

WHO'S GOT IT RIGHT – POPE OR BISHOPS?

By JAMES R. LOTHIAN*

A major motivation for Pope Benedict's *motu proprio Summorum Pontificum* was his dissatisfaction with the state of the current liturgy. He made this very clear in his letter accompanying *Summorum Pontificum* (Benedict XVI, 2007) and indeed has expressed similar sentiments in various writings throughout the past several decades (e.g., Ratzinger, 2000)

In his letter to his fellow bishops Pope Benedict wrote (2007):

Many people who clearly accepted the binding character of the Second Vatican Council, and were faithful to the Pope and the Bishops, nonetheless also desired to recover the form of the sacred liturgy that was dear to them. This occurred above all because in many places celebrations were not faithful to the prescriptions of the new Missal, but the latter actually was understood as authorizing or even requiring creativity, which frequently led to deformations of the liturgy which were hard to bear. I am speaking from experience, since I too lived through that period.

Close to a decade ago in his autobiographical reminiscences *Milestones* (1998, pp.148-149), Pope Benedict said much the same thing but in rather more forceful terms:

I am convinced that the crisis in the Church that we are experiencing today is to a large extent due to the disintegration of the liturgy, which at times has even come to be conceived of *etsi Deus non daretur*: in that it is a matter of indifference whether or not God exists and whether or not He speaks to us and hears us. But when the community of faith, the world-wide unity of the Church and her history, and the mystery of the living Christ are no longer visible in the liturgy, where else, then, is the Church to become visible in her spiritual essence? Then the community is celebrating only itself, an activity that is utterly fruitless. And, because the ecclesial community cannot have its origin from itself but emerges as a unity only from the Lord, through faith, such circumstances will inexorably result in a disintegration into sectarian parties of all kinds - partisan opposition within a Church tearing herself apart. This is why we need a new Liturgical Movement, which will call to life the real heritage of the Second Vatican Council.

Pope Benedict's view, however, does not appear to be widely shared even by bishops who have expressed support for *Summorum Pontificum*. The Scottish bishops, for example, the day of the *motu proprio*'s issuance stated "In thanking the Holy Father for this most recent document, the Bishops of Scotland wish to note that since 1970 Catholics in Scotland have embraced the reform of the liturgy, with the same openness of heart as they had already begun to accept the other decisions of the Second Vatican Council." Such sentiment, moreover, is not at all atypical. One can with very little effort find similar statements by other bishops issued in the wake of *Summorum Pontificum*. Indeed, belief in the efficacy of the *novus ordo* Missae of Pope Paul VI, in very little time following its promulgation took on the aura of conventional wisdom.

Almost immediately afterwards, Archbishop Annibale Bugnini, CM, the leader of the Consilium, the group that devised it, declared it a smashing success. For with the change, he wrote, "millions and hundreds of millions ... have at last achieved worship in spirit and truth."

Bugnini's assertion, though arguably rather premature given its proximity to the event, was certainly not atypical of reactions either then or during the course of the years that followed. Writing in 1988, for example, Bishop John R. Keating of Arlington, Virginia stated:²

Twenty-five years ago today the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* gave birth to a remarkable worldwide renewal in the way we worship God together and receive His gift of sanctification. The transformation is well underway and, thanks to the Holy Spirit, there are palpable impulses everywhere, prompting us to a greater reverence for the Eucharist. Indeed we are privileged witnesses to "a new Pentecost."

Sixteen years later David Haschka, S.J., then Secretary for Pastoral Ministry for the United States Jesuit Conference, claimed very much the same thing. "Most Catholics who are now middle-aged," he wrote, "typically embraced the liturgical changes that followed the Second Vatican Council—vernacular language, new musical idioms, presiders facing the assembly, the simplification and relative informality of the rubrics, the variety of lay liturgical ministries and on and on. It was a joyous revolution, running alongside a number of other revolutions of culture and consciousness occurring during those turbulent years." (Haschka,

2004, p.6)

The next year, the General Synod of Bishops meeting in Rome stated in Proposition No. 2 of their concluding document: “The Synod recalls with gratitude the positive influence which the liturgical reform mandated by Vatican Council II has had on the life of the Church.”³

The conventional view of the liturgical changes and Pope Benedict’s assessment are, therefore, clearly at odds. If Catholics now “worship in spirit and truth” and have “embraced the reform of the liturgy,” if the *novus ordo Missae* has ushered in “a new Pentecost,” and has been “a positive influence ... on the life of the Church,” there cannot at the same time be a “crisis in the Church” that is “to a large extent due to the disintegration of the liturgy?”

It is, therefore, an empirical question which of these two diametrically opposite views are true. What do we see in the actual practices of Catholics that can allow us to distinguish between these two descriptions of the liturgical changes that were imposed following Vatican II and that to varying degrees have continued in the years thereafter?

The first and most obvious place to look for such evidence is in data on Mass attendance.⁴ If the apologists for the liturgical changes of Paul VI were correct, Mass attendance over the past forty years ought to have increased. We ought now to see a greater proportion of Catholics attending Mass than prior to the post-Vatican II liturgical changes.

In actual fact, however, we see the exact opposite. I have assembled such data for nine countries for as long a period for each country as figures were available. For four of these countries, Canada, England and Wales, the Netherlands and the United States, these data extend well into the period prior to Vatican II. For Australia and Belgium, the data begin in the mid to late 1960s, in both instances, therefore, still prior to the promulgation of the *novus ordo*. For the remaining three, Ireland, New Zealand and Scotland the data begin later, the mid-1970s in the case of the first two and 1984 in the case of Scotland.

Fig 1a. Belgium, Canada, Eng. & Wales, Netherlands and United States

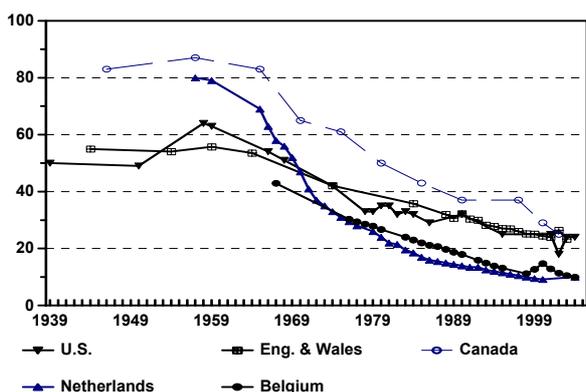
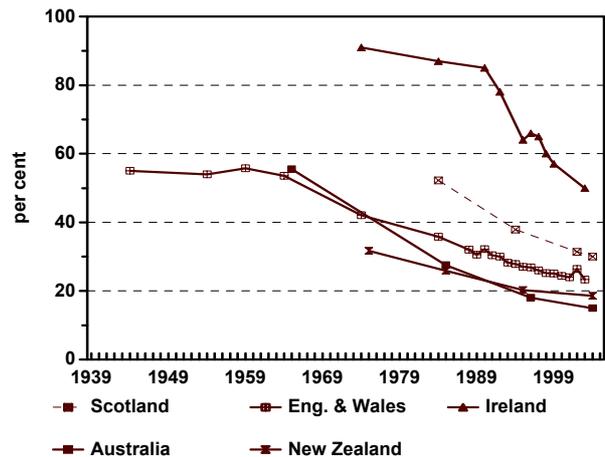


Fig 1b. Eng.&Wales, Australia, Ireland, New Zealand and Scotland



The picture that the data for these countries paint is universally distressing – substantial and continual declines in all nine countries. The magnitude of these declines ranges from 70 percentage points in the Netherlands over the period 1957-2004 to 13 percentage points in New Zealand over the much shorter period 1975-2004.

In short, there is not the slightest trace in any of these data of the increased appreciation for the Mass that the liturgical changes have been widely described as effecting. Indeed, the timing of the declines in Mass attendance suggest that those changes had a negative, rather than positive effect. In three of the four countries with data that antedate Vatican II, the declines in Mass attendance began following the close of that council; in the fourth, the Netherlands, a pre-existing decline turned into a cataclysm.

I review this evidence in greater detail in the next section of the paper. I then go on to consider two issues: Whether factors other than the liturgical changes themselves can provide an explanation for the declines in Mass attendance and why, in principle, one might have expected the liturgical changes to be not only ineffective but counterproductive.

I. The Message in the Data

The data that I have compiled are for weekly Mass attendance of Roman Catholics as a percentage of Catholic population in the nine countries listed above: Australia, Belgium, Canada, England and Wales, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Scotland and the United States.⁵ The time periods covered and the frequency of observation differ by country and were dictated by data availability. For the United States I have adjusted the data to reflect differences between the Gallup Poll survey figures and more accurate recent head-count figures.⁶

Figure 1 contains charts of the data showing

their temporal movements. Table 1 provides an overview of these data on a country-by-country basis. The first two rows of the table show the year in which the respective series begins and the level of Mass attendance in that year. The next two rows show the changes in Mass attendance pre- and post-1965 in percentage-point terms. The last row shows the difference between these two figures.

Plotted in Figure 1a are the series for Belgium, Canada, England and Wales, the Netherlands and the United States. What immediately strikes the eye here are the generally substantial downtrends in all of the series and the rather marked change in behavior that takes place in the mid-1960s. In Canada, England and Wales and the United States, we see a shift from little or no trend in Mass attendance prior to 1965, to a substantial downtrend in the years thereafter. In the case of the Netherlands, we see a relatively small, but not inconsequential decrease (15.6 percentage points) pre-1965 and a more than three times larger decrease (54.4 percentage points) thereafter. The cumulative drop in Dutch Mass attendance is, therefore, 70 percentage points and that does not tell the full story since the number of Catholics in the Netherlands also declined over the period.

Plotted in Figure 1b are the series for Australia, Ireland, New Zealand and Scotland along with that for England and Wales, reproduced here to provide a frame of reference.

The data series for these countries span periods, ranging from 20 years in the case of Ireland to 40 in the case of Australia. Scotland and New Zealand lie in between with approximately 30 years of data each. All show substantial declines, the largest of which are those of Australia (41 percentage points) and Ireland (40.5 percentage points).

For none of these latter four countries is comparison of the pre- and post-Vatican experience possible. It is, of course, possible to compare the

behavior of Mass attendance in these four countries with behavior in the first four. In general, the parallels are quite close. Viewed over comparable periods, the Mass attendance series for Australia and New Zealand and, to a somewhat lesser extent Scotland, behave very similarly to that of England and Wales. The one exception to this pattern, and that only partial, is Ireland. In Ireland, as in the rest of the countries, Mass attendance shows a marked decline, but the decline starts much later than in the other seven countries and from a much higher initial level than in all but Canada and the Netherlands.

In this regard, the different experiences of Ireland and the Netherlands are instructive. When World War II ended, the Catholic churches of both countries were considered to be among the strongest in Europe.⁷ Both had full seminaries and the Netherlands, like Ireland, exported priests. Mass attendance, as the later data for the two countries indicate, must have been extremely high at that time. The Dutch church, however, was in the vanguard of both liturgical change and theological experimentation. The Irish hierarchy, and church more generally, resisted both. In the Netherlands, the entire situation began to change very quickly and very early on, even before the start of the Second Vatican Council. In Ireland, in contrast, the *status quo ante* prevailed very much longer than in most other Western countries.

Other traditionally Catholic European countries appear to have suffered similar declines. According to recent data Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, weekly Mass attendance in France is now 8 per cent, in Germany 22 per cent, in Portugal 27 per cent and in Switzerland 17 per cent. The figure for France, moreover, includes a substantial number of French Catholics who attend the Old Mass. Mass attendance in Italy, which had been thought to be both relatively high and quite stable – remaining in the 45 to 50 per cent range over the past two and a half decades – on closer inspection appears to be very much lower – in the range of 15 per cent to 22

Table 1. Changes in Mass attendance over the full period that data are available

	Canada	Belgium	Eng/Wales	Netherlands	U.S.	Australia	Ireland	N. Zealand	Scotland
Starting	1946	1967	1944	1957	1939	1965	1974	1975	1984
Starting	83.0	42.9	55.0	80.0	50.0	55.5	91.0	31.7	52.2
Pre-1965^b	0.0	n.a.	-1.5	-15.6	1.0	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Post-1965	-54.0	-33.0	-30.3	-54.4	-27.0	-40.5	-41.0	-13.1	-22.2
Difference	-54.0	n.a.	-28.8	-38.8	-28.0	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.

Notes: ^a Mass attendance as a per cent of Catholic population.
^b Figures in last three rows are changes in percentage points.

per cent.⁸

The message in the data, therefore, is quite clear: There is absolutely nothing in these data to support the view that the post-Vatican II liturgical changes have had the salutary effects initially envisaged by their proponents and still claimed to have occurred by their apologists. Indeed, the timing of the declines in Mass attendance, which is more or less coincident with the post-Vatican II liturgical changes themselves, and the ubiquity of those declines strongly suggest that the liturgical changes, far from being the “positive influence ... on the life of the Church” described the General Synod of Bishops have been a negative influence.

II. Alternative explanations

Many Catholics – priests, religious and laity – would probably disagree with that conclusion. They would, I believe, point to the positive influence of the Mass in their own lives and the lives of family members, friends and parishioners. They would, I suspect, further, argue that the declines in Mass attendance were the result of factors other than the changed liturgy.

One set of factors can be ruled out at the start as the primary cause of those declines. The remarkably similar trends of Mass attendance in almost all of the countries examined mean that country-specific factors – the laity’s reaction to an alleged intransigent Church hierarchy in one country, clerical abuse crises in others, changing age distributions in others, and the like – can at most have played only a minor role. Idiosyncratic explanations of this sort cannot explain the ubiquity of the declines, their largely similar time paths, and in most instances, the timing of their onsets.

A second type of explanation, attributing the declines to a common factor operating in the world as a whole – call it “the temper of the times” – also appears quite problematic. If it were the *principal* cause of the decline in Catholic Mass attendance, there would be no reason in the first instance to expect it to operate differently in Catholicism than in other Christian religions. That, however, is not the case. In Figure 2, I plot data on Protestant church attendance in Canada and the United States. In both instances, Protestant attendance behaves quite differently to Catholic

attendance. In Canada we see a steep early decline followed by a subsequent increase; in the United States we see no trend either way for much of the period and then an increase.

A qualification is in order here. The data for Protestant church attendance shown here are aggregate figures and as such conceal what are in fact two quite different types of behavior. Attendance of “mainstream” Protestants – Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans in general and members of the United Church of Christ – is low and for many decades has fallen. Attendance of other Protestants – Missouri Synod Lutherans and Southern Baptists, Pentecostal and various sects in contrast is strong and increasing.

Iannacone (1994) reviews these disaggregated data and the related literature. As he points out, this dichotomy in church attendance between the two groups corresponds to a similar dichotomy in the “strictness” or “conservatism” of their religious practices. One can, I believe, without stretching the point argue that a shift in the degree of strictness of Catholicism, as actually practiced, took place post-Vatican II. If so, it raises the question of how much factors other than liturgical change affected Catholic Mass attendance.

Before I turn to this question, I would like to consider an alternative comparison group – Orthodox Catholics. This in many respects a better frame of reference than Protestants, since the Orthodox Churches are very close to the Catholic Roman Church theologically and their liturgies have not undergone the changes that the Roman Catholic liturgy has. Unfortunately, I could not obtain comprehensive time-series data for these Churches. I did, however, uncovered survey data on Mass attendance for the Russian Orthodox Church in America for 2005.⁹ These data are quite illuminating. The median weekly attendance figure derived from this survey is 72 per cent. The comparable Catholic attendance figure for the nine countries studied here, in contrast, is only 25 per cent.

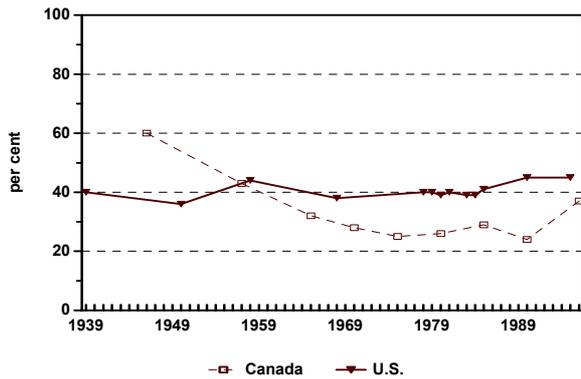
A third and perhaps more fruitful alternative explanation views the observed decline in Catholic attendance in terms of broader currents in Catholicism over the period in question and sees the liturgical

Table 2. Changes in Mass attendance in the two decades following Vatican II

Period	Canada	Belgium	Eng/Wales	Netherlands	U.S.	Average
1974 vs. 1964	-21.7	-12.6	-11.5	-31.8	-14.6	-18.7
1984 vs. 1974	-18.8	-7.3	-6.3	-13.5	-10.0	-11.3
1984 vs. 1964	-40.5	-19.9	-17.8	-45.3	-24.6	-29.9

Notes: All data are in the form of percentage points changes. Figures for Belgium are for 1976 vs. 1966 and 1984 vs. 1976; and for the Netherlands, 1975 vs. 1964 and 1985 vs. 1975.

Fig 2. Canada and U.S.
Protestant Church Attendance



changes themselves as playing only a bit part. Letter writers commenting on two earlier articles that I wrote on this subject (Lothian, 1999, 2000), cited altered and, in their opinion faulty, catechesis as the major cause of the attendance decline documented in those studies for England and Wales and the United States.¹⁰

One could extend that explanation to include other changes in intellectual outlook, that took place post-Vatican II in the Catholic Church. The problem here, most notably with regard to catechesis, but also as it pertains to the realm of ideas more generally, is that such factors are only likely to become important with a rather long time lag. Ideas have consequences, but over the course of decades, if not generations, rather than immediately or even over the space of several years. The fact of the matter, however, is that in each of the countries for which the data permit such temporal comparison, the decline in attendance begins soon after Vatican II.

We can see this clearly in Table 2 which shows the declines for the five countries for which full data are available over the course of the 20 years following Vatican II and, what perhaps may be more pertinent, over the first 10 years following the council. In each instance, the decline is substantial, both in absolute terms and in comparison to the full declines for those countries listed in the last row of Table 1. Over the first 10 years, the declines in attendance average close to 20 percentage points, a bit less than half of the average of the total decline figures in Table 1. Over the first 20 years, they average close to 30 percentage points or roughly three-fourths the average total decline.

III. Conclusions

Two main conclusions emerge from this analysis. The first is straight forward and incontrovertible: Catholics, far from “embracing” the liturgical changes have become increasingly indifferent to the Mass over the past forty years. There is a “crisis in the Church,” as Pope Benedict has stated, and, as he has argued, it does centre upon the liturgy. The second is that, while factors other than the liturgical changes may

very well have played a role in creating this sense of indifference, the liturgical changes themselves appear to have occupied centre stage.

Why was this so? Proponents of the new liturgy praise it in terms of what they consider to be its greater accessibility, the increased participation of the laity that they regard it as ushering in and its greater sense of community that they claim it has brought. Why does none of this seem to have mattered?

Let me turn to Pope Benedict for an answer. In his review of Alcuin Reid’s *The Organic Development of the Liturgy* he wrote:

If the Liturgy appears first of all as the workshop for our activity, then what is essential is being forgotten: God. For the Liturgy is not about us, but about God. Forgetting about God is the most imminent danger of our age. As against this, the Liturgy should be setting up a sign of God's presence. Yet what is happening, if the habit of forgetting about God makes itself at home in the Liturgy itself, and if in the Liturgy we are only thinking of ourselves? In any and every liturgical reform, and every liturgical celebration, the primacy of God should be kept in view first and foremost.

In the same piece, he went on to say:

[T]he fact that [the liturgy] was presented as a new structure, set up against what had been formed in the course of history and was now prohibited, and that the liturgy was made to appear in some ways no longer as a living process but as a product of specialized knowledge and juridical competence, has brought with it some extremely serious damages for us. ...

In this way, in fact, the impression has arisen that the liturgy is 'made,' that it is not something that exists before us, something 'given,' but that it depends on our decisions. It follows as a consequence that this decision-making capacity is not recognized only in specialists or in a central authority, but that, in the final analysis, each 'community' wants to give itself its own liturgy. But when the liturgy is something each one makes by himself, then it no longer gives us what is its true quality: encounter with the mystery which is not our product but our origin and the wellspring of our life....

There are three ideas here: that the liturgy is, as Benedict has written elsewhere, “opus Dei,” given by God and directed toward God, that at any point in time historically its particular form had always been the result of an evolutionary process of slow organic growth, and that the form of the liturgy and belief are

inexorably intertwined – *lex orandi, lex credendi*. Alter that form drastically and you will inevitably alter beliefs.

Reid in the concluding chapter of his study addresses these latter two points directly. He writes (p.285):

Our review of liturgical reform in history leads us to the conclusion that, while liturgical history bears witness to the development of many rites, and at times to their reform, it is clear that Catholic Liturgy is by no means a subjective expression of the faith that can be altered at will according to contemporary fashions or desires. Rather Catholic Liturgy is a singularly privileged and an objective constituent element of Christian Tradition. The liturgical rites and formulas themselves share in this objectivity. Their faithful transmission ensures continuity and orthodoxy of belief and practice. Their development – which at times is both necessary and desirable – can only be legitimate by ensuring substantial continuity with received Tradition. We may therefore agree with Johannes Wagner that : “History has proved a thousand times that there is nothing more likely to result in discontent, incertitude division and apostasy than interference with the Liturgy and consequently with religious sensibility.”

I submit that we have observed following the post-Vatican II liturgical changes and that this study has documented, is a similar phenomenon. In this connection, Mgr. Klaus Gamber, whom Pope Benedict has described as a “model” liturgist, wrote in his book *The Reform of the Roman Liturgy* (1993, p.102): “The real destruction of the traditional Mass, of the traditional Roman Rite, with a history of more than one thousand years, is the wholesale destruction of the faith on which is was based, a faith that had been the source of our piety and of our courage to bear witness to Christ and His Church, the inspiration of countless Catholics over many centuries.”

NOTES

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¹ The quote is from a letter written by Bugnini to Hubert Jedin reported in Bugnini (1990, p. 283, footnote 16).

² “A Pastoral Letter on Reverence for the Eucharist,” 1988.

³ There is no English translation available on the Vatican website. The unofficial “plurilingual”

version reads: “L’Assemblea Sinodale ha ricordato con gratitudine il benefico influsso che la riforma liturgica attuata a partire dal Concilio Vaticano II ha avuto per la vita della Chiesa.” See XI Coetus Generalis Ordinarius Synodi Episcoporum, 2005.

⁴ Related alternative indicators are the number of priests, the number of seminarians and the number ordained. In the United States, these data behave very similarly to the Mass attendance data analyzed here. See Jones, 2003.

⁵ An appendix describing the data and their sources along with a file containing the data themselves will be available on request.

⁶ See the discussion in Lothian (2000).

⁷ On the experiences of the two countries respectively see Twomey (2003) and van Rooden (1997) and Oostven (1998).

⁸ Source: Alessandro Castegnaro, Gianpiero Dalla Zuanna, *Studiare la pratica religiosa: differenze tra rilevazione diretta e dichiarazione degli intervistati sulla frequenza alla messa*, *Polis*, numero 1, aprile 2006, pp. 85-112.

⁹ In 2005, parish priests from every diocese of The Orthodox Church in America were invited to participate in an online survey on parish life and practices. The 260 priests responding represented 51 per cent of all assigned parish priests across North America. The attendance data are responses by parish priests to the question “In a given month, what percentage of your parishioners attend church on a typical Sunday.” The resultant figures are arrayed in the form of quintiles of a distribution of responses., from which I derived the figure cited above.

¹⁰ Clearly there is a relationship between the two. Causation, however, very likely runs in both directions: One learns about and appreciates the liturgy from catechetical instruction, but one is also more receptive to catechetical instruction if one is regularly confronted with inspiring liturgy.

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