

‘PRACTICAL’ AMERICANS DON’T GET THE POINT

By JAMES R. LOTHIAN

Catholics in America have had a somewhat mixed but on net quite positive reaction to Pope Benedict’s *motu proprio Summorum Pontificum*.

The usual suspects both in the hierarchy and in the Catholic press have been in a terrible tither. So too many commentators in the mainstream media. But there has also been a surprisingly strong positive reaction from a good number of bishops as well as many clergy and laity.

I have collected statements from 41 of the 178 American dioceses. Of those 41, 15 are articulate in their support of *Summorum Pontificum* and another 11 moderately supportive. Of the remaining 15, one by Bishop Donald Trautman of Erie, Pennsylvania is quite hostile to the document and 14 rather muddled and, although most not overtly hostile, not very sympathetic either.

Exactly how things will develop in the months and years ahead is hard to say, but one thing is certain: It will not simply be business as usual. Catholics now have a degree of freedom with respect to the liturgy that has been almost totally missing for the past 40 years. Competition has replaced monopoly and power has been given to parish priests to celebrate the ancient liturgy of the Church as they see fit. Both developments are all for the better.

The “liberals” in the Church are not at all happy with his new state of affairs. They will no longer be able simply to chant “Spirit of Vatican II” in mantra-like fashion to stifle dissent. *Roma locuta est, causa finita est*.

The *National Catholic Reporter* (NCR), the house organ of liberal American Catholicism ran an editorial entitled “Full participation before all else” along with two opinion articles and a news-cum-opinion piece by their Rome correspondent, John Allen. All were critical of *Summorum Pontificum*

although Allen’s piece had a veneer of objectivity about it.

The NCR editorial was amusing in a wry sort of way. NCR since its founding in 1964 has continually sounded the clarion call for choice in the Church. Priests choosing to say the Old Mass and laity choosing to assist at this Mass are, however, different in NCR’s view. Liberalism evidently has its limits

“We fear that re-embracing the Latin Mass could undermine the liturgical reforms that undergird the spiritual and theological developments of the Second Vatican Council,” they wrote. Quoting an article that Rembrandt Weakland, the troubled former archbishop of Milwaukee, had written eight years ago they went on to say: “[W]e have to ask: ‘Can the two, the reform of the liturgy and the reform of the church, be separated?’”

The answer of course is that they cannot. But what NCR and their ilk term “reform” is what other less ideologically motivated, more orthodox folk call “revolution.”

In his 2005 Christmas address to the Roman Curia, Benedict set out his agenda, asking the question “Why has the implementation of the [Second Vatican] Council, in large parts of the Church, thus far been so difficult?” His answer, in short, was that it was viewed as an overthrow of the old order and the creation of the new – as a call for continual innovation in both doctrine and liturgy. Benedict termed this “the hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture.” He juxtaposed it against what he termed the “hermeneutic of reform,” the view – in his eyes, correct – that what the Council was trying to achieve was organic change and refinement of doctrine in the context of Tradition. *Summorum Pontificum* is a very important step in the process of implementing that vision. It is also supremely pastoral in the true sense of the

word

Archbishop Raymond L. Burke of St. Louis, who is one of the American bishops that strongly supports the *moto proprio* pointed explicitly to the pastoral motivation behind it in his column for the diocesan newspaper. He wrote:

As [Pope Benedict] observes, there was a greater attachment to the former rite than perhaps was anticipated, especially among the faithful ‘with a notable liturgical formation and a deep, personal familiarity with the earlier form of the liturgical celebration.’ An interest in and attachment to the former Rite of the Mass also developed among the faithful in circumstances in which the reforms of the *Novus Ordo* were not implemented with fidelity but were falsely seen to permit or even require a creative interpretation on the part of the priest. Such circumstances, in the words of Pope Benedict XVI, ‘led to deformations of the liturgy which were hard to bear.’ Our Holy Father reflects upon his own experience of the confusion and hurt which sometimes accompanied the implementation of the *Novus Ordo*.

Archbishop Burke went on to say:

Not infrequently, I meet young people who are attracted to the former Order of the Mass, even though they had no experience of it when they were growing up. What attracts them is the beauty and reverence, which the earlier form very much fosters. Such beauty and reverence should also be evident in the celebration of the *Novus Ordo*. Because the ordinary form is greatly simplified, the priest and those who assist him must be attentive to the divine action taking place and not give way to an informality and familiarity which is offensive to the nature of the Sacred Liturgy.

Particularly worth emphasizing here are Pope Benedict’s and Archbishop Burke’s characterisations of individuals attracted to the

Old Mass. Contrary to the usual allegations, it not simply nostalgic old folks with little understanding of the liturgy who assist at the Old Mass. Young people and people “with a notable liturgical formation and a deep, personal familiarity with the earlier form of the liturgical celebration” are well represented in their, I believe quite accurate, view.

Archbishop Burke, like Pope Benedict, also sees no opposition between the documents of Vatican II, *correctly interpreted*, and the celebration of the Mass using the 1962 missal. In an interview in *The Wanderer* newspaper last year, he stated:

It is clear to me that there has to be a continuity between the rites, both those in force in 1962, and those that are currently in force. I think the generous permission to celebrate the former rites will help us to see the richness of the 1962 missal and other sacramental celebrations, and in that way, will help us to be more faithful in carrying out the reforms mandated by the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council.

The middle ground

It is, however, in the middle ground, where much of the detail of *Summorum Pontificum* will be worked out. In a number of his diocesan statements, there is a pattern of the sort that emerges when students peek at each other’s homework answers. “We have had the Old Mass weekly in our diocese since ___ (fill in a date) . Only a relatively small fraction of Catholics attend this Mass. We, therefore, anticipate *Summorum Pontificum* to have little effect in our neck of the woods.”

This is a Yes-Minister-type response, not totally disingenuous, but certainly not the whole the truth. One Mass in a diocese once a week at an inconvenient time in an out-of-the-way parish is hardly the “ wide and generous application” of the use of the 1962 Missal that Pope John Paul II called for in his *moto proprio Ecclesia Dei adflicta* almost 20 years ago. In most instances, moreover, such celebrations of the Mass preclude participation in normal parish life.

Many bishops, as also laity and other clergy, simply do not seem to get it. One has the impression from reading some of the diocesan statements and other commentary that many American Catholics are oblivious to what Pope Benedict is trying to accomplish, not only with regard to the liturgy but elsewhere in Church life. These are “practical” people to whom the realm of ideas is rather alien terrain.

The major differences that they see between the Mass of Paul VI, celebrated as it is in much of the United States in seemingly endless variety and the Mass of Blessed John XXIII is that one is in English and the other in Latin and that one has the laity hopping about and getting all huggy and the other is quiet and seemingly sedate.

The notion that the purpose of liturgy is worship and ought to focus on God and not be as Benedict has elsewhere put it be simply be the community celebrating itself seems to escape them entirely.

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