

The Holy Father's *Motu Proprio* On the "Old" Mass:

What Does It Mean for Us?

by Fr. Robert Johansen

recover and restore the fullness of our authentic Catholic tradition in our worship, because only in doing so can we remain fully grounded in the Faith as it has come down to us from the Apostles.

What should I do about this?

Well, firstly, if you're not familiar with the Extraordinary form of the Mass, or with our Latin tradition, take a little time to start getting familiar with them. Without doubt, many articles, workshops, and conferences about these things will be forthcoming. Take advantage of the opportunity to read the articles and attend some of the workshops. The more you understand our Catholic Faith the more fully you can live it!

Second, be patient! It will take some time to work out how this will be implemented and lived out in every diocese and parish. Make allowances for an awkward "adjustment" period, and even a little personal discomfort – the Church is asking us to grow, and deepen our understanding of how we are to live our faith as Catholics. We can't grow if we insist in remaining in our own "comfort zone".

Finally, say a prayer of thanksgiving for the wisdom and prudence of our holy father in giving this great gift to the Church. He is allowing the Church to re-appropriate the Living Tradition as it has come down to us from the Apostles and Fathers. This is a great gift!

Some On-Line Resources

Motu Proprio "*Summorum Pontificum*" – English Translation:
<http://www.zenit.org/rssenglish-20071>

Explanatory Letter of the Holy Father on the *Motu Proprio*:
<http://www.zenit.org/article-20070?l=english>

Amy Welborn's *Motu Proprio* Tip Sheet (in progress):
<http://amywelborn.typepad.com/motuproprio/>

Analysis in **The Catholic Herald** (England) by Dr. Alcuin Reid:
http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/features_opinion/feature%203.html

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On July 7, Pope Benedict XVI promulgated an Apostolic Letter *Motu Proprio*, titled "*Summorum Pontificum*", in which he greatly broadened the circumstances under which the "Old" Mass, that is, the "pre-Vatican II" Mass, could be celebrated. A *Motu Proprio* is a letter issued by the Holy Father "on his own initiative" for the good of the whole Church, and has the force of both legislation and teaching. This document promises to be of great importance to the lives of **all** Catholics, not only for its provisions for the celebration of the Classical Roman Rite, but for the understanding of the Church's liturgy that it advances. This pamphlet will discuss some of the main points of the document and clear up some possible misconceptions.

What does the *Motu Proprio* do?

In this document, Pope Benedict grants any priest who can properly celebrate Mass according to the "old" usage the right to do so, without the need to seek permission from his bishop. Furthermore, it allows the **faithful** who desire the Mass according to the Classical Rite to request it from their pastors, who are now expected to "willingly grant" such requests. If such a request is not granted, the people have the right to take the matter to their bishop, who, the *Motu Proprio* states, is "strongly requested" to grant their petition. Should both the pastor and bishop not grant the request, the matter is to be referred to the Commission *Ecclesia Dei* of the Holy See. In short, the *Motu Proprio* recognizes the right of the faithful to the traditional Latin Mass, and makes it incumbent on pastors and bishops to provide it.

Does this *Motu Proprio* "bring back" the Latin Mass?

In one sense, **no**, because the "Latin Mass" has never been suppressed or "gotten rid" of by the Church. Firstly, Pope Benedict makes clear in the *Motu Proprio* that the pre-conciliar form of the Mass was never "abrogated" or suppressed. Also, the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, while it calls for a

reform of the liturgy and for some use of the vernacular, also quite clearly calls for retaining the use of Latin in the liturgy:

36. 1. Particular law remaining in force, the use of the Latin language is to be preserved in the Latin rites.

54. ...Nevertheless steps should be taken so that the faithful may also be able to say or to sing together in Latin those parts of the Ordinary of the Mass which pertain to them.

The constitution also recognizes the pride of place of traditional aspects of the liturgy such as Gregorian Chant.

What the *Motu Proprio* does is establish that the “old” Mass is one form of celebration of the Roman Rite, and the “new” Mass, while different, is but another form of that one Roman Rite. Indeed, from now on the two forms are to be known as the “ordinary” (new) and “extraordinary” (old) form.

Does this mean that all of our Masses will be in Latin?

No. Pope Benedict is not calling for a wholesale overturning of the *status quo*. The Church has learned the lessons from the “overnight” way in which the changes of the 1970 Missal were implemented, which created great pain and uncertainty among the faithful. What the holy father wants is the opportunity for the living Tradition of our liturgy to once again become part of the “normal” life of the Church.

What if I don’t want to go to a Latin Mass?

Well, firstly, I would wonder why a Catholic would be so uninterested in our Tradition as to adopt such an attitude. Generations of Catholics prayed the Mass, received Our Lord in Holy Communion, lived their faith, were given strength and comfort, and grew in holiness with the “old” Latin Mass. Surely, it seems to me, at the very least out of respect for them we should make an effort to value, or even treasure, that which gave them so much. As the holy father wrote in his letter explaining the *Motu Proprio* : “...what earlier generations held as sacred, remains sacred and great for us too...”.

However, that being said, if you really don’t want to go to a Latin Mass, you don’t have to. No one will be forced to participate in one.

Why is the holy father doing this now?

There are at least two reasons for this *Motu Proprio*:

Firstly, following the introduction of the “New” Mass in 1970, many Catholics - priests and laypeople - continued to desire the Mass according to the Extraordinary Form. However, in the early years following the change, in most places the Extraordinary Form was completely abandoned, and indeed many people were told or led to believe that the “old” Mass was forbidden or suppressed. This was **not**, in fact, the case. Because of the continued desire of many Catholics for the Mass in its Classical form, in 1984 Pope John Paul II extended an “indult” or special permission, allowing priests to celebrate the Mass of the Classical Roman Rite with their bishops’ permission. The document extending the indult urged bishops to grant this permission “generously”. Unfortunately, a substantial number of bishops did not abide by the spirit of the indult, and either refused to grant the permission altogether, or laid many conditions and burdens on those requesting the Classical Rite, in practice all-but denying it.

The second reason for this document is the holy father’s concern for the overall liturgical life of the Church. In the decades following the Council and the implementation of the “new” Mass, then-Cardinal Ratzinger and many other theologians and scholars realized that intent and goals of the council fathers had not been completely fulfilled, and in some cases, not fulfilled at all. For example, the provisions regarding the retention of Latin were largely ignored. Furthermore, it became apparent, as Pope Benedict wrote in his explanatory letter, “that in many places celebrations [of the liturgy] were not faithful to the prescriptions of the new Missal, but [the “new” Mass] actually was understood as authorizing or even requiring creativity, which frequently led to deformations of the liturgy.” He further explained that “there is no contradiction between the two editions of the Roman Missal. In the history of the liturgy there is growth and progress, but no rupture.” The holy father, as he indicated also in his encyclical of last year *Sacramentum Caritatis* (“The Sacrament of Charity”), desires that we