

Careful analysis is needed to assess accurately the true fruits of the “new” Mass and the liturgical revolution that accompanied it

Novus ordo Missae: The record after thirty years¹

By Dr. James Lothian

■ Thirty years later the liturgical changes that were implemented in the aftermath of Vatican II have again become a subject of debate. Conventional opinion has it that all has gone well, that the renewal that was promised at the time has taken place and that the Church is all the better for it.

Not everyone agrees with this optimistic assessment, however, and some of the more forceful criticism of the current liturgy has come from high places within the Church. Day-to-day observation paints a similarly mixed picture. Active parishes with dedicated priests and laity certainly exist, but for every such story of success, one of failure can be related -- a church that has been closed, a seminary near emptiness, or close family members that no longer practice their faith.

What is needed is broad-based, formal statistical evidence on developments since Vatican II, particularly on developments directly related to the liturgy. My purpose in this article is to provide such evidence. To do so, I have collected data on Mass attendance of U.S. Catholics over the period 1939 to 1995. I compare these data with data on Mass attendance of English and Welsh Catholics over the shorter period 1959 to 1996 and with data on the church attendance of U.S. Protestants over the same period as for U.S. Catholics.

The picture that emerges is distressing. Mass attendance of U.S. Catholics fell precipitously in the decade following the liturgical changes and has continued to decline ever since. This decline moreover is not an isolated phenomenon, confined solely to the Church in America. In England and Wales, the time pattern of Mass attendance has been just as bad, perhaps even worse. Church attendance of Protestants, in contrast, has followed a much different path. For most of the period it was without any discernible trend, either up or down. In recent years it actually has risen. The notion that the Catholic fall off was simply one part of a larger societal trend, therefore, receives absolutely no support in these data.

Two views on the liturgy

At the time the New Rite of the Mass, the *Novus Ordo Missae*, was introduced, expectations ran high. The liturgy, it was said, was being renewed, stripped of later nonessential accretions and returned to its earlier and simpler form. The faithful, as a result, would find the Mass more understandable. This would heighten their appreciation for the Mass and increase their participation in it.

Has this actually been the case? Have the liturgical changes had such effects? In the conventional view, the answer is an unqualified “yes.” We encounter such sentiments repeatedly in official Church pronouncements, both from the Vatican and from the various national bishops’ conferences. We read them in the mainstream Catholic press. And we hear them from the pulpit.

A typical example was provided in a column on the liturgy written by the editor of my diocesan newspaper several years ago. The motivation for this column was an article from the Catholic News Service reporting observations that Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger had made in an autobiographical volume that had just been released in Italy but had not yet been translated into English. Cardinal Ratzinger had been cited in the CNS article as calling the current situation one

¹ *This reprint corrects a labeling error in Figure 3 in the original version of the article. In addition it uses a symmetric (yearly) temporal scale in all three charts rather than the non-symmetric (periodic) scale used in the original. Neither of these changes alters any substantive conclusion.*

of “ecclesial crisis” and as attributing this in turn to what he claimed was a “collapse of the liturgy.”

The editor disagreed quite vehemently with Cardinal Ratzinger’s assessment, so much so that he did not even wait until he had read the book before he panned it. “The cardinal frets too much,” he opined. “At least here in America, Catholics have embraced the so-called new liturgy. Contrary to what the cardinal is saying, there is a much better understanding that the Mass is the central act of the Church. There is an understanding that the Mass is not just another devotion. It is the place where we meet Jesus in sacramental union. We have a better understanding because of changes in the liturgy.”

This difference in perspectives clearly is more than simply one of nuances. If Catholics have “embraced” the new liturgy, there cannot have been a liturgical “collapse” or a “crisis.” If there has been such a collapse, there cannot have been anything other than the most transient of embraces. The point is that this difference is so profound that it ought to be possible to confront these two competing descriptions with actual data on Catholics’ behavior so that one of them can be ruled out.

The data examined

Shown in Figure 1 are the data for the U.S. Catholics for the period 1939 to 1995 and for English and Welsh Catholics for the period 1959 to 1996. The U.S. data are survey data compiled by Gallup (1985, 1986). The English and Welsh data are from parish records as reported in Currie, et al.(1977) and Joyce (1999). Let me focus on the United States first.

After temporarily rising to nearly 75% in the immediate aftermath of World War II, U.S. Mass attendance stood at about 65%, and hence roughly its 1939 level, in the period immediately surrounding Vatican II. From there on, it fell continuously, at a relatively fast pace initially, then much more slowly, and now more recently faster again. In 1995, according to these data, it stood at 46%, which as we will see below is about the same level as Protestant Church attendance in the United States in that year.

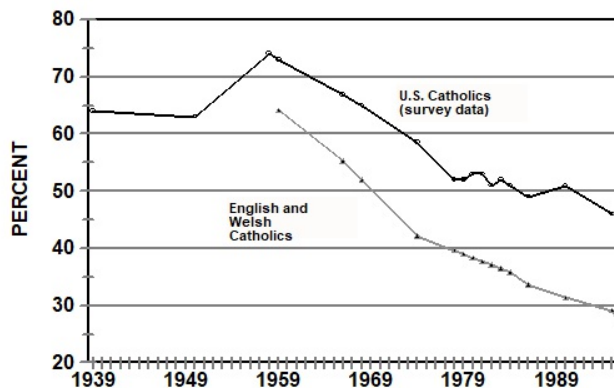
There are, however, several questions that arise in connection with this analysis. One is the difficulty of interpretation that surfaces in any statistical exercise such as this. Chance rather than human action may be responsible for the movements that we observe, but we may have too few observations to tell. A second question is whether the decline in Mass attendance in the United States that we observe in these data is representative of Catholic behavior more generally. A third issue is data reliability, whether the data are measured reasonably accurately or are subject to substantial bias of one sort or another. Let me consider these three issues in order.

The first is a garden-variety statistical problem that in principle can be dealt with rather easily. To do so, I first fit a trend line to the data mathematically. The result was an estimate of the average annual rate of change of the series. I then went on to apply standard statistical tests to see if this estimate could have been due purely to chance. The trend that I estimated showed an average annual decline in U.S. Mass of .4 percentage points per year. The related test indicated that this was most unlikely to be a spurious finding: the probability of getting a negative estimate of this magnitude when the true trend rate of change was zero turned out to be only two hundredths of one per cent. The chances of obtaining this estimate when the true trend was positive, as the optimistic view suggests it ought to be, would be even smaller.

The data on Mass attendance in England and Wales which also are plotted in Figure 1 are used to address the question of data representativeness. With two small exceptions, this series follows a similar path to that of the U.S. series. Again there is a substantial initial decline -- roughly 15 percentage points -- in the decade or so surrounding Vatican II, followed by a slower paced, but nevertheless continual decline thereafter. Over the period as a whole, Mass attendance in England and Wales fell by almost 29 percentage points, about the same as in the United States. The differences between the two series are the consistently lower reported level of Mass attendance in England and Wales than in the United States, and the somewhat more rapid rate of decline in England and Wales than in the United States in the latter half of the period.

Fitting a trend line to the English and Welsh data, I obtained an estimate of the annual rate of change of -.8 percentage points per year. As in the case of the U.S. the probability of obtaining this estimate when the true trend rate of

Figure 1. Mass attendance in the U.S. and England and Wales



change was zero turned out to be exceedingly low — less than two tenths of one per cent.

Now let me turn to the issue of measurement error. As already mentioned, the U.S. data are survey data. Their accuracy, therefore, in part depends upon the truthfulness of survey responses. A problem of some potential importance here is bias in the U.S. survey caused by some Catholics who did not attend Mass in the weeks in question claiming that they did. Using headcount data like those for England and Wales is one way to solve this problem, but such data are not available for the United States in a continuous form. Two independent scholars, Professors Mark Chaves and James Cavendish (1994), however, have compiled such data for the year 1994 alone. The estimate that they come up with for that year is 25 per cent attendance versus the 46 per cent figure given in the 1995 Gallup survey.

One obviously cannot just lump this figure together with the earlier Gallup data since the latter almost certainly contain a systematic bias also. It is, however, possible to use the Chaves and Cavendish estimate together with the Gallup figure for 1994 to adjust the earlier Gallup data for this apparent bias. I did this by assuming that the ratio of those who did not attend Mass according to Chaves and Cavendish but claimed that they did to the total number of non attendees was the same in the earlier years as in the mid-1990s. I estimated this ratio using the Chaves and Cavendish figure for 1994 in combination with the Gallup figure for 1995. I then applied this estimate to the earlier Gallup data to arrive at the adjusted series plotted in Figure 2.

Three features of this new series stand out. The first is its much lower level throughout the period. The second is the near coincidence between this series and the series for England and Wales. The third is the greater total decline in U.S. Mass attendance implied by this series as opposed to the survey-based series.

The data, therefore, confirm what casual impressions for some time have suggested. Mass attendance is way down, even in America and Britain where the Church had been strong. To make matters worse it continues to fall further. Liturgical change and liturgical renewal apparently have not gone hand in hand.

Correlation versus causation

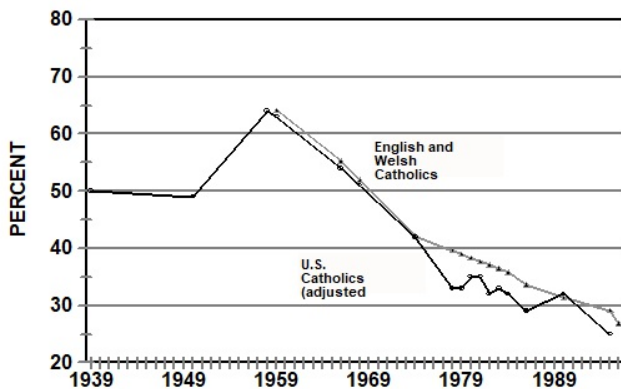
Such a conclusion, it could be argued, confuses correlation and temporal ordering with causation. The observed trends may very well be real but have little to do with the post-conciliar liturgical changes *per se*. They could instead be a reflection of other factors. The declines in Mass attendance could conceivably be just one further consequence of the broader erosion of values that began in the late 1960s, and that has continued thereafter.

The data on church attendance of U.S. Protestants, which are plotted in Figure 3 together with the data for Catholics that we have just reviewed, provide evidence on this question. The Protestant series is, so to speak, the “control group.” The contrast between its behavior and those of the two Catholic series is stark indeed. In the Protestant data, we see no downward trend at all. Church attendance is lower than that for Catholics during most of the period but is certainly not declining. In fact it may even have begun to trend up. If the temper of the times had been the cause of the decline in Catholic Mass attendance however there is no reason that similar forces should not have operated within Protestantism too. Church attendance should have declined there also.

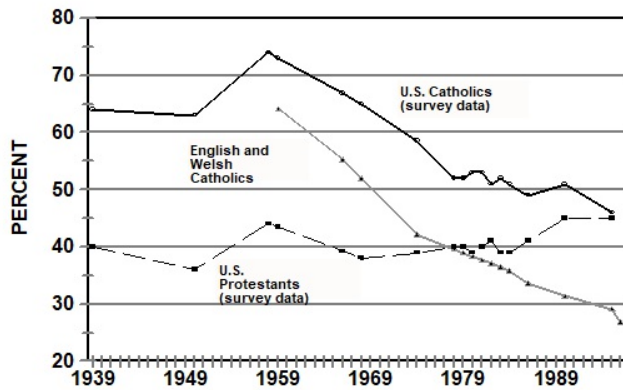
Statistical tests applied to the three series reinforce these conclusions. They showed a less than one in ten thousandth of a per cent chance of the estimated trend rates of change for the two Catholic series and for the Protestant series being equal. The bottom line then is that the downward trends in the two Catholic series and the lack of a similar trend in the Protestant series appear to be behavioral phenomena, and not fluke occurrences.

This is a powerful finding, and quite at odds with the conventional view. If the post-conciliar changes had been the overwhelming success they very often are described as being, we would expect to see increases in Mass attendance. We

Figure 2. Mass attendance adjusted U.S. data



**Figure 3. Church attendance
Catholics vs. Protestants**



would certainly not expect to see the substantial declines that have taken place in both the United States and England and Wales over the past 30 years. That Protestant church attendance during this period behaved so differently makes the data even more difficult to reconcile with the conventional view. Had Protestant church attendance declined too, it might have been possible to argue that the situation in Catholicism would have been even worse if the liturgical changes not been implemented. Given the near constancy and then rise in Protestant attendance, however, that argument becomes quite tenuous, if not out and out untenable.

What then went wrong? The problem, I believe, resides in the liturgy itself -- both the way in which it was altered and what it was changed into.

For almost fourteen hundred years the Roman Rite remained largely the same. The few changes that did occur were all relatively small in nature and quite spread out over time. Historians of the liturgy point to roots of the Roman Rite that extend back to the fourth century. Three centuries later, according to the great English liturgist Adrian Fortescue it was almost fully developed. "[A] modern Latin Catholic who could be carried back to Rome in the early seventh century would -- while missing some features to which he is accustomed -- find himself on the whole quite home with the service he saw there," Fortescue wrote (1913).

One of the important hallmarks of human institutions that stand the test of time is that they are effective. They do what they are supposed to do better than the alternatives. As a result, they survive, while their competitors go by the boards. This, I would argue, is the reason why the Roman Rite varied so little from one century to the next.

The other general feature of such institutions is that they develop slowly, evolving gradually and seemingly by trial and error rather than being implemented all at once according some grand design drawn up on high. They are, to use the phrase made popular in my own field of economics by the Nobelist Friedrich von Hayek, the "result of human action not of human design." In this connection, J.A. Jungman referred to the Roman Rite as a "liturgy which is the fruit of development." (Cited in Ratzinger, 1993)

At heart, the liturgy is our encounter with God. It is the ultimate of human institutions. It is the one institution that aims at uniting created with Creator, *imago Dei* with *Deus*. A liturgy that does this well by the very fact that human nature does not change will not change in any substantial degree either.

The argument that it had to be radically altered thirty years ago and ever after tinkered with to be relevant to and understood by "modern man" is fundamentally misguided. As Cardinal Ratzinger has argued, it involves "a thoroughgoing misunderstanding of the essence of the liturgy and of liturgical celebration. For in the liturgy one doesn't grasp what's going on in a simple rational way, as I understand a lecture, for example, but in a manifold way, with all the senses, and by being drawn into a celebration that isn't invented by some commission but, that, as it were, comes to me from the depths of the millennia and, ultimately, of eternity."(Ratzinger, 1996, p.175).

Post-Vatican II, it was indeed a commission that ruled. We see the end results of this policy in the data that I have just presented. Msgr. Klaus Gamber, I believe, summarized the situation quite well when he wrote: "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" (Gamber, 1993, p. 102).

What is to be done? Unfortunately, no simple answer to the question presents itself. It is comparatively easy to tear down the wall of a house, as anyone who has ever renovated a home can attest but much harder to put things back in order. The law of prayer and the law of belief are closely intertwined, and beliefs once eroded are not easily reestablished. Two necessary conditions for the process to start, however, are for the return of the sacred to the Mass, and the reestablishment of its links to the liturgy of the ages. This has to be done in a credible way. It has to be more than piecemeal in implementation and it cannot be seen as just one more bit of liturgical engineering.

As a practical matter, therefore, the old Mass needs to be made much more widely available again. The Pope a year and a half ago urged that this be done. Addressing the pilgrims who came to Rome to celebrate the tenth anniversaries of the issuance of the *motu proprio Ecclesia Dei* and of the founding of the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter he stated: "I invite the Bishops also, fraternally, to understand and to have a renewed pastoral attention for the faithful

attached to the Old Rite and, on the threshold of the Third Millennium, to help all Catholics to live the celebration of the Holy Mysteries with a devotion which may be true nourishment for their spiritual life and which may be a source of peace.”

It is curious and indeed quite scandalous that so many bishops throughout the world continue to turn a deaf ear to this plea. ■

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