

## The Case of ... Cultural Confusion

Have you ever been to Mass and thought you'd walked into some other denomination rather than Catholic, maybe some other religion rather than Christian? There are lots of reasons why you might think that — and you might even be right. Altar girls, communion in the hand, no acknowledgment of the Real Presence of Christ in thought, word, action or deed.

But ... there are Christian services, Catholic services, Divine Liturgies just as much the Mass as the Mass we know and love that you might not recognize and might be confused about. And, actually, some of them are more likely to be in tune with the eternal breath of the Church, which is the Holy Spirit, than your average Mass in the Latin Rite.

I call this one ... the case of cultural confusion.

Let's clear up a very common, but important, thing. The expression "The Latin Rite" doesn't refer to — or shouldn't be used to refer to — the Tridentine Form of the Mass. Rather, it refers to a particular Church within the Catholic Church.

Okay, I'm thinking I just made you more confused than ever before. There's just *one* Church, right? Well, yes — and there are particular Churches within Her. Let's go back into some history.

In the first millennium after Christ, the Catholic Church spread far and wide. It encompassed all of the old Roman Empire and went even further, covering Europe and making serious inroads into Europe and Asia. The Catholics in these areas were gathered together in parishes, parishes into dioceses, and each diocese had a bishop who was in communion with the bishop of Rome, the Pope.

So far so, good, right? Sounds just like the system we have now. And, of course, it was; it was the same Church, the same faith, the same doctrines as the Church professes today. But the liturgies in different areas were, well, different. They were celebrated in different languages, with different styles and forms. These liturgies were the result of centuries of theological, spiritual and disciplinary development, and reflected the social and artistic norms of their local cultures. The same faith, the same doctrines, expressed in a different way in different places for different cultures.

Really, when you think about it, that is a wonderful thing. The mysteries of the Faith are called mysteries because we cannot understand easily. We can never understand them fully without divine help, of course, but to grasp even the smallest fragment we need to be shown the truth by way of parable and metaphor, analogy and example, art and liturgy. Different ways of presenting the same truth mean more opportunities for us to wrap our feeble human minds around them.

All was well for about a thousand years, and then a terrible event called the Great Schism happened. The details are fascinating, complex, argued over and far beyond the time we have here. But at the end of it, a terrible wound had been dealt to the Church, a wound that has never healed. The Eastern Rites of the Church, known as the Eastern Churches, had split off from Rome, breaking away from the Catholic Church and forming the Eastern Orthodox Churches.

This left the Catholic Church standing, liturgically, on one leg. Or, perhaps more appropriately, breathing with one lung. That is the metaphor theologians have used for the two halves of the Church: the East and the West. The two lungs of the Church need to work together for the life of the Church to be breathed into the world.

Of course, our current Pope, Pope Francis, has shown you can survive with one lung — but I think if we asked the man from Buenos Aires, he would say he'd rather have both!

But, the story's not all doom and gloom. Much of the motivation behind the Great Schism of 1054 AD was — as is much in the Church — political rather than theological. The Eastern Orthodox's theology and doctrines are very, very close to the Catholics'. Really, the "great issue" that is the headline reason for the split is nothing more than a semantic stumbling block that most people understand and have put behind them.

So, while full rapprochement between Catholics and Orthodox was, and might always be, too much to ask, there were many Orthodox who longed to come home to Rome. The result was, around 400 years after the split, many Orthodox returned. They became the Eastern Catholic Churches. You are probably familiar with some of their names: Byzantine, Chaldean, Syriac. At a glance, you might think they weren't Catholic and were, instead, Eastern Orthodox or some other flavor of Christianity.

But they aren't. They are loyal to Rome, follow Catholic doctrine and teaching, and are part of the Catholic Church. But they have their own liturgical traditions, informed by the ancient practices of their culture. Their Masses — which they often call Divine Liturgy, as the word “Mass” has a Latin origin — are beautiful expressions of that, often free from the liturgical innovations and changes which have plagued the Latin Rite of the Church over the last half century.

The Latin Rite of the Church is what we are most familiar with; the vast majority of Catholics in the world are Latin Rite. And that has its own distinctive liturgy, which is expressed in two forms: the Ordinary Form, which is the Novus Ordo Mass, and the Extraordinary Form, which is the Tridentine Mass. But both forms are the same liturgy, the same Mass, expressed in two different forms.

But just because most Catholics are Latin Rite — and, until recently, one of the titles of the Pope was “Patriarch of the West” — that doesn't mean the Latin, or Western, Church is more important than the others — far from it. In the Second Vatican Council document on the liturgy we read:

In faithful obedience to tradition, the sacred Council declares that holy Mother Church holds all lawfully acknowledged rites to be of equal right and dignity; that She wishes to preserve them in the future and to foster them in every way.

You might think that this liturgical diversity undermines the unity of the Faith, but you would be wrong — because it is a diversity of style, not substance; diversity of presentation, not doctrine. The same truths are being presented in different ways, drawing on different experiences, for different cultures. When the Church is breathing with both lungs, East and West, She is breathing more freely and is more easily able to promote Her doctrines to a wide variety of people.

So, it can be seen that the existence of different rites in the Church is the exact opposite of a problem. If there is a problem, it comes from confusion about them, an ignorance of them, but not their existence themselves. And, between you, me and the fencepost, many of these Eastern Catholic liturgies have an awful lot to teach us Latins about reverence, piety and sacredness.

But that's not the only reason you might think you'd wandered into a different religion's services during Mass.

The Church takes Her mission very seriously. She was given it, personally, by God, after all. “Go out and make disciples of all nations.” Convert the whole world, basically.

The Church is still doing this. Now, much of Her effort is directed — and should be directed — towards what is often called the “New Evangelization” but is perhaps better titled a “re-evangelization” — the re-conversion of peoples once converted who have now fallen away from the Faith. You only have to look at the collapse of the Church in formerly Catholic countries like Italy, France and Ireland to realize just how necessary that is!

But the Church also reaches out, undertakes missions, to countries, peoples and places who have never heard the Gospel. Anti-Catholics like to paint this mission work as nothing more than cultural imperialism or even cultural genocide, metaphorical or not, but nothing is further from the truth. Let's read from *Sacrosanctum Concilium* again ; it's a long quote, but it is *very* important to understand what's going on;

Even in the liturgy, the Church has no wish to impose a rigid uniformity in matters which do not implicate the faith or the good of the whole community; rather does She respect and foster the genius and talents of the various races and peoples. Anything in these peoples' way of life which is not indissolubly bound up with superstition and error She studies with sympathy and, if possible, preserves intact. Sometimes in fact She admits such things into the liturgy itself, so long as they harmonize with its true and authentic spirit.

Provisions shall also be made, when revising the liturgical books, for legitimate variations and adaptations to different groups, regions, and peoples, especially in mission lands, provided that the substantial unity of the Roman rite is preserved; and this should be borne in mind when drawing up the rites and devising rubrics.

Within the limits set by the typical editions of the liturgical books, it shall be for the competent territorial ecclesiastical ... to specify adaptations, especially in the case of the administration of the sacraments, the

sacramentals, processions, liturgical language, sacred music, and the arts, but according to the fundamental norms laid down in this Constitution.

What does that mean in practice? It means, put simply, the rubrics of the Mass can be changed so they reflect the art, literature and other cultural experiences of a particular people, provided those things aren't bound up with something utterly opposed to the Gospel. The pre-Columbian people of South and Meso-America practiced child sacrifice and cannibalism; these things have no place in Christianity, and there is no way to allow them to continue as part of worship.

But a culture that worships by dancing, or playing drums, or some other innocent expression of devotion *can* have that brought into the liturgy, to better reflect their culture.

Remember: The Church isn't a homogeneous culture. She does not seek to wash away the unique cultural identity of people. She does not seek to destroy their cultural expressions. Rather, She seeks to baptize those cultural expressions, bringing them into the Church, and to wash away people's *sins*.

This cultural diversity, a means to bring the Gospel to many different peoples in the most effective way, to take what is already good in their cultures and make it better by offering it to God in the Mass, is a strength of the Catholic Church and allows Her to be truly universal.

If you are still uncertain about it, remember this: At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit gave the Apostles the ability to speak in other tongues. Many different cultures — Parthians and Medes and Alamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and gentiles — were all spoken to in their *own* languages, rather than having to learn the country-bumpkin dialect of Galilee.

Of course, some people just up and run with this to places it shouldn't go.

Cultural expressions in the liturgy — African dance, Asian drums, Native American singing, what have you — are reserved to those cultures. We (and by “we” I mean people like me, who are European, whose cultural patrimony is Western civilization, people who are not “mission people”) don't get to use this as an excuse to include inappropriate singing and dancing and other elements into the liturgy. That kind of cultural appropriation is wrong, both from a liturgical sense, but also from a sense of respect for these cultures. I am not a member of these cultures. I don't have their history, their experience. It's not my cultural heritage; it's not something for me to latch onto just because I want a more “exciting” Mass for some reason.

But what *is* my cultural heritage, the cultural heritage of the West? Do we have one?

Yes, we do — and it is the Latin Mass and the Catholic Church.

Western civilization, Christendom as it was once known, was built and unified by one force: the Catholic Church. It was She who baptized the barbarians, who made uncivilized men civilized. It was She who preserved the knowledge when the Vandals burned the books. It was She who kept the fires burning when the light of the Roman Empire went out. It was Her teachings, Catholic morality, doctrine and discipline, that made Western civilization with its principles of justice and liberty the dominant force in the world for a thousand years or more.

And so our cultural patrimony *is* the Tridentine Mass, *is* Gregorian Chant, *is* organ music and stained glass and gothic cathedrals and classical architecture. That is who we are.

Now, of course, such things are not fashionable. Revisionist historians — beginning with the Protestant revolutionaries and their lies about the “Dark Ages” being benighted times of backward, primitive peoples quaking under the cruel yoke of Catholicism, and moving through those who accuse Catholic missionaries of cultural or literal genocide, to today's secular media masters who want to strip Western civilization of anything Catholic while at the same time denying that civilization ever did anything good — revisionist historians have done a very good job of spreading the lie Western civilization is the cause of all the ills in the world.

And too many people, too many useful idiots, have bought that lie, and so want to drop anything that smacks of their ancient and noble culture, their Catholic culture, like a hot potato.

Of course, the *reasons* don't really matter. The end result is what is important — and the end result is the Mass is stripped of its essential Catholic character. It becomes nothing more than a feel-good service, devoid of the ancient artistic resonances of the culture that built the modern world. We apologize when we should be proud.

And that — the cultural relevance of the Tridentine Mass — is why we still have it. When the New Mass was promulgated, the Tridentine Mass was forbidden to be said. But in 1971, a petition was sent to the Pope, asking that permission be given for Catholics in England and Wales to celebrate the Tridentine Mass. The petition noted — and pay attention to this — the exceptional artistic and cultural heritage of the Tridentine Mass.

And it wasn't just Catholics who signed it. In fact, the most famous names on it *weren't* Catholic. Even non-Catholics — authors, statesmen, even two Anglican bishops! — recognized the central role the Tridentine Mass played in Western civilization.

Pope Paul VI, or so the story goes, read the petition and was scanning throughout the list of signatories. “Ah, Agatha Christie!” he exclaimed aloud when he got to her name, and then signed the petition himself. Now, maybe the Pope was a fan of Miss Marple, or maybe he was more of a Hercule Poirot kind of guy, I don't know; what I do know is that the Pope granted an indult — permission to do something that would otherwise be forbidden, from the same place as “indulgent” — for Catholics in England and Wales to celebrate the Tridentine Mass.

And that indult was the first of many which gradually restored the Tridentine Mass. In 1984, Pope Saint John Paul II granted a universal indult. Bishops could allow priests to celebrate and the people to hear the Mass. Four years later, he issued a letter asking for “a wide and generous application” of the indult.

And, finally, in 2007, Pope Benedict XVI issued his famous *motu proprio* which allowed, effectively, any priest to celebrate the Tridentine Mass and a group of faithful who wished to attend it access to it.

As these cases have revealed, and as others will also reveal, the Tridentine form is a more perfect expression of the essential nature of the Mass. It is very clearly a sacrifice, the role of the priest is clearly delineated from that of the laity. Sanctity, separation — these are the order of the day in the Tridentine Mass. The Mass is the Mass, of course, and the Novus Ordo is perfectly good enough, but, in many ways, the Tridentine Mass is better because it is more conducive to piety. It draws the congregation's hearts and minds more easily to Heaven.

And this makes it all the worse when the Tridentine Mass is disallowed or discouraged.

I'm sure you've encountered it: a priest who says he won't say it, or can't say it — or, more often, a priest who says the bishop won't let him; maybe even a priest who *wants* to say it but is getting blowback from other priests, being called by his bishop who is getting pressure from angry parishioners.

A lot of these problems are caused by a lack of spine. Priests don't have the courage to stand up to their bishops. Bishops don't have the guts to stand up to vocal minorities of the laity. Maybe the clergy don't want to be thought of as backward, reactionary, old-fashioned.

There isn't a lot I can do to solve that. You've got to pray for these priests and bishops, show them you have their back, that you support them. Show them there *is* a demand for the Latin Mass, that the Latin Mass community is vibrant, eager, active, and that it is involved in the parish in other ways. Participate in soup kitchens, the pro-life events, parish festivals. Be there, be a visible community connected to the life of the Church in all ways.

You're going to have to work for it, is what I'm telling you.

Perhaps the priest will say he doesn't know *how* to say the Latin Mass — and that's fair enough. Many seminaries stopped teaching it. They certainly stopped teaching Latin, although they shouldn't have done, but that's another case.

Knock down that objection by offering to send them on a course to learn the Mass. There are lots of courses available: books, DVDs, seminars. Heck, there's probably an ex-altar boy in your group who can teach the basics and maybe even put the polish on.

Don't let a priest get away with the excuse "he doesn't know how." One of the spiritual works of mercy is to instruct the ignorant, after all.

But perhaps the most common objection is that "the bishop won't allow it." And that is just so much hogwash.

*Summorum Pontificum*, Pope Benedict's *motu proprio*, makes it very clear the bishop *can't* refuse to grant permission for a priest to say the Latin Mass because the priest doesn't *need* permission. The priest can just say the Tridentine Mass if he desires to, if there is a group of the faithful who want it.

Of course, that doesn't mean the bishop can't throw his weight around, cajole, threaten, run a whisper campaign — but that's a matter of spine, of guts and courage, rather than of force of law. If we talk about law, then *Summorum Pontificum* is very clear what should happen if a bishop tries to stop the celebration: The case should be referred to Rome.

The Tridentine Mass is, as the rest of these *Case Files* show, not only the most effective liturgy for conveying essential Catholic truths and the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, but also part of the rich cultural history of the West. Rome has the back of any priest wanting to celebrate it. I think, if we can make sure we too have our priest's backs on this matter, we can call this case closed.