

Singapore Latin Mass draws young workers

UCA News | Oct. 12, 2008

SINGAPORE

"Dominus vobiscum" (the Lord be with you), the priest says, and about 40 people answer, "Et cum spiritu tuo" (and with your spirit). The priest then turns his back on them and continues the opening prayer facing the cross and tabernacle.

A traditional Latin Mass has begun in the bright chapel of St. Joseph's Institution International School. This Mass, held the fourth Sunday of every month, follows the liturgical books published with the approval of Blessed John XXIII in 1962, before that pope opened the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). It features Gregorian chant, and only the homily is not in Latin.

What immediately strikes a first-time visitor to this Mass, organized by the Traditional Latin Mass (TLM) movement in Singapore, is the congregation. The young working adults, mostly in their 20s, who make up about three-fourths of the people were born after local languages replaced Latin in liturgies following Vatican Council II.

Only Catholics 45 and older, just one-fourth of this group, would have had the chance to attend the traditional Mass in Latin as children. Jenson Tay, coordinator for the TLM movement, did not.

The 28-year-old tonsured seminarian is taking a leave of absence after his first year of seminary life with the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter (FSSP) in Australia. The fraternity, founded in 1988 with Pope John Paul II's approval, trains its priests to celebrate the traditional Latin liturgy, which the Church recognizes as an extraordinary form of the Roman rite.

Tay also spoke of his role as "master of ceremonies" in another Latin Mass, held the second Sunday of every month at the Church of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour.

That Mass uses the ordinary form of the Roman rite, used around the world today, in which the priest faces the congregation. But everything except the Scripture readings and homily are in Latin rather than a local language. Gregorian chant is used for the hymns.

Tay ensures the smooth conduct of these parish liturgies, which draw around 100 parishioners. The TLM movement does not organize them but sees them as a way to promote Latin as a liturgical language.

About 20 active members make up the movement's core team, which has three sub-groups: Schola Cantorum, the Gregorian chant choir; altar servers; and logistics.

Several times while speaking with UCA News, Tay stressed that movement members have no association with the Society of St. Pius X, which rejects the liturgical reforms of Vatican Council II and is not in full communion with the Church.

The TLM community has "remained faithful to the local bishop and the Holy Father," and demonstrates this through "patience, obedience and perseverance," Tay insisted. He added that despite hindrances such as being denied use of a church for their Masses and being openly criticized for "rejecting" the Second Vatican Council, community members patiently believe the archdiocese will one day open a Mass center for them.

Educated young TLM members "read Church documents and want to worship in the way the Church wants them to," Tay said. Other members "grew up with the traditional Mass," often called the Tridentine Mass.

Father Paul Staes, ordained in 1961, also grew up with the traditional Mass but sees two main problems with its use in Singapore today.

People can learn to recite the prayers, but "you don't know what you are saying, because you don't know Latin," said the priest, who spent six years studying the language. "It's like having a Mass in sign language where no one is deaf."

Even if everyone understood Latin, he continued, the old form of the Mass raises a more fundamental issue.

"As priest, you are doing your own thing, and the people are doing their own thing. Is Mass not more a participatory event of the people? To me, one of the biggest achievements of the Second Vatican Council was the new form of the Mass. The language is not the most important thing; it's the whole set-up," Father Staes told UCA News.

Tay, far from a diehard traditionalist, confided to UCA News that he likes contemporary praise and worship songs, only "outside of liturgy." He believes the TLM movement can help Catholics regain reverence for the Mass.

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