Spoiler Alert: This article contains spoilers for *Mass of the Ages* Episode 3.

Roman Catholics, with our system of beliefs, are well-versed in the distinction between matter and form. We understand that there is a difference between the physical appearances and the underlying essence that makes a thing what it is. This understanding teaches us that even the most refined matter can falter if not orchestrated with a mindful design. The cinematic realm offers a canvas where this interplay can unfold: where the merit of camera work, of graphic design, of animation, and of the quality of interviews make up the matter, while the form emerges from how well the matter is made into an effective and unified message and story.

The most simplistic and raw example I can think of are nature documentarie (whichI must admit I am no aficionado.) But what I do observe is that despite usually containing footage of animals, fauna, and the like, the documentaries usually rely on a series of these things to keep the beautiful footage interesting, as I don't believe anyone is interested in watching hours of uncut marsupial footage, no matter how good the footage of a Tasmanian devil.

The reason for this preface is because, as traditional Catholics, we are not used to having our own content shown in high-quality settings, and so the mere existence of high-quality matter might convince that there is high-quality form. But the matter of a film must serve the form, and how well it does this determines how good the film is. We might say that the essence governs the experience.

A Trilogy's Journey

Attending the premiere of *Mass of the Ages* Episode 3 and securing an interview with its director, Cameron O'Hearn, was a delight. My primary goal during our conversation was to unearth the film's core objective. O'Hearn painted a picture of the trilogy for me: the first film was "an introduction to the Latin Mass," the second was about "how it was taken away and [how] it was changed," and now the final film in the trilogy is a culmination of both, being about "how it came back into popularity and why it is being restricted today." When I asked about what he hopes the film's overall message will be, O'Hearn stated:

> "I hope that bishops of the world, especially, see that traditional Catholics are just Catholics that want to raise their family in the Faith; and they are not here to leave the Church or divide the Church. If they wanted to leave the Church, they could find traditional liturgy without the Pope (there are groups that do that). The people that make up the largest part of the traditional movement are people under the authority of the Pope who just love this liturgy."

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Whether the film achieved this goal is another thing entirely. Episodes 1 and 2, despite their rich content, sometimes faltered in weaving a cohesive narrative, flashing between tangentially related stories. Yet, I think ultimately they succeeded in providing a loosely connected and unified message, primarily due to the fact that mere exposure to the Latin Mass can leave one in awe. Episode 3, however, created a labyrinth of narratives, all vying for attention but failing to get across a coherent core message effectively.

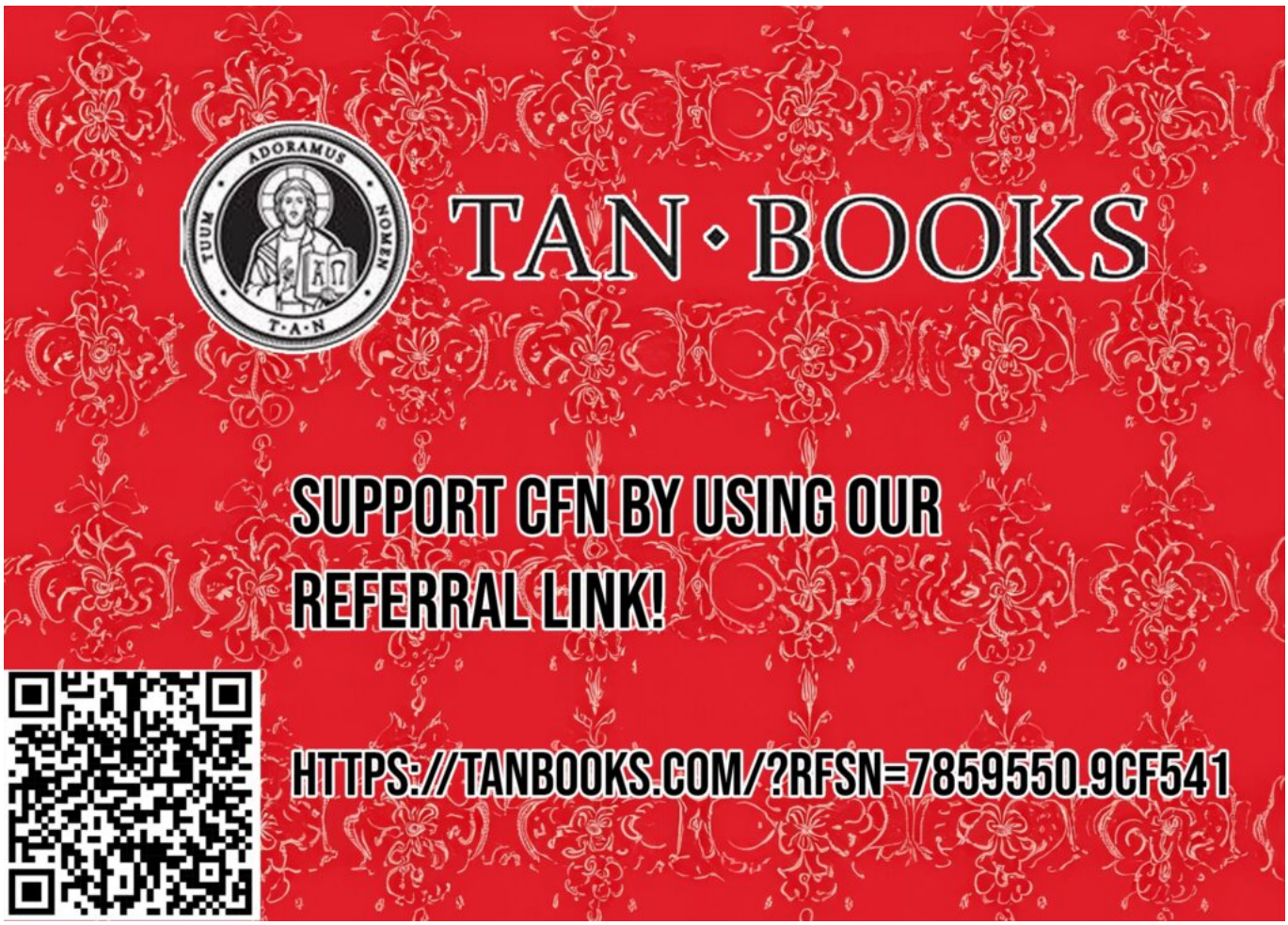
The History of the TLM Post-Vatican II

The structure of the film sets out to show the diversity and earnestness of traditional Catholics currently living around the world. To do this, the film navigates the history of the Traditional Latin Mass post-Vatican II — its supposed suppression, resurrection, and current crisis of being shut down again. A notable event in this series is that the SSPX was finally given well-deserved mention, and Archbishop Lefebvre rightfully received credit for his initial preserving of the Latin Mass.

Yet, even in this early part of the film, a discernible bias emerges, subtly favoring the Ecclesia Dei groups over the SSPX. There are some common factual errors here, including a statement that the Archbishop was excommunicated by the Pope, when in reality it was a statement that he had been supposedly excommunicated *latae sententiae,* a distinction that anyone versed in this debate will immediately know is extremely important. There is also repeated mention and seeming praise of Ecclesia Dei and other traditionalist priests for maintaining to accept Vatican II. Moreover, the film indulges in lengthy praises of Joseph Ratzinger, praising his theology and at one point even suggesting he should be canonized, as though the roster of post-Conciliar Saint Popes isn't already a crowd. These are all things that I don't believe will resonate even with traditionalist supporters of the Fraternity and the Institute.

Despite the apparent partiality, it's a tall order to cast the SSPX and Archbishop Lefebvre in a negative light within this cinematic piece, especially considering the dire circumstances for Catholics in the wake of *Traditionis Custodes*.

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No Need for Inculturation

One area where the film excels is in painting a picture of traditional Catholicism as global, stretching far beyond our familiar confines of Europe and the Americas. It's in these international places that the film finds its stride, showing a part of traditionalism rarely highlighted, notably with traditional Catholic life in Tanzania — a testament to a faith flourishing without the need for liturgical "inculturation." Yet, this is where the accolades start to wane.

The French Mothers' Crusade

A significant portion of the film focuses on French mothers embarking on a pilgrimage to Rome, hoping and praying for the restoration and protection of the Traditional Mass. This segment, meant to be moving, instead becomes muddled, portraying Pope Francis in a rather unflattering light – while he exchanges formalities with the mothers, he is aloof and dismissive, seemingly more intent on sending them away than addressing their devout

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pleas. This strange episode, set up to be the climax of the film, is followed by the announcement of the *Rescriptum* (Feb. 20, 2023), further entrenching the strictures of *Traditionis Custodes* (July 16, 2021). The end result of the pilgrimage of the mothers, while certainly providing them spiritual fruit, comes across as a failure, their efforts crushed by Francis.

A Cristero Parallel

In another case, we are shown the case of Mexican adherents of the FSSP, and a connection is made to the Cristero War in that they are both using weapons, though one material and one spiritual, to fight for the restoration of their faith. This, too falls flat as, despite their protests and spiritual uprising, the majority of the traditional sacraments remain restricted in their diocese. The filmmakers, perhaps inadvertently, sketch another parallel to the dooming of the Cristeros by Pius XI: both groups, uplifted by faith, find themselves ensnared in a web of ecclesiastical politics; left to navigate a pit of despair, they look to their superiors for help and find the Holy Father acting more as an end to their hopes.

The film's portrayal of these steadfast souls marked by tears and despair ought to lead one to expect a collective heartbreak in the audience. However, this doesn't seem to be the intended emotion on the part of the filmmakers, whose desired goal was to convince the ecclesiastical authorities to allow the Latin Mass. Portraying those same ecclesiastical authorities, even if inadvertently, almost as Dickensian villains snatching away all that is cherished, hardly seems like a helpful part of the plea deal. Is the audience expected to believe that such stark depictions will inspire a change of heart among those same authorities, leading them to retract their oppressive edicts? Such a strategy seems naïve.

If, on the other hand, this is meant to draw non-Catholics or the broader Catholic community to tradition, far from making one want to join in the ranks of traditionalism, this hopeless state of affairs does little but prompt a sympathetic pat on the back accompanied by a consoling, "Well, I am sorry that your chosen religion isn't working out for you."

This conundrum seems to have been apparent to the filmmakers as there is a type of addendum at the end of the film focusing on papal authority. Yet, this addendum, rather than offering solace, spirals into a cacophony of contradictory musings that only serve to further muddy the waters. A good amount of the final section of the film talks about the limits of papal authority over the liturgy, with an unnecessary and confusing set of contributors such as a bizarre piece of an interview with Tim Gordon, containing only his statement that he doesn't know what the exact limits of papal authority are. The whole segment ought to leave viewers to wonder if the film sought to illuminate or obfuscate the topic entirely.

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The Problem of Obedience

But it is not as if the film doesn't promote its own disobedience. In the first place, there is much time dedicated to showing how Canon 87 allows bishops to seemingly disobey *Traditionis Custodes* and not apply it to their own dioceses. The filmmakers even include a large map celebrating the wealth of bishops who did not suppress the Latin Mass. But they couple this with the aforementioned *Rescriptum* issue and curiously include the cancelled Bishop Strickland to talk about the proper role of a bishop, a view that the Pope doesn't seem to have agreed with in his case! If this was to help their stated goal of persuading the bishops to support the Latin Mass, I struggle to see how showing a persecuted bishop and a papal document doubling down on the cancellation helps with this.



The Priest Training Program

This message is compounded with the introduction of a new priest training program, a rather bizarre enterprise which Cameron, in his interview with me, stated was for priests to

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learn the Latin Mass in their own free time, that they might celebrate it in their own private chapels. While every Mass certainly has merit, are we really supposed to believe that the future of the traditionalist Catholic community is in clerics turned hermits praying in solitude? I believe this is obviously a closeted attempt to get more underground communities started, despite the director saying that they are not encouraging any priest to "go rogue." This stealthy endeavor also goes against the spirit of the law of *Traditionis Custodes*, which does not approve of any new priest learning the Traditional Mass. All these things display a strange and outdated attitude in a post-*Summorum Pontificum* world of surface level obedience but underground disobedience. I suppose the law now operates under the principle of *quod non videt oculus cor non dolet!*

The film culminates with Archbishop Fulton Sheen eloquently musing on the crucible of suffering and the anticipation of Resurrection. This metaphor, drawing parallels between the Church's present trials and the Crucifixion, aims to strike a chord. Yet, as a defense for urging traditional Catholics to quietly toe the line, confining the celebration of the Holy Mass to whispered corners of obedience and refusing to spread it into new dioceses, it falls somewhat flat. Once again, I struggle to see how a new generation of Catholics is supposed to be inspired by this message. Does not the spirit of resilience sometimes call for voices to rise up in support of what is right and just, rather than just isolated acts of silent endurance?

The SSPX Problem

Considerable noise is likely to made concerning the nebulous, passive-aggressive note at the end of the film stating that the SSPX recanted its participation in the documentary. On my watching of the film, it is obvious why the SSPX chose to do this, since one of the only unequivocable messages from the film is that vaguely "going rogue" is wrong, no matter how bad things get. We are left with a trilogy supposedly meant to represent traditional Catholicism today, but one that did not cover the experience of the largest traditionalist group on the planet. And so we are in an odd predicament: In attempting to explore the mansion of Latin Mass communities, the film's final product chose to observe them through a keyhole and exchanged the view of the estate's grandeur for the confines of a room.

Conclusion

Mass of the Ages Episode 3 showcases commendable cinematography and quality interviewees. Yet, it falters in form, lacking a coherent vision, narrative, or story in what is perhaps the weakest link in the series. This disappointment is compounded by the realization that the film squanders a wealth of material and stunning footage at its disposal.

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For a film that is supposed to represent the modern struggles of traditional Catholics, I find that it doesn’t really represent the common perspectives of traditional Catholicism at all. Even at the premiere, it was evident that there are a great deal of even FSSP and ICKSP supporters who have major reservations and misgivings with the weaponized ambiguity in the Second Vatican Council, who don’t believe that the Mass should or can be suppressed, and who don’t think that pandering or seeking pity is the way forward for the movement. Rather, like their fathers and mothers in the Faith, they think that the success and survival of the Mass will depend on the bravery of those who boldly stand up to defend it.

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