News

Altar shown up close, as well as priest's hands and vestments.

A sacramentary is seen on the altar during a traditional Latin Mass July 18, 2021, at St. Josaphat Church in the Queens borough of New York City. The parish, located in the Diocese of Brooklyn, celebrates a traditional Latin Mass on Sundays and five other days of the week. The Sunday liturgy has a dedicated following, drawing more than 150 people from Queens and neighboring counties, in addition to southwestern Connecticut and northern New Jersey. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)



Jonathan Luxmoore

View Author Profile

OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Oxford, England — July 16, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Following the example of a group of British cultural icons, a group of American "Catholics and non-Catholics" and prominent cultural and intellectual personalities asked Pope Francis in an open letter July 15 not to further restrict the traditional Latin Mass.

"We come to you with the humility and obedience but also the confidence of children, telling a loving father of our spiritual needs," wrote signatories of the letter called "An Open Letter from the Americas to Pope Francis," inspired by Dana Gioia, former chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts.

"To deprive the next generation of artists of this source of mystery, beauty, and contemplation of the sacred seems shortsighted," emphasized the signatories, including composer Morten Lauridsen, international religious freedom advocate Nina Shea and Blanton Alspaugh, Grammy award-winning classical music record producer.

"All of us, believers and nonbelievers alike, recognize that this ancient liturgy, which inspired the work of Palestrina, Bach, and Beethoven and generations of great artists, is a magnificent achievement of civilization and part of the common cultural heritage of humanity," they said, adding that "It is medicine for the soul, one antidote to the gross materialism of the postmodern age."

Earlier in the month, 48 respected and widely known British signatories asked Francis the same in a July 2 letter published in The Times, praising the traditional Mass and warning against moves to unravel its "spiritual and cultural heritage."

"Although we don't know how it's been received in Rome, this letter has met sympathetic reactions from bishops in Britain," said Joseph Shaw, chairman of the London-based Latin Mass Society.

"While some have accused its 48 signatories of treating the Latin Mass as a museum piece, they're actually doing the opposite — seeing it as something of spiritual value to the world. We hope this will have wider echoes," Shaw said of the British letter.

In an OSV News interview, Shaw said he hoped the British prefect of the Vatican's Dicastery for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Cardinal Arthur Roche, would recognize the signatories and resist pressure to "crack down on the Mass" by "those opposed to it on principle."

Meanwhile, a leading British priest said he believed new rules on the Latin Mass had "worked well" since "Traditionis Custodes," a July 2021 apostolic letter from Pope Francis.

"This left it to local bishops to decide where and when the Latin Mass could be celebrated, in consultation with the Vatican," Father Jan Nowotnik, mission director for the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, told OSV News.

"Although it's sometimes been a focus for culture wars elsewhere, it isn't causing any great tension at present. Nor are traditionalists taking over lots of parishes or exerting some big influence," he said.

The traditional, or Tridentine, Mass, last presented in the 1962 Roman Missal, was restricted in favor of vernacular translations by St. Paul VI, in line with reforms at the 1962-1965 Second Vatican Council.

However, it was reauthorized in England and Wales under a Nov. 5, 1971, papal indult, or dispensation, following a petition from 105 British politicians, writers, artists and musicians, including novelists Agatha Christie, Robert Graves and Iris Murdoch, as well as composers Vladimir Ashkenazy and Yehudi Menuhin.

Permission to celebrate the Mass was widened by St. John Paul II in 1984, and was extended to all priests by Pope Benedict XVI under a 2007 apostolic letter, "Summorum Pontificum."

In "Traditionis Custodes," however, Francis ruled that post-Vatican II liturgies were the "unique expression" for Latin-rite Catholics, and said traditional Masses should be allowed by bishops only if their adherents did not deny "the validity and the legitimacy" of Vatican II liturgical reforms and the papal magisterium.

Francis added in a letter that accompanied "Traditionis Custodes" that bishops should not establish new groups or venues devoted to the Latin Mass, and said the situation "preoccupies and saddens me," referring to the fact that some traditionalists rejected Vatican II "with unfounded and unsustainable assertions."

Advertisement

Both the American and British open letters came after a traditionalist website, Rorate Caeli, said June 17 that opponents of the traditional Mass, "especially in the United States and France," were seeking a "wide, final and irreversible" ban in a document under preparation by the divine worship dicastery, although the claim was contested by other Catholic news media saying that no such document was under

preparation in Rome.

In their July 2 Times letter, arranged by composer James Macmillan, the British public figures said they worried the Latin Mass faced being "banished from nearly every Catholic church," adding that their appeal was "entirely ecumenical and non-political."

The traditional liturgy is a "cathedral of text and gesture" — developing as venerable buildings did over many centuries — and to "destroy it seems an unnecessary and insensitive act in a world where history can all too easily slip away forgotten," said the signatories, who included Julian Fellowes, award-winning writer of the "Downton Abbey" TV series, and Andrew Lloyd-Webber, creator of musicals "Jesus Christ Superstar" and "Evita," as well as human rights campaigner Bianca Jagger and writers, historians, musicians and film stars from religious and nonreligious backgrounds.

A former government minister who signed the letter, Rory Stewart, told OSV News the traditional Mass was a "rare and precious connection to the deep history of the church," extending right "to the church fathers, to the whole community of past believers and communities of worship linked through the language of the liturgy."

Meanwhile, the editor of Britain's Catholic weekly, The Tablet, Brendan Walsh said what was "at risk or under threat" was not the Latin Mass, which was allowed "all over the Catholic world," but parish celebrations of older Roman rites, which were "flecked with queasy reminders of the anti-Judaism the post-conciliar church is still struggling to disinfect itself from."

In his OSV News interview, Novotnik said concerns about the traditional Mass raised "deep theological and ecclesiological issues," amid fears that groups favoring "an older form of liturgy" also opposed other current reforms.

However, this was rejected by Shaw, the Latin Mass Society chairman, who said "small discontented groups" existed throughout the church, adding that Francis had faced criticism not just from "traditionalist Catholics" but also from "angry liberals."

Although bishops varied in attitudes to the traditional Latin Mass, many had "become more open-minded and reassured" after visiting more traditionalist communities who "respected their authority, produced vocations and made sense financially," Shaw said.

"Opponents of the traditional Mass have expressed fears about a parallel church — but if we're now pushed out of parishes, this really will create a parallel church," Shaw told OSV News.

"People signed this letter because they care about the Latin Mass and believe spiritual traditions have value and can't just be crushed under the mortar of stupid, incomprehensible arguments. The way to deal with diversity isn't to marginalize an already marginalized minority even more."

In a Times article accompanying the July 2 letter, composer James Macmillan said the 48 signatories had acted "in defense of religious freedom."

American signatories of the July 15 letter said that the traditional Latin Mass "cannot be understood as a mere refuge from modernity, for some of the most creative minds on our planet are inspired by the Latin Mass — its beauty, its reverence, its mystery — to make new works of art and also to serve the least among us."