Opinion

NCR Voices



A sacramentary is seen on the altar during a traditional Tridentine Mass in this file photo dated July 18, 2021, at St. Josaphat Church, Flushing, in the Queens borough of New York City. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)



by Michael Sean Winters

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No matter how you look at it, the story about a Tridentine Catholic Mass being held in a conference room in the U.S. Capitol is more than a little bizarre. Even assuming the best of intentions, the whole thing is strange.

Religious services were often held at the U.S. Capitol in the early years. Remember, Washington was mostly unsettled swampland when it was designated as the location of the new federal government. Georgetown had been a trading port for decades, but the area where the Capitol was built was virgin territory. In 1794, a small, wood frame chapel was built within the limits of the federal city to meet the spiritual needs of the Irish immigrants working on building the government buildings. It was called St. Patrick's.

St. Patrick is still there, and two churches even closer to the U.S. Capitol have been added since, St. Joseph's on the Senate side of Capitol Hill and St. Peter's on the House side. All three are parish churches and, consequently, cannot host a Tridentine rite liturgy.

The organizers from the Arlington Latin Mass Society told The Pillar, which first reported the story, that the service was being held on the anniversary of the FBI memo that detailed "the increasingly observed interest of racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists (RMVEs) in radical-traditionalist Catholic (RTC) ideology." They wanted to show they were loyal Americans.

"We're not a threat to America in any way. We're Catholics. We're Catholics that maybe have a little particular idea of how you ought to do liturgy," Ryan Ellis, a board member at the Arlington Latin Mass Society, which organized the liturgy, told The Pillar. "But other than that, there's really not anything strange about us compared to mom-and-pop Catholics in any other setting."

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The FBI memo was poorly conceived and should never have been written, as I have argued previously, touching as it does on constitutionally protected behavior. It was, according to Kathleen McChesney, who worked at the FBI for many years, "a terrible analytical document."

And if the memo had served as the basis of an actual witch hunt against Catholics fond of their Latin Mass, marking the anniversary would be understandable.

In fact, the memo was disavowed by both FBI Director Christopher Wray and Attorney General Merrick Garland. Garland called it "appalling."

It is one of the hallmarks of a certain kind of traditionalist Catholic that they think they are being persecuted. Many of us opposed the Health and Human Services contraception mandate on religious liberty grounds, to be sure, but no one in the government came to shoot us. This isn't the Mexican Revolution. Joe Biden is not Plutarco Calles.

Beyond the overwrought theatrics about persecution, there were other oddities. The Mass was originally scheduled to take place in H-122, the Speaker's Dining Room, which hosts a Christian religious service every Wednesday night at 7 p.m. It was moved at the last minute to a more nondescript room.

From the photo in the Pillar story, it looks like a collapsable table served as a makeshift altar. I thought one of the reasons people are attracted to the old rite is because of its beauty and otherworldliness. This looked more like one of those coffee table Masses hippies had in the '70s.

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If these traditionalists really want to ape the 1950s, you would have thought they might have gotten permission from the bishop to hold the Mass. They did not. The Washington Archdiocese provides three locations where the Tridentine rite can be

celebrated and the basement of the Capitol isn't one of them.

Washington's Cardinal Wilton Gregory will likely not take any action against the organizers, but if this had happened in the '50s, you can bet Archbishop Patrick O'Boyle would have given them a piece of his mind. When O'Boyle was integrating the parochial schools, a delegation of distinguished citizens from southern Maryland came to beg him to delay. His biographer tells the tale:

> In the end they pleaded that he postpone any changes in their schools until the state ordered integration in the public schools. To those who claimed that the area would not be ready for integration for at least a decade, O'Boyle replied, "Well, gentlemen, we're going to do it tomorrow." The delegation took its leave knowing it had failed.

That was the '50s. Ignoring the legitimate authority of the archbishop of Washington to conduct this Mass at the Capitol would have been unthinkable back then.

We should be careful not to attribute motives too quickly to those who like the old rite. A friend said devotion to the old rite represents a desire to restore the priest being in charge, and a rejection of that active participation by the laity in the liturgy that is the hallmark of the post-conciliar rite, and for some that is doubtlessly true. It is also true that the most active form of participation in any Mass is prayer and it is not difficult to believe some people find the old rite more conducive to prayer than the new.

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The Arlington Latin Mass Society, however, does not seem motivated only, or even primarily, by aesthetics. For example, they held a rally and prayed the rosary in front of the apostolic nunciature in January for recently deposed Bishop Joseph Strickland. Their founder, Noah Peters, has published articles at right-wing outlets Crisis and Rorate Caeli.

For the society, the whole idea of needing the old rite to make the avowedly political statement about the FBI memo seems to invest the liturgy with a kabbalistic significance. It is as if only the secrets of the Tridentine rite can produce the graces they seek. It is a kind of necromancy, but instead of conjuring the spirits of the dead, they conjure the liturgy of the dead.

It can't be said too often: Every religion looks a bit weird from the outside. The U.S. Constitution guarantees freedom of religion to the Arlington Latin Mass Society, full stop. But as Catholics, we can regret the tendency of some Latin Mass groups toward extremism. We can hope and pray they will not fall into schism.

The fact that they held this Mass in the Capitol shows them to be cafeteria Catholics, acknowledging legitimate ecclesial authority only when it agrees with them. They may be a remnant of sorts, but it is not necessarily a faithful remnant.