

How and why has Pope Francis restricted the Latin Mass?

“Chin up, it’ll work itself out,” I told my friend, Michelle. She was “despondent” at the news [Pope Francis had abrogated *Summorum Pontificum*](#) – the law by which Pope Benedict XVI liberalized the use of the 1962 liturgical books – and in fact had told me she “hadn’t felt such grief” since her father passed a little more than a year-and-a-half ago.

My friend is a cantor at her very ordinary parish. She loves to sing for the Lord, and she teaches others to sing for him in the way the Church prescribes. She’s middle-aged and never married. She lost her mother too soon, and cared for her father until he went the way of all flesh. The Church is the center of her life.

[My friend is hurt.](#) She is hurt in her sentiments, sure, but she is also hurt in her person – a loyal daughter of the Church, who has suffered alongside many of her fellows in personal devotion to an ancient and venerable form of public prayer, and now discovers the man to whom she has looked as a father in God is displeased with her attachment and suspicious of her loyalty to him.

She isn’t wrong to feel that way, and she’s far from the only one.

She reads a lot of the blogs and visits a lot of the websites that traffic in “news” about traditional worship, of interest to the communities devoted to traditional forms. Through the years, I’ve encouraged her to pay less attention to them. They amplify unfounded internet chatter to gin up the angst among people already inveterately aggrieved and too much given to hand-wringing.

Nada te turbe (“Let nothing disturb you”), I’ve quoted her too

many times to count.

I stand by that advice – it comes from St. Teresa of Ávila, after all, and she's one better placed than I with respect to the Lord, better prepared by long trial of patience to offer such counsel – but I must admit that I was wrong about Pope Francis' designs for traditional liturgy and the communities that are devoted to it.

There had been chatter for years about Pope Francis' plans to curtail or abrogate [*Summorum Pontificum*](#), but I never believed any of it. I knew the attractive power of traditional worship and knew the reality of communities devoted to those forms. The doomsaying one encountered in internet comment boxes struck me as a tolerable nuisance, at worst, and, in any case, not even worth the trouble of investigating.

So, what happened?

Long story short

In very broad strokes, then: Pope Benedict XVI saw that the great liturgical patrimony of the Roman rite had developed organically through many long centuries, during which it sustained the faithful, and still had something important – even indispensable – to offer the Church; Pope Francis believes that attachment to the older forms of worship is somehow a sign of maladjustment or poor attunement to the Holy Spirit, whose will for the Church is “uniquely” expressed in the liturgical books his sainted predecessor, Pope Paul VI, promulgated.

Pope Francis says he came to his determination after broad consultation with the world's bishops, 14 years' removed from his immediate predecessor's liberalizing law.

It is worth noting that Benedict XVI cited the worldwide episcopate's general failure to respond with sufficient generosity to Pope St. John Paul II's promulgation of [*Ecclesia*](#)

[Dei](#), which created a special permission for the use of the old books. “To all those Catholic faithful who feel attached to some previous liturgical and disciplinary forms of the Latin tradition,” Pope St. John Paul II wrote, “I wish to manifest my will to facilitate their ecclesial communion by means of the necessary measures to guarantee respect for their rightful aspirations.”

“In this matter,” John Paul II continued, “I ask for the support of the bishops and of all those engaged in the pastoral ministry in the Church.”

The beginning of the end to the short version of that long story came with Pope Benedict XVI noting that difficulties persisted into the present of 2007 – the year in which he issued *Summorum Pontificum* – especially concerning the use of the 1962 missal outside the groups that had been operating irregularly and had later been able to avail themselves of the indult granted in 1984.

Then, in his [letter to bishops explaining his reasons for *Summorum Pontificum*](#), Pope Benedict said that the unsatisfactory situation was “because of the lack of precise juridical norms,” and “particularly because bishops, in such cases, frequently feared that the authority of the council would be called into question.”

The general presumption in the wake of the post-conciliar liturgical reform was that “requests for the use of the 1962 missal would be limited to the older generation which had grown up with it,” Benedict told the bishops, but in the years between 1969 and 2007, young people also came to discover the older form. They “felt its attraction and found in it a form of encounter with the Mystery of the Most Holy Eucharist, particularly suited to them.”

“Thus,” Benedict wrote, “the need has arisen for a clearer juridical regulation which had not been foreseen at the time

of the 1988 *motu proprio*.”

“The present norms,” Benedict XVI explained in his letter accompanying *Summorum Pontificum*, “are also meant to free bishops from constantly having to evaluate anew how they are to respond to various situations.”

There was some foot-dragging in the three years between the promulgation of *Summorum Pontificum* in 2007 and the first reports from bishops at the three-year mark in 2010. There was some obstructionism in some quarters – some of it highly publicized, especially in the aforementioned e-pages with an eye to the disaffected and maladjusted – but most bishops came to let their traditional communities be.

“A posture of salutary neglect,” was how I described it for the Catholic Herald, where I also predicted that one effect of Francis’ 2020 questionnaire could be an increase in bishops’ attention to the traditional communities under their jurisdictions.

When the 2020 questionnaire appeared, on the back of which Pope Francis has built his abrogation, I noted that the effect of the thing in the short term would be “to end the salutary neglect that has been practiced in many dioceses – if not most – since the three-year implementation period [for *Summorum Pontificum*] ended in 2010.”

I suppose I wasn’t wrong about that, but I had no idea how right I’d be.

Whether the questionnaire was part of Pope Francis’ design from the beginning, or an ultimately unsuccessful attempt on the part of curial officials to temporize, the thing is done now. Pope Francis has done it.

There’s lots to say about what Pope Francis has done now, and there’s lots to say about how he has done what he has done. It’ll be easy to get lost in the weeds. Forays into the rough

will eventually be necessary. For now, the big questions are “How?” and “Why?”

The answer to the “How?” question will depend in great part on the answer to the “Why?” question, but both require that bishops wrap their heads around what, precisely, Pope Francis has done – and there are lots of questions about that.

Timeline of the 1962 Latin Mass since the Second Vatican Council

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- **Oct. 11, 1962** – The Second Vatican Council opens, during which the council fathers discussed new norms for the Mass. Since the 1500s, the Tridentine Latin Mass was the norm. The last edition of the Roman Missal for the Tridentine Mass was promulgated in 1962 by Pope John XXIII.

- **1969** – The Mass of Pope Paul VI, called the *Novus Ordo* (new order) is issued, first published in the 1970 edition of the Roman Missal.

- **Oct. 3, 1984** – The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments issues a letter that granted diocesan bishops an indult to authorize the celebration of the 1962 Latin Mass for specified priests and groups of the faithful who requested it.

- **July 2, 1988** – Pope St. John Paul II issues *Ecclesia Dei* in response to the excommunication of Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre and Bishop Antônio de Castro Mayer and the four priests they consecrated as bishops outside of the *Novus Ordo*. *Ecclesia Dei* expanded the scope of permission granted by the indult for use of the 1962 Roman Missal.

- **July 7, 2007** – Pope Benedict XVI issues *Summorum Pontificum*, which allows priests, without having to seek the permission of their bishop, to privately celebrate the 1962 Latin Mass and “in parishes where a group of the faithful attached to the previous liturgical tradition stably exists.”

- **July 16, 2021** – Pope Francis issues *Traditionis Custodes*, calling the Mass promulgated by Pope Paul VI the “unique expression of the *lex orandi* of the Roman Rite,” restoring the obligation of priests to have their bishops’ permission to celebrate the 1962 Latin Mass, and ordering bishops not to establish any new groups or parishes in their dioceses devoted to the old liturgy.

What has Pope Francis done?

According to the [strict letter of the new law](#), any and all priests desirous of celebrating the older form of the Roman

rite – the *usus antiquior* in Benedict XVI’s Latin – the “extraordinary form” or the “Traditional Latin Mass” – must seek and obtain the permission of the local ordinary (usually the diocesan bishop).



Cardinal Walter Brandmüller elevates the Eucharist during a Tridentine Mass at the Altar of the Chair in St. Peter’s Basilica at the Vatican May, 2011. CNS photo/Paul Haring

Diocesan bishops have “exclusive competence” to decide who gets to say Mass with the older books.

Article 3.2 establishes that bishops will have some discretion in establishing when and where priests may use the older books. They are not to allow the groups to gather in parish churches, though; nor are they to permit the formation of new groups.

Pope Francis’ law also establishes that local bishops are “to take care not to authorize the establishment of new groups,”

and to assure himself that existing groups “do not deny the validity and the legitimacy of the liturgical reform, dictated by Vatican Council II and the magisterium of the Supreme Pontiffs.”

Pope Francis also tinkers with the celebration of the *usus antiquior*, decreeing that bishops must “establish at the designated locations the days on which Eucharistic celebrations are permitted using the Roman Missal promulgated by St. John XXIII in 1962,” and that “the readings” in those celebrations “are [to be] proclaimed in the vernacular language, using translations of the sacred Scripture approved for liturgical use by the respective episcopal conferences.”

Article 3.4 orders local ordinaries “to appoint a priest who, as delegate of the bishop, is entrusted with these celebrations and with the pastoral care of these groups of the faithful,” raising the question whether existing communities and personal parishes will get to keep their pastors.

Articles 4 and 5 establish that priests ordained after the publication of *Traditionis Custodes* who wish to celebrate using the 1962 Roman Missal “should submit a formal request to the diocesan bishop who shall consult the Apostolic See before granting this authorization.”

“Priests who already celebrate according to the *Missale Romanum* of 1962,” reads Article 5, “should request from the diocesan bishop the authorization to continue to enjoy this faculty.”

One practical upshot of all this, then, is that the leaders of communities established in response to the desire of groups devoted to the old books – many of which have been active in parish life for well over a decade – must now seek permission from the bishop to keep doing what they’ve been doing with their people.

Another is that, while priests ordained after the promulgation

of the new law have a paper right to request permission to use the older books, the law itself instructs bishops to work so that no priest will have a reason to make the request – namely, Pope Francis’ indications in his accompanying letter – and also orders those bishops to consult with Rome before granting any such request.

Why has he done it?

Why Pope Francis has decided to do what he has done, and why he has decided to do what he has done in the way he has decided to do it, are questions for which neither the law nor the accompanying letter offers a completely satisfactory answer.

To hear Pope Francis say it, he “instructed the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to circulate a questionnaire to the bishops regarding the implementation of the *motu proprio Summorum Pontificum*,” and found in the responses “a situation that preoccupies and saddens” him, and has persuaded him “of the need to intervene.”

“Regrettably,” [Pope Francis writes](#), “the pastoral objective of my predecessors, who had intended ‘to do everything possible to ensure that all those who truly possessed the desire for unity would find it possible to remain in this unity or to rediscover it anew,’ has often been seriously disregarded.”



People pray during a traditional Latin Mass Aug. 2020, at Our Holy Redeemer Church in Freeport, N.Y. CNS photo/Gregory A. Shemitz

“An opportunity offered by St. John Paul II and, with even greater magnanimity, by Benedict XVI,” Pope Francis continues in his letter to the bishops, “intended to recover the unity of an ecclesial body with diverse liturgical sensibilities, was 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.”

Short version: *Avemo provato co' 'e bbone, e 'mo, provamo co' 'e brutte*. That's Roman dialect for: “We tried it the nice way, and now we're going to try it the not nice way.”

In case there is any doubt regarding the construction, let Pope Francis say it in his own words: “The distorted use that has been made of this faculty is contrary to the intentions that led to granting the freedom to celebrate the Mass with the *Missale Romanum* of 1962,” Pope Francis writes. “[In defense of the unity](#) of the Body of Christ, I am constrained to revoke the faculty granted by my Predecessors.”

Whether reality on the ground comports with that estimation is a matter requiring investigation.

That is one capital reason for which many observers are in such a state of perplexity over the conspicuous absence of a *vacatio legis* – a period of time between the promulgation of a law and its entrance into effect – which would allow bishops to assess the situation, understand what the law is asking of them and begin to develop plans for implementing the new legislation.

Instead, bishops around the world [are acting with more haste](#) than can possibly be deliberate. In the United States,

Archbishop Salvatore J. Cordileone of San Francisco gave blanket permission to his priests. Bishop Anthony B. Taylor of Little Rock restricted the Latin Mass to two parishes. Others are proceeding with more considerate speed, but the whole affair is terribly rushed.

Any way you slice it, *Traditionis Custodes* is an almost purely centralizing document. The only power it gives to bishops is taken from priests, while the powers bishops previously held are now limited by papal diktat, at least in their discretionary exercise.

The only power bishops gain, in other words, is at the expense of their priests. That, by definition, is centralizing. It is bound to create more bureaucracy all around. One wonders whether bishops really want the trouble.

Excerpts from Pope Francis' letter to the world's bishops

“Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

“Just as my predecessor Benedict XVI did with *Summorum Pontificum*, I wish to accompany the *motu proprio Traditionis Custodes* with a letter explaining the motives that prompted my decision. I turn to you with trust and ‘*parresia*,’ in the name of that shared ‘solicitude for the whole Church, that contributes supremely to the good of the universal Church’ as Vatican Council II reminds us. ...

“With the passage of 13 years, I instructed the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to circulate a questionnaire to the bishops regarding the implementation of the ‘*motu proprio*’ *Summorum Pontificum*. The responses reveal a situation that preoccupies and saddens me and persuades me of the need to intervene. Regrettably, the pastoral objective of my predecessors, who had intended ‘to do everything possible to ensure that all those who truly possessed the desire for unity would find it possible to remain in this unity or to rediscover it anew,’ has often been seriously disregarded. An opportunity offered by St. John Paul II and, with even greater magnanimity by Benedict XVI, intended to recover the unity of an ecclesial body with diverse liturgical sensibilities, was 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.

“At the same time, I am saddened by abuses in the celebration of the liturgy on all sides. In common with Benedict XVI, I deplore the fact that ‘in many places the prescriptions of the new missal are not observed in celebration, but indeed come to be interpreted as an authorization for or even a requirement of creativity, which leads to almost unbearable distortions.’ But I am nonetheless saddened that the instrumental use of *Missale Romanum* of 1962 is often characterized by a rejection not only of the liturgical reform, but of the Vatican Council II itself, claiming, with unfounded and unsustainable assertions, that it betrayed the tradition and the ‘true Church.’ ...”

Change in Leadership

Pope Francis let *Summorum Pontificum* stay in effect for 14 years – not quite a full blink of the eye in ecclesiastical reckoning – before sending his questionnaire to some of the same men whose failure to respond to the pastoral needs of the faithful devoted to the old books was a major factor in Benedict's decision to free the Latin Mass in 2007.

Sensible of the division sown by Pope St. Paul VI's effective suppression of the Latin Church's liturgical life prior to 1969, Benedict XVI sought to foster unity by making more widely and readily available the sacred things that many Catholics desired from the time Pope St. Paul VI took them away and that many others had discovered in the meantime.

"In the history of the liturgy," wrote Pope Benedict, "there is growth and progress, but no rupture. What earlier generations held as sacred, remains sacred and great for us too, and it cannot be all of a sudden entirely forbidden or even considered harmful," he continued in a well-known and oft-quoted passage from the letter he wrote to the world's bishops in explanation of his decision. "It behooves all of us to preserve the riches which have developed in the Church's faith and prayer, and to give them their proper place."

That was then. Now, 14 years later, Francis is pope.

Christopher Altieri writes from Connecticut.

WHAT ARE U.S. BISHOPS SAYING?



“As these new norms are implemented, I encourage my brother bishops to work with care, patience, justice and charity as together we foster a Eucharistic renewal in our nation.”

– **Archbishop José H. Gomez** of Los Angeles, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops



“The Mass is a miracle in any form: Christ comes to us in the flesh under the appearance of bread and wine. Unity under Christ is what matters. Therefore the Traditional Latin Mass will continue to be available here in the Archdiocese of San Francisco and provided in response to the legitimate needs and desires of the faithful.”

– **Archbishop Salvatore J. Cordileone** of San Francisco



“These norms will require further study by individual bishops and by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Those studies will help determine how these norms apply here in the Archdiocese of Baltimore. In the meantime, the current practice will continue and going forward every effort will be made to meet the pastoral needs of those who frequent holy Mass in the extraordinary form.”

– **Archbishop William E. Lori** of Baltimore



“I will prayerfully reflect upon *Traditionis Custodes* in the coming weeks to ensure we understand fully the Holy Father’s intentions and consider carefully how they are realized in the Archdiocese of Washington. In the interim, I hereby grant the faculty to those who celebrate the Mass using the liturgical books issued before 1970 to continue to do so this weekend and in the days to come, until further guidance is forthcoming.”

– **Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory** of Washington



“I have informed our clergy that I am granting temporary permission for those priests competent in offering Mass in the extraordinary form to continue to do so in churches that already have an extraordinary form Mass on their schedule or in a private setting until further study and clarification can inform an appropriate implementation of this document.”

– **Archbishop Paul S. Coakley** of Oklahoma City