challenge that Francis now faces is how to separate the pious faithful with traditional devotion to the old liturgy from the ideologues who reject the reforms of the council.

His solution is to empower local bishops with the authority to separate the sheep from the goats. He has returned to bishops their traditional authority over the liturgy that is celebrated in their dioceses, the same authority they had under John Paul II. The bishops can still allow the celebration of the old Mass where they judge there is a pastoral need, but they can deny it to dissenters who oppose the reforms of Vatican II.

The bishop can also control which priests are celebrating the old Mass to make sure that they are fostering unity with the church rather than dissent. According to Francis, these priests should be "animated by a lively pastoral charity and a sense of ecclesial communion."

However, Francis does reserve to the Vatican permission for newly ordained priests to celebrate the old liturgy. He worries about young priests and seminarians who only want to celebrate the old liturgy. He wants to make sure that they understand that they are being ordained for the whole church, not just a small faction within it.

Likewise, he has told bishops not to authorize new parishes or new groups for the sole use of the old Mass.

Francis has also reversed Benedict's decision to give equal standing in the church to the pre- and post-Vatican II liturgies. According to Francis, the new liturgy is the only liturgy of the church, and the old liturgy is only allowed temporarily for pastoral reasons.

Francis has also mandated that the Scriptures at these Masses be read in the vernacular, not Latin. Perhaps he hopes to gradually introduce the vernacular into these liturgies in the future.

In any case, once again, it is the official position of the church that the old liturgy should fade away.

Will it fade away? Not quickly.

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Many bishops have already announced that there will be no immediate change in their dioceses. This is smart. Pastoral practice demands that the bishop have a dialogue with their communities before making any decision. Those who are spiritually attached to the old liturgy should be treated with compassionate sensitivity and separated from those who foment rebellion.

Those who are young must be educated to the deeper meaning of the Eucharistic reforms and encouraged to go to the new liturgy. They need to understand the communal and participatory aspects of liturgy. We come together not simply for our individual devotion but to worship as a community of disciples who are called to help establish God's kingdom on earth.

Local bishops can also point out that saying the Mass in Latin is not a problem if it is the Latin version of the new rite. It is the old liturgy that is used to breed disunion.

The need for pastoral sensitivity means that it will take time for old liturgy to fade away, but this ultimately is the goal.

When my mother was alive, she used to go to the Saturday evening Mass at her parish. One Saturday she showed up and the Mass was in Spanish. She kept going to that Mass even though she did not know a word of Spanish. When I asked her why, she responded, "It is wonderful, just like the old Latin Mass. I don't understand a word they are saying." Then she added, "It is even better, I don't understand the homily."