

PAIX LITURGIQUE

Letter 117 published 31 May 2021

THE SUMMORUM PONTIFICUM GALAXY PREPARES TO RESIST !

The provisions of the motu proprio *Summorum Pontificum* were provisions for peace. *Summorum Pontificum* was an entirely atypical document in terms of liturgical legislation; it was an effective response to a situation which was itself atypical. It established a modus vivendi between the older and the newer liturgies by granting to every Latin priest the right to the *ritus antiquior* while setting up the conditions for the public exercise of that right. It sought to bring peace to a Church that was sinking deeper and deeper into a state of crisis.

Now, however, this long-delayed right appears to have become intolerable to the men in power since 2013. The notion is gaining traction among them that this text ought to be, if not abrogated, then at least so diluted as to lose its substantial meaning. In their view, the pre-Vatican II Mass can at best enjoy only *toleration*, and within limits at that.

Their ideological outlook causes them to take on “with a light heart the responsibility” of renewed liturgical hostilities, to quote French head of government Émile Ollivier when he thrust France into the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 and its disastrous outcome. There is a strong likelihood that, thanks to them, we shall find ourselves in a situation similar to that which prevailed in the post-Conciliar years, though under worse conditions for the Church as institution.

The celebration of the Tridentine Mass: a hard-won right.

It is worth underscoring that it was only pressure from an uncontrollable movement of contestation that led the Roman legislator to interpret the promulgation of the 1969 Missal as non-binding. This was done in stages: in 1984 came *Quattuor abhinc annos*; in 1988 *Ecclesia Dei*; in 2007 *Summorum Pontificum*.

Indeed, in France as elsewhere throughout the world, parish priests had serenely continued to celebrate the Tridentine Mass. At the same time, in many places “illegal” chapels were getting organized even as the sanctions imposed by some bishops actually contributed to propagating such celebrations. These chapels found a firmer footing when young priests formed by Archbishop Lefebvre started exercising their priestly ministry in independent organizations founded specifically for that purpose, as well as in urban and rural locales that had been converted, sometimes summarily, to host the liturgy.

When Archbishop Lefebvre was suspended *a divinis* in 1976, his undertaking acquired a far broader notoriety than ever before. Another event followed upon it: the peaceful occupation of Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet, a church in Paris, by Msgr. Ducaud-Bourget and his faithful. They went in one Sunday and there they remain to this day. Likewise in 1986, ten years later, near Versailles, the traditional-Mass parishioners of Saint Louis of Port Marly, having been kicked out of their church, simply broke back in through the bricked-up doors. They haven’t left yet.

An historic 1976 IFOP (a French polling company) survey published by the Lyon daily newspaper *Le Progrès* showed that 48% of regularly practicing Catholics believed that the Church had pushed the reforms too far; it also showed that 35% remained favorable to the Mass in Latin. The several surveys that Paix

Liturgique has conducted since then, in France and then in the whole world, bring out a strong tendency: the *demand* for the celebration of the traditional Mass in their own parishes by a large proportion, sometimes even a majority, of practicing Catholics.

Later on, the favorable psychological climate created by Benedict XVI's *motu proprio*, on the one hand, and the on-going growth of institutes specialized in the traditional liturgy (SSPX and *Ecclesia Dei* institutes founded from 1988 on), on the other hand, have caused the number of traditional Mass locations to keep increasing worldwide. From 2007 to 2017, for example, the number quite simply doubled.

Here is a paradox that social scientists who study religion have noted, among them Danièle Hervieu-Léger in France: the traditional movement has opposed the Conciliar mainstream in a process that has a highly “modern” appearance of resistance to authority. Traditional reaction exhibits some characteristics of what is now called “populism,” which questions the legitimacy of the “élites” on the grounds that the latter are adopting novel positions elaborated in their “elitist” bubble.

Here is another paradox: from the very beginning, the traditional movement has been grounded in the action of laymen (who support and even “beget” priests through the specialized institutes) who refused Vatican II guidelines—the very guidelines that were supposed to “promote the laity.” One may add that because the Roman Church has ceased to be Tridentine since Vatican II, “Tridentinism”, though essentially hierarchical, has now been taken over by folks at the grassroots level. In truth, from a theological rather than a sociological point of view, what we have here is a surprising and providential manifestation of the *sensus fidelium*, of the instinct of the faith among the faithful, which defends tooth and nail the *lex orandi*'s expression of the doctrines of the Eucharistic Sacrifice, of the Real Presence, of the hierarchical priesthood, and more generally of the transcendence of the mystery: “Do this in memory of Me!”

An irrepressible capacity to resist

Considering the currently looming danger, one can now attempt to take the measure of the forces involved. The French situation, though to be sure not that of the universal Church, does as a rule provide highly significant indications for doing so.

The “official” Church today has nothing in common with the solid machine it was in the first decades after the Council. She has been bled dry in terms of priests and religious. The number of seminarians, in fact the number of seminaries themselves, ever decreases. Practicing Catholics are getting ever older—and ever more spaced out in the pews, even without any “social distancing” health measures. Logically enough, this has precipitated a catastrophic financial situation in a good number of dioceses. Add the fallout of what is called the “health crisis,” which has caused about 30% of the remaining parishioners to disappear. Habits born of history, which take a while to fade, lead us to consider Catholicism still to be an essential component of our societies. But things are now appearing in their stark reality: Catholicism has practically vanished from the public square.

In contrast, the world of tradition represents an “exception” in the Church. This is particularly the case for priestly and religious vocations, whose numbers are similar to those before 1965. Numerous young people who know nothing of the conciliar quarrels are now turning to it. Sunday congregations are robust and, on average, young. In the traditional galaxy everything, both in its liturgical life and in its “fruitfulness,” happens as though Vatican II had never taken place. Structured and time-tested catechetical teaching and a well-developed network of schools provide a solid transmission of the faith, practice, and habits of the Christian life. Furthermore, the traditional galaxy shares a porous border with the “conservative” world (Community of Saint Martin, the Emmanuel, etc.) whose vitality can also be explained in part by its “difference” from the official line—a difference which, to a greater or lesser degree, draws its inspiration from traditional resistance.

Success, of course, has a downside: generational succession is in place, to be sure, but in an extremely secularized world it does not take place without some losses. Also, compared to the understandably high militancy of the post-Conciliar years, the traditional world can sometimes seem more *settled* now than it once was. Yet, it turns out to be relatively easy to organize political action and lobbying to preserve acquired positions and to achieve greater growth; this is because here as elsewhere social networks give a considerable boost to the expression of a “nonconformist” galaxy.

All things being equal, a yellow-vest-style explosion of discontent could erupt at any moment in the Church today. With a major advantage, however: when it comes to Catholicism, as far as the Christian people are concerned, doctrine and practice are centered on the celebration of Sunday Mass. All that is needed for it to be celebrated is a priest to say it and the faithful to attend it, without anyone being able, when all is said and done, to prevent them. That is what happened from 1965, and especially 1969, on: Tridentine Masses kept on being celebrated as though nothing were the matter. Threats, obstacles, even persecution may have been thrown at them, nothing worked: priests and laity went on doing “what the Church had always done,” as Archbishop Lefebvre was fond of saying.

Here is a very revealing recent event: the bishops of France and elsewhere have foolishly extended government-imposed “sanitary measures” to Eucharistic Communion by forbidding Communion on the tongue. As a result, a certain number of the faithful who respect the Sacrament have left “ordinary” churches to go and receive the Holy Eucharist in a worthy manner at traditional celebrations. This is how, since the “health crisis,” the number of those attending the traditional Mass has markedly increased in most places!

In the fourth century Saint Jerome famously said “The whole world groaned and marveled to see itself Arian,” as the bulk of the hierarchy had gone over to heresy, while many of the faithful remained attached to the Christological doctrine of Nicaea. Have we not seen—are we not seeing—a similar situation today? But this capacity to resist “on the ground,” which is irrepressible in itself, may well come to include powerful demonstrations and actions. Already now, in various spots on the globe, they are being given serious consideration.