

On March 25, 2020, in the midst of the largest global shutdown of the Catholic Church in history in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Vatican released two decrees of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (both dated Feb. 22) relating to the Traditional Latin Mass. Some in the Traditionalist world have seen these documents as either benign or positive developments. In this article, I will explain why I believe these decrees pose a serious threat to the integrity of the Traditional Latin Mass. Every priest committed to the exclusive use of the Traditional Latin Mass should refuse to opt into these changes and should oppose similar ones until the crisis in the Church comes to an end and proper authority is restored.

What Do the Decrees Say?

The first decree, [*Cum Sanctissima*](#), permits priests offering Mass according to the 1962 Roman Missal the option of substituting for certain feasts on the calendar various “saints” who were purportedly “canonized” in the post-Conciliar era. These Masses can be offered on the dates on which they appear on the New Mass calendar or may be offered as votive Masses on days that permit votive Masses. Since the Traditional Mass rubrics would not permit a priest to change the Propers of the Mass on any day ranking as a First, Second, or Third-Class Feast, this change would have only permitted this substitution of New Mass “saints” on feasts of the Fourth Class or ferias that are not privileged (such as those in Lent).^[1]

To increase its potential impact, *Cum Sanctissima* makes a sweeping rubrical change. It permits these optional new “saint” Masses to be used on some, but not all, Feasts of the Third Class. The decree creates a list of 70 saints of the Third Class that cannot be trumped by one of the long line of post-Conciliar “canonized saints.” Those saints that don’t make this cut to be super Third Class (such as St. Louis of France, St. Stephen of Hungary, and St. Edward the Confessor of England) can be passed over in favor of a Mass for the likes of Pope Paul VI. The decree requires one of the existing sets of Propers contained in the 1962 Missal (or a national supplement in use at that time for local or national feasts), using as a last resort the appropriate common.

In a separate decree, [*Quo Magis*](#), the CDF permits a priest offering the Traditional Mass to substitute one of seven additional prefaces for the one prescribed in the 1962 Missal. Four of these prefaces—namely, the Prefaces of the Angels, of St. John the Baptist, of Martyrs, and the Preface for Weddings—are lifted from the *Novus Ordo* Missal with an ending that corresponds to the Traditional Prefaces tacked on to the conclusion. The drafters of the *Novus Ordo* claimed these four prefaces were merely the restoration of ancient lost prefaces. Yet that claim, like so many other claims about the New Rite, is not quite true. The

texts in the New Mass are loosely based on ancient prefaces of the same name, but their content was rewritten to comport better with the new spirit of the New Mass. In transposing them into the Traditional Mass (other than the endings), those revisions remain. As the [press release](#) of the International Federation *Una Voce* (discussed below) notes, the claim that these prefaces were adapted from ancient sources for the New Mass “implies that these ancient Prefaces have been adapted for use in the Ordinary Form, a process which makes them conform less, rather than more, with the spirit of the Extraordinary Form. If the value of these Prefaces lies in their antiquity, it is not clear what is to be gained by their being used in the Extraordinary Form in a redaction designed to make them conform to the themes and preferences of the Ordinary Form.”

It has also been claimed that the other three prefaces (All Saints and Holy Patrons, the Blessed Sacrament, and the Dedication of a Church) are historical, pre-Vatican II texts. It is true that these texts had been permitted prior to 1962 in some local dioceses, but they were not universally permitted. They do not derive from the Roman Rite but rather from the Neo-Gallican Rite and are therefore not organic to the Roman Rite. As with *Cum Sanctissima*, no priest is obligated by law to use any of these optional prefaces but may choose to do so.

Initial Reactions

Generally, reactions among Traditionalist groups and individuals has ranged from characterizing the changes as insignificant to embracing them as improvements. Fr. Albert Marcello wrote for *Rorate Caeli* a detailed [explanation](#) of the decrees and commented favorably on them. He, like many others, defends them as completing the work Pope Benedict XVI desired when he issued *Summorum Pontificum* (July 7, 2007). Father quotes from the note accompanying the *Motu Proprio* Benedict's desire that “the two Forms of the usage of the Roman Rite can be mutually enriching: new Saints and some of the new Prefaces can and should be inserted in the old Missal.” He goes on to characterize these decrees as adopting a “cautious (some might say conservative) approach.”

Dr. Peter Kwasniewski, the eminent scholar and contributor to *Catholic Family News*, also offers an initial [reaction](#) that is detailed and thoughtful. His main point is that we have no real reason for alarm. He counsels, “No one needs to panic that this is a ‘Trojan Horse’ that threatens to destroy the integrity of the *Vetus Ordo*.” Although he concedes we do not strictly speaking need more prefaces, “the Roman rite has had varying numbers of prefaces over the centuries, and seven more beautiful prefaces is not going to shatter the ‘*Romanitas*’ of the Roman rite.” Beyond counseling that these changes are not harmful, he goes on to argue that in a certain respect they are a positive development because they restore the Traditional Rite to the status of a living liturgy that can grow organically. He argues: “We

are looking at a living liturgy, not something that exists only in books printed in a certain arbitrary year, reflecting the mentality of the liturgical reformers of that period. ... [M]inor additions have always been a part of the history of liturgical rites, and always will be. Additions are far different from ideologically-motivated expurgations, abbreviations, or rewritings."

Finally, we will look at the official reaction of the International Federation *Una Voce* (FIUV). By way of background, the FIUV was founded in 1964 to work for the preservation of the Traditional Mass. Reading the signs of the times, the organization, which although founded in France launched affiliates across many countries, has always been a staunch defender of the 1962 typical edition. Even as early as the 1965 transitional Missal, it saw the need to hold the 1962 line as a way to protect the integrity of the Mass until saner times prevailed. The FIUV has always resisted any variation from the 1962 edition and as a result has often drawn the ire of groups that want to return to the pre-1962 texts, such as the pre-Pius XII Holy Week.

In light of its history, I found the FIUV's press release surprising. Although it certainly notes some reasons for caution and contains some criticism (as noted above), it is generally quite positive. The FIUV proclaims: "The Federation welcomes in particular the possibility of making a liturgical commemoration of saints canonised since 1962, without excessive disruption to the Sanctoral Calendar as it has come down to us." The FIUV thus sees the potential insertion of modern "canonized" saints as something to welcome.

Serious Problems Posed by the Decrees

Notwithstanding the valid points made by the foregoing commentators, I believe the decrees are harmful, *particularly at this moment in history*, for the Mass of All Ages and we would be better off without them. My objection is twofold: (1) these changes contribute to the perpetration of several errors concerning the Mass and the post-Conciliar era; and (2) a time of grave crisis is the worst of all times to make any changes whatsoever, even ones which in normal circumstances might be reasonable.

Perpetration of Errors

The first problem posed by these changes is that they reinforce the original flaw in Benedict XVI's plan to permit more priests to offer the Traditional Mass. In the [Letter to Bishops](#) that Benedict issued to explain *Summorum Pontificum*, he makes the claim that the New Mass and the Traditional Mass are "two forms" of the same Roman Rite (in *Summorum* itself, he similarly asserts that "they are two usages of the one Roman rite"). This claim is not sustainable. A liturgical rite is a coherent arraignment of ceremonies (both Ordinary and

Propers) that are consistent across of forms of that rite. Different forms or usages of a rite include minor variations to the Propers (to honor particular saints or feasts that are important to those who use such form) and minor variations to the Ordinary. For example, the Sarum Usage was used throughout England before the Reformation. There were minor variations of the prayers at the foot of the altar (in some places, all of Psalm 42 was recited before the priest reached the altar). The chalice was prepared between the Epistle and Gospel. Importantly, from the Preface through the Canon, the Sarum Usage and the Roman Rite were word-for-word identical and the gestures were virtually identical (Sarum had some variation in the gestures to adore the consecrated species).

Comparing the New Mass and the Traditional Rite, however, the variations are too extensive to consider them two forms of the same rite. Their cycle of Propers is radically different (as the changes in *Cum Sanctissima* demonstrate). The offertory prayers bear no resemblance to each other. Prayers are not merely moved to a different time; they are simply different prayers. Finally, the heart of the rite, the Canon, is radically different. The Roman Canon and the most typically used "Eucharistic Prayer II" are not in any way the same prayer. If one were to take an objective observer from another century and show him the Sarum Usage and the Traditional Roman Rite and then the New Mass, I do not think he would say they are all three usages of the same rite. It would be very obvious which one is not like the others.

More importantly, the desire of Benedict XVI that these "two forms" can and should enrich each other is false. There is nothing about the New Mass that is an enrichment of the Old Mass. Every comparison between the two shows that the New Mass is a deprivation of things in the Old, not an enrichment. The two most prevalent arguments employed for enrichment are that the New Mass increases Scripture in the Mass through a second reading and the New Mass enriches by adding options. The first claim is false. In examining the entire Missal, quotations from Scripture are reduced in the New Mass because texts (especially the Psalms) are eliminated throughout the entire text. The Traditional Mass does make use of more than one reading from Scripture on several occasions (such as Ember Days), but the extension of an extra reading in the first part of the Mass does not compensate for all of the deletions.

As for the "enrichment through options" claim, adding "options" does not enrich something if those options are impoverished and flawed. The multiplicity of "Eucharistic Prayers" is a prime example. Every single additional one that has been added, including and since the first four in the original New Missal, lack the theological and aesthetic depth of the Roman Canon. If I go to a restaurant and all their menu options lack any nutritional value, the increase in such poor choices improves nothing.

Thus, these two decrees further reinforce the erroneous claims of Benedict XVI that the two Masses are not different rites and that the flawed new rite can somehow enrich the old.

The second error supported by *Cum Sanctissima* is that the mass-produced saint factory created and operated by all the post-Conciliar popes is legitimate and worthy of respect. Although space does not permit a thorough explanation of this issue, I can simply state that the post-Conciliar popes have so radically altered the process of declaring saints to have practiced heroic virtue that these events bear no resemblance to the actual (pre-1983) process of canonization. The radical alteration of the process that substitutes the goals of speed and quantity for the virtues of caution and thoroughness is so unreliable that we must hold as doubtful any results of this process (see [here](#) for a fuller treatment). This is not to say that amid the title wave of “saints” manufactured by the Conciliar Church there are not a few that would have legitimately survived the traditional process. However, a few good anomalies do not salvage a system so riddled with careless disregard for a legitimate process that garners respect.

The Trojan Horse of “Options”

A final Trojan horse that seems hidden in the admittedly modest changes promulgated by the CDF lies in the legitimization of the New Mass concept of “choices for the celebrant.” One of the defining features of a rite (or even a usage of a rite, for that matter) is that every celebration of that rite on a particular occasion is the same no matter the identity of the priest offering the Mass. The New Mass has famously promoted the reality that the prayers heard and gestures witnessed will vary significantly from parish to parish—and even from priest to priest at the same parish—depending on which options the particular priest chooses. The only significant choice in the Traditional Roman Rite is the choice on permitted days to offer a votive Mass. I have already noted how the CDF has expanded this choice by changing the rules for some Third-Class Feasts. Yet, once that single choice was made, there were no more options for the priest to ponder. Every Votive Mass in Time of Epidemics, to cite a timely example, would be the same as any other such Votive Mass. Priests do not get to opt out of the *Confiteor* (by choosing a different “Penitential Rite”) or decide which form of the consecration they want to use (as with the “Eucharistic Prayers”).

The principle of multiplying options springs from the false principle that the Mass does not speak appropriately to different types of people. The priest needs to adapt the Mass by making choices appropriate to the age, gender, nationality, and sensibilities of whomever is “participating” in that Mass. This principle was already encroaching slightly in the 1962 Missal with the regional permission of a few of these prefaces. The two new CDF decrees make that encroachment universal and deeper. Now, a priest has to decide if a “Mass in

honor of St. Paul VI" will be more significant for the group of people he expects to be at Mass that day than the Third-Class (lower tier) saint on the calendar. The unity of the Roman Rite underscored the universal attribute of salvation. It spoke equally to all, notwithstanding differences.

The promotion of the notion that all options enhance the Mass also poses another danger. The insidious use of options has been used throughout the liturgical revolution as cover for mandatory changes. We must learn from the prior tactics of the revolutionaries. Time and time again, they have introduced novelties as "options" that were quickly transformed into mandatory dictates which eliminated the traditional option, leaving only the revolutionary one. From turning the priest away from God and toward the people, to Communion in the hand, to standing for Communion, etc., changes have been rolled out as "options" that individual bishops and episcopal conferences mandate as obligatory so as not to cause "dissension" in their respective dioceses or countries.^[2] Thus, we should not simply shrug off these changes by consoling ourselves that they are totally optional and no priest will ever have to use them. I do not think it far-fetched to be concerned that bishops will be demanding that if you want to use that Old Mass you better substitute a "Mass of St. John Paul II" as proof of your "full communion" with Rome. Our best option is to oppose the "options" trap.

Not the Time to Tinker

Although I do not share Dr. Kwasniewski's more benign assessment of the new CDF decrees, he is absolutely correct in his historical assertion about the Traditional Roman Rite. As to its details, it has always been organic in its development. Even following the Bull [*Quo Primum*](#) canonizing its status, the Old Rite continued to accrete minor additions and variations as the Church progressed through time. He is correct that "minor additions have always been a part of the history of liturgical rites, and always will be." As such, I share his desire that the Traditional Rite can return to that normal pattern of organic development. The calendar will at some point (once the canonization mess unleashed in the past few decades is abandoned) need to be adjusted to accommodate legitimately canonized saints.^[3] The point on which I take a slightly different view than Dr. Kwasniewski, however, is that now is not the time to restart that process. It is not the time to tinker with details when one is in a dire crisis. When the very essence of the Roman Rite is under attack by what Archbishop Lefebvre called in his famous sermon in Lille a "bastard" rite, it is not the time for what in other times might be legitimate development.

The 1962 Missal, being the last officially recognized version of the Roman Rite before all hell broke loose liturgically, must in such unprecedented times of liturgical shipwreck^[4] be

our steady lifeboat. It is our sure link to the certainty of organic liturgical history. We need to cling to that life raft until a future pope rescues us from this liturgical shipwreck. It is not the time for adding some flourishes to the stern to make it look a bit nicer.

The need to leave the 1962 Missal alone out of prudential caution until the crisis passes is further evidenced by the fact that the Vatican has shown itself utterly untrustworthy in matters liturgical for the past five decades. The Vatican bureaucracy and liturgical “experts” sprung the leak in the first place. We cannot trust their tinkering until they at least admit they sunk the ship. At their very best under Benedict XVI, the Vatican authorities merely admitted the Traditional Mass should be tolerated. They, including Benedict, cling to the delusion that even if the Old Mass can be kept around, the New Mass is good and legitimate and not an albatross to be cast into the sea. Given that even those who tolerate (or even personally prefer) the Old Mass refuse to admit the reality of the failure of the New Mass, we cannot and should not trust them to guide the organic development of the Roman Rite, which in saner times would be laudable. The time will come to reignite healthy, cautious, and prudent organic development. This pontificate is certainly not that time.

Conclusion

Even though the principle of introducing a few more saints to the calendar or even the organic development of a theologically sound and aesthetically enriching preface or two are not in and of themselves objectionable, taken as a whole at this moment of history the two recent decrees of the Vatican are not anything to celebrate. Will they bring about the destruction of the Traditional Mass forever? Such a scenario is highly unlikely, yet the Traditional Rite has been locked for decades in a conflict to the death with the “banal on-the-spot product” of the New Mass, as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger once described it.

Given the radically different theology and spirituality of the New and Old Mass, they cannot survive side by side forever. The fantasy that “they are two usages of the one Roman rite” (Benedict XVI, *Summorum Pontificum*) will eventually be exploded. One must be abandoned under their inherent contradiction of each other. In this decades-long struggle, we should recognize this move for what it is—not a knock-out punch, but rather another chip to make inroads for the errors that underlie the specific changes at this moment in history. We must resist these changes so that the illegitimate saint factory and the error that options for the priest are better than uniformity do not become accepted as legitimate. In any event, we cannot trust anyone in the Vatican bureaucracy—and particularly anyone that has kept their head under the Dictator Pope—to touch in any way the one life raft we have back to Tradition, the 1962 Missal.

[1] For a good summary of the rank of feasts, see [this page](#) on website of the Latin Mass Society of England and Wales.

[2] For recent proof that this tactic is alive and well, see [this letter](#) of Bishop Peter Christensen of Boise, Idaho in which he acknowledges that kneeling to receive Holy Communion is a legitimate option but then makes it clear to his priests that they will be in trouble if they facilitate or encourage anyone to take advantage of this option.

[3] For example, St. Maria Goretti was canonized in 1950 according to the traditional process (prior to the radical changes introduced by Pope John Paul II via the 1983 Code of Canon Law). However, in 1962, when Pope John XXIII issued a revised edition of the Tradition Roman Missal, her feast was only recognized as a local one for certain parts of Italy. In normal times, she might well have been a saint so significant for our era that a pope would extend the local observance to the universal calendar, and this could certainly be seen as a laudable addition to the Sanctoral Cycle.

[4] I here allude to a phrase popularized by Michael Davies to describe modern liturgy. See his short booklet, *Liturgical Shipwreck: 25 Years of the New Mass* (TAN Books, 2009).