News



Fr. John Ubel, pastor of the Church of St. Agnes, wears the traditional biretta hat and vestments as he sits between altar servers during one of the Catholic parish's Latin Masses in St. Paul, Minn., June 28, 2026. (AP/Giovanna Dell'Orto)

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With incense wafting to an elevated pulpit and 13 altar boys looking on, the priest at the Church of St. Agnes preached about merging old Catholic customs with fidelity to the Vatican this week — as Pope Leo XIV tackled a major challenge from a traditionalist breakaway group.

"Our Catholic faith is a living tradition, and there is a difference between being rooted and being stuck," Fr. John Ubel said in homilies June 28 at English-language and Latin Masses.

Since the Second Vatican Council modernized the liturgy more than 60 years ago, celebrating Mass in the traditional Latin Rite that preceded those reforms has become a lightning rod of the theological, cultural and increasingly partisan divides among Catholics.

The conflict made global headlines when Leo declared July 2 that one traditionalist group — the Society of St. Pius X, founded to reject the Council's reforms and celebrate exclusively the old Latin Mass — had formally broken with the Catholic Church.

The Vatican excommunicated the SSPX bishops and priests and warned its thousands of faithful after the society consecrated four men as bishops in defiance of Leo.

While the Latin Rite was not the cause of the rift, the acrimony and the lingering suspicion that all those who like it are ultraconservative rebels is an open wound at St. Agnes, which isn't affiliated with SSPX and has the church's permission to celebrate Mass in Latin.

"For all who are attached to Tradition, I pray that they seek to maintain full ecclesial communion with our Holy Father, Pope Leo XIV," Ubel said July 2.

**A congregation continues to pray for unity**

St. Agnes, a historic church founded for German-speaking immigrants in what's now a diverse, central neighborhood in Minnesota's capital, offers one traditional Latin Mass per weekend, with the archbishop's permission. It also has a modern version of the Mass in Latin and four in English.



Worshippers at the Church of St. Agnes receive Communion on the tongue and while kneeling at the altar rails, in the traditional custom, during one of the Catholic parish's Latin Masses in St. Paul, Minn., June 28, 2026. (AP/Giovanna Dell'Orto)

"I believe that St. Agnes is an example where the different forms of Latin Mass, and English, peacefully coexist, and, in many ways, I think it's a model for how the church can respect various liturgical traditions and do so in full charity," Ubel said in last Sunday's homilies.

Peter Draganowski, a 15-year-old incoming sophomore at St. Agnes' school, has been an altar boy at both English and Latin services for years. He prefers the latter despite the extra preparations and rituals.

"It's really not hard, it just has a lot more moving parts," he said in the parish hall as hot dogs and doughnuts were served after Sunday's first English Mass. "The sacred mysteries deserve that beauty."

The archbishop of St. Paul and Minneapolis, Bernard Hebda, expressed hope that local Catholics who had been attending SSPX chapels would now turn to approved services.

"We are blessed that the same traditional Eucharistic liturgy beloved by those who have worshiped with the SSPX in the past continues to be celebrated in six locations throughout the Archdiocese," Hebda said in a statement. "I am confident that those who prefer the Traditional Latin Mass could find a home here."

**Latin Mass supporters a small but vocal group**

In addition to being celebrated in Latin, the old rite Mass diverges from standard services in other ways: The prayers are different and longer, the priest celebrates at the altar with his back to the congregation, and Communion is given out only on the recipient's tongue, instead of in the hand, while the person kneels at the altar rail. The priests also wear shorter "Roman-style" vestments and a black biretta hat.



Fr. John Ubel, pastor of the Church of St. Agnes, celebrates the eucharistic prayer facing the altar, in the traditional custom, during one of the Catholic parish's Latin Masses in St. Paul, Minn., June 28, 2026. (AP/Giovanna Dell'Orto)

Very few U.S. Catholics regularly attend Sunday Mass in the "extraordinary form" that predates the Vatican II reforms of the 1960s, according to Stephen Cranney, a lecturer at Catholic University of America in Washington, and coauthor of an upcoming book on the Latin Mass in the United States.

He estimates that 510 such Masses are celebrated on Sundays in the United States, where there are more than 16,000 active parishes. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate said they don't track the data.

Most American Catholics he surveyed who like this Mass say they do so because of the elaborate esthetics, the deeper sense of reverence, and the continuity with centuries of tradition, Cranney said. Only a small percentage said they oppose the Vatican II reforms, let alone support defying the pope, he added.

But the challenge has remained over the decades for popes that the threat of schism, or a rupture within the church, might lurk behind a preference for a more solemn liturgy.

"How do you ... try to be accommodating to the people who might prefer the traditional Latin Mass while not giving fuel to the fire of people that want to split off?" Cranney said.

**Popes have taken different approaches**

Leo's two predecessors tried different approaches. In 2007, Pope Benedict XVI upheld the validity of the Latin Rite and urged priests to offer such a Mass if their parishioners demanded it.

But Pope Francis cracked down on the practice in 2021-23, requiring individual bishops to give their approval for celebrating the traditional Mass and to determine if the faithful who wanted it had accepted the Vatican II reforms. He also restricted the use of parish churches for these services.

Francis said he acted because the old Mass had become a source of division in the church — although Vatican documents leaked last year after his death suggested most bishops actually had expressed general satisfaction with the practice.

Last fall, Leo allowed a U.S. cardinal to celebrate the old Latin Mass in St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City, which many traditionalists saw as an encouraging sign.

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In the year since his election, Leo has spoken often of the need for unity. On June 30, before the SSPX consecrations, he again pleaded with the society not to proceed. Once they did, however, the Vatican warned the faithful to stop going to the society's Masses, declaring "those who adhere formally" to the society are considered themselves schismatic and excommunicated.

**'Not a competition'**

Parishioners at St. Agnes said they were saddened by the schism and would continue to pray for a united church.

Nell O'Leary Alt, who grew up in the parish, said her family attends both Latin Masses, as well as English services.

As a mother of five children aged 5 to 16, she joked that she initially found the silent moments of the traditional Latin Mass intimidating, with nothing to cover the fussing and giggling of her growing family in the pews.

But they love the Latin worship: "It's the same the saints knew all through the ages."

Tom Graff, another "cradle Catholic" at the church who chants in the choir, said he's drawn to the rites' solemnity. But this week's events highlight the importance of what he teaches his four children, about not falling into the trap of believing one form of worship is superior to another.

"I can appreciate both the ordinary and the extraordinary forms of Latin Mass, and Schubert's 'Tantum Ergo' as well as 'On Eagle's Wings,' " Graff said, referring to a centuries-old and a modern Christian hymn. "It's about the holy sacrifice of Mass, regardless of the parish or the type of liturgy."

Ubel believes having multiple Mass options is about inclusion rather than division.

"It's not a competition to see who's more Catholic," he said.