

PAIX LITURGIQUE

Letter 120 published 22 September 2021

LETTER OF ABBÉ PELLABEUF TO THE HOLY FATHER TO REQUEST THE ABROGATION OF TRADITIONIS CUSTODES

I have decided to publish this letter even though many have already voiced their reactions to Traditionis Custodes. This is because, generally speaking, those who regret the publication of this motu proprio usually follow the older missal. For my part, I use the new one daily, and have said Mass according to the older order only on a few rare occasions.

Furthermore, it is in the very name of Vatican II that I ask for the abrogation of Traditionis Custodes, even though the Holy Father claims to have published it in order to promote the acceptance of the Council. Yet the new Missal does not correspond to what the Council Fathers said regarding the liturgical reform they were calling for.

Also, although this may lengthen my presentation, I wanted to indicate at nearly every step of the way my involvement in the current liturgical conversation.

Abbé Bernard Pellabeuf

On the feast of Saint Mary Magdalene

Open Letter:

Summo Pontifici Francisco Papae

Holy Father,

The good of the Church is inseparable from yours; I am writing to you in behalf of both. As a loving son, I suggest that you abrogate the motu proprio “*Traditionis Custodes*,” and I do so in a spirit of faithfulness to the Second Vatican Council. Indeed, it is false to claim that the missal promulgated by Saint Paul VI was what the Council Fathers had wanted.

I consider you to be the Sovereign Pontiff, the Vicar of Christ, the successor of Peter. You are entitled not only to my respect, but also to my affection: I certainly refuse you neither.

I fully adhere to the teaching of Saint Ignatius, who, I am sure, is dear to your heart: if I see something white, and the Church tells me it is black, I go along with the Church's opinion. But of course this assumes that the Church does not contradict herself. Indeed, if the Church were to say “Yesterday I said it was black, but today I say that even yesterday it was white”, it would then appear that I had been stupid for adhering to what the Church said yesterday, and I therefore have no reason to adhere to what she might say thereafter. I am here talking, of course, about what cannot change, particularly dogma and morals. I am writing to you in this spirit of faithfulness to the Church.

I know that *Traditionis Custodes* is a disciplinary and pastoral document, and therefore fallible; but it concerns ecclesial communion and fidelity to Vatican II,

and is for that reason of capital importance. Not to mention that what concerns the liturgy is often closely linked to dogma.

Morality, and canon law supports this, obliges a subordinate to give his opinion to his superior if he thinks that the latter is mistaken in a serious matter. I am doing so by means of an open letter. This is in part to prevent some courtier from saying, when I publish it, that I was publishing the pope's private correspondence, as was unfortunately done when some cardinals published the text of their dubia. This letter is a public letter.

For you see, Most Holy Father, I believe that I have duties towards the faithful who wish to make use of the more traditional means of approaching God. Indeed, I am known as one of the very first of Archbishop Lefebvre's seminarians, when he began his work in Freiburg, Switzerland. There are many who, over fifty years after the fact, still reproach me for it and suspect me of integrism: this is silly. Indeed, it is worth remembering that Archbishop Lefebvre started out with every necessary authorization. I was practically alone, at the age of twenty, to believe that I had to leave this enterprise. I already sensed that things would go further than was desirable, especially when it came to the missal. I have never abandoned the values that the members of the Society of St. Pius X held legitimately. To take just one example, in most of the dioceses of France priests were discouraged from wearing clerical clothing: the 1983 code showed that Archbishop Lefebvre was right in this; and he was right on a number of other points too. I try never to miss a chance to dialogue with Archbishop Lefebvre's spiritual heirs, in the hope of a return to full communion with you and the whole Church. If I did not express myself in public under the present circumstances, my participation in such a dialogue would seem insincere.

I must therefore clarify my position on the points of contention between the Church and those called Lefebvrists. I fully adhere to the Second Vatican Council as a pastoral council, which is to say, in my view, a council intended to put the Church in a better position to evangelize. This council is good, but it is not exempt from criticism: the Church acknowledged as much when, in dialogue with the Society of Saint Pius X, she said that such criticism ought to be constructive. For instance, I adhere to the intention of *Dignitatis Humanae*, but I am of the opinion that its presentation and the basis of its argument do a disservice to that intention.

Likewise, I maintain that the so-called missal of Paul VI is perfectly valid and legitimate; against the traditionalists I also maintain that a reform of the former missal was necessary, and I point out to them that, since they claim that the so-called missal of Saint Pius V guarantees orthodoxy, they ought to be sensitive to the fact that the Council Fathers, all of whom (except the Orientals) used that missal, considered that a reform was necessary. I can rely on my 43-years of experience in the priesthood to state that the recent missal is an authentic means of sanctification. Nevertheless, I will grant to the Lefebvrists that this missal is not exempt from criticism, and I do so on the basis of Vatican II. Indeed, and this has been insufficiently noted, the missal promulgated by Saint Paul VI does not follow the recommendations of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 23, especially the following:

[T]here must be no innovations unless the good of the Church genuinely and certainly requires them; and care must be taken that any new forms adopted should in some way grow organically from forms already existing.

This passage of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* is crucial, because what it says is rooted in one of the very first principles of liturgical science, as your venerable predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, forcefully recalled: liturgy is received, not made. This principle stems from the attitude of Saint Paul: "I delivered unto you first of all, which I also received." The Council Fathers have here given a profoundly wise lesson, which applies to any liturgical reform in any era. If the reformers of the liturgy had heeded this lesson, there would probably not have been any dissidence over the missal; at any rate, it would not have reached the magnitude it has today. Unfortunately, in the missal that Saint Paul VI promulgated, the offertory and lectionary (to take just two examples) do not conform to this requirement

This is why one can only agree with Benedict XVI when he affirmed the need for a "reform of the reform." To refuse this is tantamount to rejecting a fundamental point of Vatican II. As far as I am able to discern, Benedict XVI was well aware that this reform could not merely be decreed; he wanted it to happen through a two-way influence—a mutual enrichment—of the two forms of the missal on each other. In this, he has been badly interpreted. Some say that he wanted a pure and simple return to the older form, and that any talk of reciprocity was purely for diplomatic reasons. Others claimed contrariwise that what he was aiming at was the progressive disappearance of the older missal, and that he did not say so openly for the opposite diplomatic reasons (particularly his desire for reconciliation with the SSPX). These speculations are absolutely contrary to what is known of your predecessor's great simplicity of heart; there was nothing in him of a *furbo*, as I believe one says in your native language.

How could this indispensable mutual enrichment occur if one of the missals is sequestered, as you want it to be? As long as a missal according to the wishes of the Council Fathers has not been arrived at, the use of the older missal must subsist unimpeded. Hence the need to abrogate *Traditionis Custodes*. There is no way to lay claim to Vatican II while giving unqualified approval to the recent missal, no more than one can lay claim to the older one to question the validity of what the Council Fathers thought and said about the need for a reform of the very missal they used.

My fear is that in all of this there is a confusion of unity and conformity. Once upon a time the Church, in the Western sphere, existed in a relatively homogenous

cultural world. Today, however, even in the West, we have multiculturalism. This change, a principal component of which has been a shift from a culture of transcendence to a culture of immanence, has not been sufficiently gauged. These two cultures produce two distinct spiritualities. As God is both transcendent and immanent, there is no need to worry about a shift from a spirituality of transcendence to one of immanence: one needs only to remain within reasonable limits, and especially remember that it is more difficult to preserve a sense of the sacred within a spirituality of immanence—and Benedict XVI precisely denounced a certain loss of the sense of the sacred. Yet the sacred is a constituent part of our religion. I see it as a necessity stemming from the fact that, while the supernatural order is so to speak the extension of the natural order, it is nevertheless located on an entirely other plane: the sacred is that which, though taken from the natural order, is considered by nature or by convention as giving access to the supernatural order.

In this context a double mistake is often committed. On the one hand, probably because a sizeable number of ecclesiastics subscribed to the ideology of progress, there was a general consensus that this shift from one mentality to the other was necessarily a good. On the other hand, there was an attempt to impose this shift on every one. Are there not many mansions in the Father's house? Unity is not uniformity. The pluralism of rites in the Church ought to spur us to prudence: since the Church has, throughout the centuries, been able to adapt to diverse cultures, she must continue to do so today. She must Christianize cultures, not impose them.

That is why I regret that, in your *motu proprio* and in the accompanying letter to the bishops, the faithful attached to the older missal seem to be, as it were, condemned without a hearing and without having been given time, in a true dialogue, to acknowledge the specific validity of Vatican II and of the new missal—at least in the case of those who still harbor any such doubts. Not enough importance has been ascribed to dialogue with traditionalists. As proof I'll mention that although I am known to be close to them, never in any of the dioceses I have served in has anyone asked me anything about them.

And so it seems rather harmful to punish an entire community for the supposed faults of some of its members. Remember Mamre: "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" Abraham said this to God, and He accepted the argument. Indeed, reducing the possibility of using the older missal on the grounds that some of those who like it harbor bad sentiments necessarily looks like a punishment. In a word, since you say that you acted in response to the request of certain bishops, it is necessary to acknowledge that they do not belong to the *pars sanior* of Catholic bishops.

In fact, Most Holy Father, would you accept the following reasoning? It would consist in saying that it is opportune to restrict the use of the vernacular in the liturgy because some of its proponents harbor ill will, let's say, towards *Humanae Vitae*, or towards the teaching of the Church on the impossibility of ordaining women, and because they criticize the use of Latin in the liturgy and so are opposed to *Sacrosanctum Concilium*? (Indeed the Fathers of Vatican II consistently expressed their wish for continuity both in the use of the liturgical language and in the reform of the liturgical books). This is a reasoning I cannot accept, just as I cannot accept yours, which is similar to it.

Has anyone actually totted up the proportion of vocal opponents of the Council or of the new missal among the priests attached to the extraordinary form of the Roman missal? Are not accusations all too easily received against the elders? Saint Paul warned Saint Timothy about this.

Besides, are all the bishops you consulted and who told you about the "closed-mindedness" of certain members of *Ecclesia Dei* institutes reliable in this matter? At the moment we have in France the case of a bishop who is kicking out of his diocese one of those institutes on the grounds that its priests refuse to concelebrate. Yet trying to make concelebration obligatory runs against its very nature, since it supposes in the concelebrant the will to perform a single act with the celebrant, so that the slightest reticence against concelebration—whether or not it is justified—vitiates the will to perform a single act with that of the celebrant. It has been said that it is characteristic of integrist to impose on everyone what should remain a matter of choice or of a free commitment: according to this understanding, in the case before us the integrist is not the traditionalist: it is the bishop. In fact, I wrote to him a few weeks ago and I hope that his answer will partially refute what I was saying earlier on about the lack of dialogue on this subject. "Closed-mindedness" is more widespread than one would think, and neither side has a monopoly.

I was speaking earlier about those who condemn the use of Latin in the liturgy, and thereby contradict Vatican II. There are many such people among the bishops of France; that is why one may well wonder whether they are your best advisors in liturgical matters. One of them even wrote to me, some time ago: "It is bad for a people to make a habit of praying in a language that is not its own." First of all, the idea that a people's liturgical language is not "its own" language is to be rejected: would any one say that Coptic is not the language of . . . the Copts? Latin is one of the languages of the peoples of the Latin rite. But above all, what pride must underlie that bishop's statement! So for him, popes and bishops have been wrong for fifteen centuries, since they made their people pray in Latin, while he, this one bishop, gets it better than all of them! This is the sort of attitude that causes me to say, as I did a little earlier, that there are many followers of the ideology of progress among churchmen: progress itself, apparently, makes us better equipped than our forebears to understand Revelation. Pride dims the intellect: the same bishop went on to say: "I am not the only one to be of this opinion, since the pope, when he comes to France, says the Mass in French." This was under John Paul II. What we have here is an absolute lack of logic, as though he had written: "the proof that the pope is opposed to bicycle-riding is that he skis." Saying Mass in French does not indicate opposition to the Mass said in Latin! It is this kind of attitude that makes me doubt certain bishops' fittingness to advise you in this matter. You are right to say that they are, by nature, the guardians of tradition, but I have noticed that many of them are its gravediggers.

I should like to give you another example. Your predecessor Benedict XVI maintained that liturgical translations are not the proper place for adaptation. This is for several reasons: one the one hand, it is linked to the fact that liturgy is not made but rather received; on the other hand, liturgical texts pertain to tradition, and therefore to Revelation, even though it has to be said that certain texts are richer than others as *loci theologici*. No one has the right to modify Revelation. As support for the pope's position, in 2011, the tenth anniversary of *Liturgiam Authenticam*, I criticized the French translations in use at the time: the official line was that they were adaptations, which in fact was in order to enjoy author's rights as opposed to translator's rights. Three bishops issued a disdainful and mendacious response. So for instance I had pointed out that one of these translations' defects was the depreciation of the priest's own role at Mass; they answered that I "seemed to be unaware that the faithful too offer the sacrifice." But speaking of the priest's own role means that one knows that others besides the priest have their own role too! So you see, Most Holy Father, I can place no trust in some of the bishops to be the guardians of tradition and to advise you on this topic. Besides, these bishops claimed that the reworking of the translations was not called for by the low bad quality of the existing ones, but by the evolution of the French language: they'd have trouble justifying the differences between the older translation of the missal and the translation that is about to come out with any change in the language at all.

In this connection, it must be the case that legitimate adaptation in translations, which you caused to be mentioned in Canon Law, can only bear on what the character of the target language demands, not at all on the meaning of the original text. If adaptations were made for the purpose of deriving income from sacred texts, it would be a case of manifest simony. It would therefore be an honorable gesture, for you and for your pontificate, to see to it that the Church should henceforth be shielded from any suspicion in this regard. There is a simple solution: just issue legislation requiring all texts used in the liturgy to be free of copyright as soon as the costs of translation have been covered; if this extends beyond a certain deadline, a full accounting should be rendered to the Holy See. It would not take your collaborators long to set this up; indeed, if such a reform should not take place, it would be a stain on the Church's robe.

Also, what credit can one give to the results of the survey? You had asked whether any elements of the older liturgy had passed into the new one after *Summorum Pontificum*. At this point I'd like to make a comment. Many priests who would have liked to adopt some of these elements were kept from doing so by their respect for liturgical norms: no one has the right to change anything in the liturgy on his own authority. I have even heard a priest say this about the practice of keeping together the fingers that have touched the consecrated Host: "If the norms do not say that one has to do it, it means that one must not do it." As for me, when I saw that you asked such a question, I understood that the Church allowed such borrowings from the older liturgy, and I adopted a few practices from the older way of doing things: I extend to the other Eucharistic Prayers the bow that is indicated in the Roman Canon during the epiclesis that follows the Consecrations; I genuflect after the *Per Ipsum* before the *paternoster*; I trace a horizontal cross over the chalice before dropping a particle of the Host into it, etc.

At this point it is fitting to note that in order to answer your question the bishops ought to have taken broad surveys of their own priests. Nowhere have I heard of any such consultation. It is therefore fair to have doubts about at least one portion of the survey's results.

This is why I am appealing to your pastoral and paternal sense. The communities that are attached to the missal of Saint John XXIII have already suffered a lot; they have often been persecuted. If I have dwelt too long on my own case in this letter, it was to lend my support to this idea that Traditionalists have often been persecuted, despised, rejected. I have adopted the postconciliar ways. And yet, some of my confreres have labelled me as an integrist not only before bishops, but went so far as to do so before the civil authorities I depended on, to handicap my ministry. It was enough, in certain ecclesiastical circles, to wear the Roman collar or to say the Breviary in Latin to incur unpleasantness. If I was so mistreated, how much more have the faithful who are attached to former liturgical forms been mistreated? Therefore I respectfully ask you not to compound suffering with suffering.

One may also point out that if you truly desire not to allow any negative talk about Vatican II and the new missal—and who would doubt that that is your intention?—then your *motu proprio* is ill-conceived. If the faithful who are attached to the extraordinary form of the missal can no longer easily find it among those who are in full communion with you and the Church, many will go and find it in SPPX chapels, and I have no reason to believe that, once there, they will hear much that is positive about what you are defending, i.e. Vatican II and the recent missal. Your *motu proprio*, then, is making the evils it seeks to combat worse. As you can see, it is not only in the name of Vatican II that your *motu proprio* deserves criticism, it is simple common sense: you have been very poorly advised.

Before ending I wish to thank you from the bottom of my heart for recalling the importance of respect for liturgical norms. There again, I have personal reasons to do so, beyond those every priest may have. Shortly after my ordination, I was told to say Mass otherwise than according to the norms of the Missal, and because I refused, I was made a pariah, condemned to a wandering life. So thank you, Most Holy Father, and may you appoint bishops who are convinced of this necessary obedience to liturgical law, and punish those who violate it.

Please be assured of my frequent prayers for you and accept, Most Holy Father, the expression of my filial sentiments.

