

PAIX LITURGIQUE

Letter 74 published 28 August 2016

AN INDULT IN THE SUBURBS OF PORTLAND: SAINT BIRGITTA'S

The upcoming *Populus Summorum Pontificum* pilgrimage (Nursia-Rome, 27-30 October 2016) will have an exceptional pastor as its guide: Archbishop Alexander K. Sample of Portland. To prepare for his coming, Guillaume Ferluc, one of the pilgrimage organizers, had the privilege of spending a few days in the Portland area where he had some wonderful encounters. He volunteered to share one of them with our readers

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I - 100 YEARS OF UNINTERRUPTED TRADITIONAL MASS ON THE BANKS OF THE WILLAMETTE RIVER

Portland is the business capital of Oregon, on the West Coast of the United States. On its outskirts somewhere, stuck between the road and the rail track along the Willamette valley, there is a wooden barn. Only the roadside signpost bearing the words “Latin Mass” in slightly faded red letters reveals that this building is not quite the same as any other: it’s Saint Birgitta’s church, the beating heart of the parish by the same name; it was consecrated on 16 July 1916. **There, notwithstanding the liturgical reform, the Mass of Saint Gregory the Great, Saint Pius V, and Saint John XXIII never stopped being celebrated for the past 100 years. This in perfect communion with, and obedience to, Rome and the local ordinary.**

From 1954 to 1994, the pastor at Saint Birgitta’s parish was a missionary from Croatia, Fr. Milan Mikulich, OFM. The providential length of this Franciscan’s apostolate greatly contributed to the preservation of the traditional liturgy in this islet of Christianity on the West Coast. It is from a handful of laymen, however, that the small miracle of Saint Birgitta began.

As the 60s gave way to the 70s and the new Mass was coming down the pike, four families of parishioners shared their desire to keep the Latin Gregorian Mass with Fr. Milan. Aware of the disaffection threatening his parish, especially as a result of its geographic isolation, Fr. Milan saw before him an opportunity to preserve it, if not to renew it. He took advantage of his friendship with a Roman cardinal—most likely his compatriot Cardinal Seper, Cardinal Ratzinger’s predecessor at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith—to obtain from Pope Paul VI an indult allowing him to keep celebrating according to the 1962 Missal.

And indeed, from that time until his retirement and return to Croatia, Fr. Mikulich was left free to offer the traditional Mass by the successive bishops of Portland. Then a priest who assisted him once in a while volunteered to take up his succession and guarantee liturgical and pastoral continuity at Saint Birgitta’s. That is how Fr. Joseph Browne, CSC, left the Catholic University of Portland in 1994 to offer fifteen years of loyal service to Saint Birgitta’s.

In 2009, Fr. Luan Tran, a Vietnamese priest (Portland is home to a large community of South Vietnamese refugees), was called to serve the local traditional community as it waited for a new pastor to be nominated in the now more peaceful era of the *Motu Proprio Summorum Pontificum*. Finally, in 2010, Fr. Tran was given the charge of souls at the parish.

Fr. Tran is an exemplary pastor of a parish that lives liturgical peace fully *in utroque usu*—in each of the forms of the Roman rite. He considers the isolation of Saint Birgitta’s to be a blessing: “The more hidden we are from the world, the less we promote ourselves, the more we strive to obey God in everything, the more we strive to be faithful to the Magisterium and the Hierarchy, the more blessings we receive.”

“To the best of my knowledge” he adds, “there has not been a Sunday when the congregation was without a Latin Mass!” Even during the difficult periods of transition, “the parishioners and the priest of this little insignificant church never cease to marvel at the generosity and the kindness of our Good God and the solicitous care of the Blessed Mother, and the watchful care of Saint Michael, Saint Joseph, and the intercession of Saint Birgitta over the years.”

II - THE COMMENTS OF PAIX LITURGIQUE

1) In our French-language letter #548 we recalled the historical importance (even though local bishops more or less totally ignored it) of the so-called “Agatha Christie” indult that Pope Paul VI granted to England&Wales Catholics who wished to continue praying according to the “former Roman Missal.” The history of Saint Birgitta’s is a timely reminder that this collective indult was preceded by a number of private indults, the most famous being those granted to Saint Padre Pio and Saint Josemaría Escrivá.

2) The specific interest of the indult granted to the Croatian missionary is that it was not directly the fruit of his own wishes but that of his parishioners. In a certain sense it is an excellent illustration (as it was peaceful and successful) of the importance of the laity’s role in preserving Catholic tradition. The preservation of the Tridentine missal beyond 1969 is due to a reaction of the *sensus fidelium*, the faith-instinct, of the laity who, the world over, moved heaven and earth to preserve it. The non-reception of the liturgical reform then led the Roman authorities to the express recognition of the legitimacy of the celebration according to the former missal.(*). The parishioners of Saint Birgitta’s thus prefigured what Benedict XVI was to define in his Motu Proprio *Summorum Pontificum* as a “group of the faithful attached to the previous liturgical tradition” that “stably exists.”

3) We often insist on the missionary dimension of the traditional liturgy in the specific context of re-evangelization. It is noteworthy that it was a missionary who had the inspiration of revitalizing his parish, moribund because of its isolation, by wagering on the traditional liturgy. In fact, today just as in the 1970s, the parking lot as well as the pews are full at Saint Birgitta’s every Sunday at 9:30. Lastly we’ll underscore the fact that the instigator of this celebration was a Croat and that his current successor is Vietnamese: a new illustration of the fact that being attached to the traditional Mass is not something specifically French or American; rather it is a love that is universally shared and sought after.

(*). “In some regions, however, not a few of the faithful continued to be attached with such love and affection to the earlier liturgical forms which had deeply shaped their culture and spirit, that in 1984 Pope John Paul II, concerned for their pastoral care, through the special *Indult Quattuor Abhinc Annos* issued by the Congregation for Divine Worship, granted the faculty of using the Roman Missal published in 1962 by Blessed John XXIII. Again in 1988, John Paul II, with the Motu Proprio *Ecclesia Dei*, exhorted bishops to make broad and generous use of this faculty on behalf of all the faithful who sought it.” (Benedict XVI, Motu Proprio *Summorum Pontificum*, 7 July 2007).