Vatican
Vatican News



Nuns stand next to copies of L'Osservatore Romano, a Vatican newspaper, with headlines about Pope Leo XIV at the Vatican May 9, a day after he was elected as the first North American pope. (AP/Francisco Seco, file)

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Leaked documents seemingly undermining Pope Francis' stated reason for restricting the old Latin Mass provided an incomplete reconstruction of the evidence that informed his 2021 decision to crack down on the spread of the ancient liturgy, the Vatican said July 3.

Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni declined to explicitly confirm the authenticity of the documents, which were posted online this week by a Vatican reporter. But he said they "presumably" were part of one of the documents forming the basis of Francis' decision.

"As such, it provides a very partial and incomplete reconstruction of the decision-making process," Bruni told reporters. adding that successive confidential reports and consultations were taken into consideration.

The publication of the documents this week revived the debate in the Catholic Church over the Latin Mass, suggesting that whoever leaked them aimed to put pressure on Pope Leo XIV to address the dispute just as his pontificate is getting under way.

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Leo has said his aim is unity and reconciliation in the church, and many conservatives and traditionalists have urged him to heal the liturgical divisions that spread over the Latin Mass, especially in the United States, during Francis' 12-year papacy.

In one of his most controversial acts, Francis in 2021 reversed Pope Benedict XVI's signature liturgical legacy and restricted access for ordinary Catholics to the old Latin Mass. The ancient liturgy was celebrated around the world before the modernizing reforms of the 1960s Second Vatican Council, which allowed Mass to be celebrated in the vernacular, with the priest facing the pews.

Francis said he was cracking down on the spread of the old liturgy because Benedict's decision in 2007 to relax restrictions on its celebration had become a source of division in the church. Francis said he was responding to "the wishes expressed" by bishops around the world who had responded to a Vatican survey, as well as the Vatican doctrine office's own opinion.

"The responses reveal a situation that preoccupies and saddens me, and persuades me of the need to intervene," Francis wrote at the time.

Benedict's relaxation had been "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," Francis said.

The documents posted online, however, paint a different picture. They suggest the majority of bishops who responded to the Vatican survey had a generally favorable view of Benedict's reform. They warned that suppressing or weakening it would "do more harm than good" and lead traditionalist Catholics to leave the church and join schismatic groups.

The documents include a five-page "overall assessment" of the survey findings, written by the Vatican's doctrine office, as well as a seven-page compilation of quotes from individual bishops or bishops' conferences. There is no letterhead or signature on the documentation, and it's not clear if its author cherry-picked the quotes.

The documents contain some negative and neutral opinions and say some bishops considered Benedict's reform "inappropriate, disturbing," dangerous and worthy of suppression.

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But the Vatican's own assessment said the majority of bishops who responded expressed satisfaction. It cited the rise in religious vocations in traditionalist communities and said young Catholics in particular were drawn to the "sacredness, seriousness and solemnity of the liturgy."

The documentation was prepared by the Vatican department that handled traditionalist communities and its authors may have been more sympathetic to their plight. That said, even the office's retired head backed Francis when he published the 2021 crackdown.

The new documents have comforted traditionalists who felt attacked and abandoned by Francis.

"The new revelations confirms that Pope Francis restricted the Traditional Mass at the request of only a minority of bishops, and against the advice of the dicastery in charge of the subject," said Joseph Shaw, of the Latin Mass Society of England and Wales. In an email, he said Leo should address the issue "urgently."

One way Leo can do so is by merely instructing the Vatican to more freely grant exemptions to bishops to allow Latin Masses to be celebrated in diocesan parishes.

Such permission was recently granted to the diocese of San Angelo, Texas, according to the Fr. Ryan Rojo, the diocesan seminarian director. In a June 27 post on X, he thanked Leo and the Vatican liturgy office for extending permission for another two years.

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