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Hold your breath for the next media frenzy: The Latin Mass document is coming

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

To the growing list of indications that something is imminent with regard to the long-awaited document from Pope Benedict XVI authorizing wider use of the pre-Vatican II Mass, I can add one item this week.

An April 3 letter from Cardinal Walter Kasper, who among other things heads the Vatican's Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with Jews, responds to concerns from the International Council of Christians and Jews about the pre-Vatican II Mass, in light of controversial passages it contains regarding Judaism. The last sentence of Kasper's letter, the text of which I have, is the key line: "While I do not know what the pope intends to state in his final text, it is clear that the decision that has been made cannot now be changed."

Kasper's language clearly indicates that something definitive has happened. It adds to the confirmation given by the Vatican's Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, on March 31 that a *motu proprio* from Benedict XVI, meaning a document under the pope's personal authority, on the pre-Vatican II Mass is coming.

Catholic publishers in Rome, anticipating the pope's decision, have already begun preparing new editions of the pre-Vatican II Mass books, called the "1962 Missal" because that was the last year prior to the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) in which an official liturgical book according to the old rite was issued.

Anyone who has ventured into the Catholic blogosphere recently is aware that speculation about the *motu proprio* has been at a fever pitch for months. One wag has even posted a list of the Top Ten signs that someone is in the grip of "motu-mania," including: "You have a calendar with all the likely feast days that the *motu proprio* might be issued marked," and, "You have written 500 blog posts, and 480 of them have been about the *motu proprio*."

In part, the frenzy has been stoked by a series of over-anxious news reports containing rumored release dates. A partial list includes October 2006, March 2007 (in conjunction with the pope's exhortation for the Synod on the Eucharist), Holy Thursday, and this past April 16 (Benedict's 80th birthday). The hot tip now is April 30, the feast of St. Pius V on the Roman calendar, or May 5, the feast of Pius V on the older calendar.

At the risk of raining on the "motu-mania" parade, however, it's worth noting that many experts believe this breathless anticipation will, in the long run, seem excessive in terms of the document's real-world impact.

For one thing, more than 40 years after the council, many priests are unfamiliar with the pre-Vatican II rite and may not rush to celebrate it even if authorized to do so -- if not for theological reasons, simply because they're already stretched too thin. For another, it's not clear how much pent-up demand for the pre-Vatican II Mass actually exists. Many Catholics enthusiastic for the old Mass already have access to it, in parishes and religious orders who celebrate the old Mass under the terms of a 1984 indult from the Vatican.

Most bishops, pastors and liturgical experts whom I've polled believe that with or without the *motu proprio*, the normal liturgical experience for the overwhelming majority of Catholics will continue to be the post-Vatican II Mass in the vernacular language. Estimates vary, but many say that they expect no more than one or two percent of Catholics worldwide to routinely attend the pre-Vatican II rite, even if they were given ready access to it.

As one American bishop put it to me, "We wouldn't have spent the last decade sweating blood over a new English translation of the Mass if we didn't think this was going to be the normal liturgical experience for most of our people."

Further, the *motu proprio* is unlikely to do much, at least in the short term, to end the break between Rome and the followers of the late French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre. The traditionalist Society of St. Pius X, founded by Lefebvre, claims roughly one million adherents worldwide, and trying to heal this rupture has been a top priority of both John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

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Anyone who knows the leadership of the Society of St. Pius X realizes that the older Mass is merely one element of more sweeping reservations about the council. Above all, many traditionalists object to the council's teaching on religious freedom, ecumenism and inter-religious relations. Bishop Bernard Fellay, head of the Society of St. Pius X, has stated that he wants the pope to acknowledge a formal "right of dissent" from the teaching of Vatican II on these points. By itself, the *motu proprio* will not solve these problems.

In other words, the *motu proprio* may end up as a classic instance of one of those Vatican documents that unleashes a torrent of debate and commentary, but changes relatively little on the ground.

Be that as it may, there's no doubt the *motu proprio* will be a media sensation, because the older Mass has become the most potent symbol of tensions over the basic direction of the Catholic Church in the period since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). In the court of broad public opinion, expanded access to the pre-Vatican II rite will be interpreted as a victory for the church's traditionalist wing, however the Vatican explains it.

Among the debates certain to swirl is a set of concerns regarding Jewish-Christian relations. The exchange between Kasper and the International Council of Christians and Jews, based in Germany, illustrates what's at stake.

Servite Fr. John Pawlikowski, an American, wrote to Kasper on March 29 on behalf of the executive body of the International Council of Christians and Jews. Pawlikowski, an expert in Catholic/Jewish relations at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, told Kasper that although the phrase "perfidious Jews" was lifted from the pre-Vatican II Mass by Pope John XXIII, the older Mass still contains other prayers for Jews, Muslims and other Christians that Pawlikowski called "profoundly demeaning."

"The expanded validation of such prayers," Pawlikowski argued, "will rightly challenge Catholic integrity in terms of the proclamations of the last four decades," meaning advances in ecumenical and inter-faith relations, especially with Jews.

Pawlikowski's letter does not specify which prayers in the 1962 Missal his group finds objectionable. A Web site sponsored by the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding at Boston College, however, offers a background document on the older Mass, along with a critical statement from a "Jews and Christians" group of the Central Committee of German Catholics. The two texts cite concerns widely voiced by experts in Catholic-Jewish relations.

For example, the Good Friday liturgy contains a prayer "For the conversion of the Jews," which reads: "Let us pray also for the Jews, that the Lord our God may take the veil from their hearts and that they also

may acknowledge our Lord Jesus Christ. ? Almighty and everlasting God, You do not refuse Your mercy even to the Jews; hear the prayers which we offer for the blindness of that people so that they may acknowledge the light of Your truth, which is Christ, and be delivered from their darkness."

The background document on the Boston College site asserts that the prayer is problematic.

"The references to 'even the Jews,' 'their darkness,' and 'blindness' and for their conversion runs counter to the respect for ongoing Jewish covenantal life throughout historic time that was expressed in *Nostra Aetate*, 4," it says, referring to the Vatican II document on Judaism and other religions. "Similar problems might be found elsewhere in the Missal simply because it was uninformed by subsequent developments in Catholic understanding."

The document from the German group highlights other objections.

"The pre-conciliar Roman Missal is inseparably connected to the old lectionary," it states. "In its sequence of about 60 diverse formularies for the celebration of Mass for Sundays and holy days, there is no reading from the Old Testament for each Sunday, except in only three cases ? This is blatant Marcionism, which devalues the first part of the two-part Christian Bible -- namely the Bible of Israel -- to insignificance."

The German group also questions the underlying worldview of the old Mass.

"Its theology and spirituality ? contradicts much that was theologically central to the Second Vatican Council," it says. "This concerns, not least, the unique relationship between the Church and Judaism (see *Lumen Gentium*, 16 and *Nostra Aetate*, 4)."

These points, experts say, illustrate the reservations about the 1962 Missal at which Pawlikowski's letter hints.

In his brief reply, Kasper told Pawlikowski that he had already discussed such concerns with Cardinal Dario Castrillon Hoyos, head of the Vatican's Ecclesia Dei Commission which oversees use of the older Mass. Castrillon is a driving force behind the new *motu proprio*.

Kasper writes that he expressed the concerns of "many people engaged in the Jewish-Christian dialogue" to Castrillon.

"After a long conversation, it was reiterated that the use of the Missal does not represent principally a new situation," Kasper writes, "insofar as its use has been permitted over time in particular cases."

Kasper said he's not entirely sure what might be done about sensitive passages regarding Jews.

"The 1962 Missal does not have the term 'perfidious Jews.' I was unable to obtain a clear answer," Kasper writes, "with regard to the prayer for the Jews."

Kasper then closes with the sentence quoted above about the pope's decision no longer being open to debate.

Whatever form Benedict's final decision takes, the kinds of controversies reflected in this exchange will continue -- even if most Catholics, on most Sundays and in most parishes around the world, remain blissfully unaffected by them.

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