

The Pope has created a liturgical ‘free market’



Dr. Alcuin Reid

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Benedict XVI’s motu proprio may even prompt the revival of the Sarum Rite, says Alcuin Reid

Well, he has done it. After much speculation, and in spite of intense and orchestrated lobbying from some bishops (as well as the all-too-frequently published opprobrium of ageing priests and liturgists), by means of his motu proprio letter *Summorum Pontificum* the Pope has either — depending upon your point of view — undermined the liturgical reforms initiated by Vatican II or restored to the Church the venerable liturgical tradition she jettisoned in the wake of the Council.

The latter is, at least in part, true, for we know from the writings of Cardinal Ratzinger that this pope has long since believed that the juridical proscription of the Church’s older liturgical tradition was a historical anomaly and a gross impoverishment of the liturgical life of the Church. Now, he has acted to correct this.

But let's be clear the Holy Father has not "restored" anything really, at least not by way of imposing or ordering a return to the older liturgical forms. He has simply permitted their free use. He has taken down the legal barriers that — as he says in his *motu proprio* — should never have been erected in the first place: His Holiness states clearly that the older liturgy was, in fact, "never abrogated".

Herein we glimpse the genius and the profound humility of Benedict XVI. Yes, he is deeply concerned about the crisis in the liturgical life of the Church (we saw this in *Sacramentum Caritatis*) and yes, he is convinced that it was wrong to ban the old liturgy after the Council. As Pope, he enjoys the authority to act as he judges best for the good of the Church. Having done so he imposes... nothing; he simply permits. He does not ban the newer liturgy or even recommend that there be at least one weekly celebration of Mass according to the older use in each parish or diocese. In his profound conviction that this form of the liturgy has much to offer the Church of today and of tomorrow, he humbly trusts that the pastoral judgment of priests of this and of coming generations will afford the older liturgical forms their appropriate place in the life of the Church.

This decentralised and somewhat "free-market" approach is quite a novelty in recent liturgical history. For whether we have in fact done as we have been told in Church, in the last 40 years we have been told a good deal about what we must and must not do: that Rome required us to adopt the new rites and to forsake the old, that the bishops required us to transfer this feast or that to a Sunday, that the bishop insists that the tabernacle be moved to the side, that churches must be re-ordered, and so forth.

Such positivist juridical centralism was not always the case. Throughout her history up until the Second Vatican Council the one Roman Rite had varying ancient uses (rituals for the celebration of Mass and the sacraments) proper to particular dioceses and to many religious orders. There was even more ritual plurality before the centralising reforms of the Council of Trent: here in England the Sarum use of the Roman Rite, as well as other local uses, held sway. Abroad, many if not most dioceses had their own missals or "uses". So there is nothing all that unusual - from the point of view of liturgical history - in Pope Benedict allowing different "uses" of the one Roman Rite. Indeed, we may hope that the religious orders may once again enjoy free access to their proper uses. Perhaps there may even be a place in the life of the Church in England for a revival of the Sarum use?

But doesn't all this risk liturgical disunity and repudiate the liturgical reforms of Vatican II? As to the first, we need to be honest: the way the modern rites have been celebrated in some — indeed too many — parishes over the past 40 years has been so ideologically idiosyncratic that one can legitimately ask whether there is in fact any real unity of worship (in some instances, even of faith) within the modern use of the Roman Rite. That very large issue aside, let us remember that the Second Vatican Council itself spoke of a legitimate diversity within substantial unity: unity, not uniformity.

The irony of protagonists of the modern use of the Roman Rite opposing the availability of the older use by means of insisting on liturgical uniformity ought not to be lost — for overcoming liturgical uniformity was heralded as one of the victories of the modern liturgical reform. No, whatever liturgical books are used, there will be substantial unity amid legitimate diversity, provided the rites are celebrated as the Church intends them to be celebrated. This is in perfect harmony with the Second Vatican Council and the liturgical tradition of the western Church.

Pope Benedict's act could, however, be seen to contain an implicit criticism, not of the Council, but of the liturgical reforms that were enacted in its name: quite simply, they have not completely satisfied the spiritual appetites of all the faithful. Indeed, as the Holy Father observes, many young people who never knew the older liturgy find in it much that draws them to God. To put it another way, there would have been no need for this *motu proprio* had the liturgical reform that followed Vatican II been an unqualified success and had it been a moderate, organic development of the traditional liturgy as the Fathers of the Council themselves desired. The Pope does not discuss these issues explicitly here, but he has done so frequently as cardinal.

And what of the bishops? Hasn't the Pope undermined their authority to regulate the liturgy in their dioceses? As Cardinal Ratzinger, the present pope wrote a rather audacious paragraph about the limits of the pope's power in respect of the liturgy. He stated bluntly that the pope is not "an absolute monarch" in respect of the liturgy, but "a humble servant of its lawful development and abiding integrity." Pope Benedict XVI taught this fundamental principle to himself, as it were, in his homily on taking possession of the Lateran Basilica soon after his election.

The same has to be said of the diocesan bishop: his role is that of one who oversees the liturgy in his diocese, of one who ensures that it is celebrated with integrity, in accordance with the liturgical law of the Church. Liturgical law certainly gives him some personal prerogatives (he may delegate others than himself to administer Confirmation), but it does not empower him to restrict the legitimate options that the Church gives in her liturgical books. The Pope's *motu proprio* has certainly extended the range of liturgical celebrations the bishop must supervise. Perhaps it has also served as a salutary reminder for some bishops that their episcopal office is indeed that of an overseer of the liturgy's proper celebration, and that they are not its authors or proprietors.

The lasting significance of *Summorum Pontificum* and its accompanying letter to the bishops will be seen by the generations to come. In the coming months and years we shall probably see much commentary and clarification in respect of them as the practicalities of a gradual increase in the celebration of the *usus antiquior* of the Roman Rite are worked out. Please God, we shall also see progress in the reconciliation of those groups who have broken with Rome over this and other questions: their positive response to the *motu proprio* is both encouraging and a testament the paternal solicitude of the Holy Father.

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