

Reflections on the Traditional Latin Mass Movement

A Reply to Dennis M. Doyle

from William H. Johnston

Der Autor reagiert nachfolgend auf die Einladung zu einer Gegendarstellung bezüglich DoYLES Essay mit dem Titel „The Traditional Latin Mass Movement and the Unity of the Church.“ Vor dem Hintergrund der anerkennenden Kenntnisnahme von DoYLES kirchlicher Gesinnung und verschiedener Elemente seines Beitrages profiliert der Autor drei Gesichtspunkte. (1) Abgesehen von kritikwürdigen, weil spalterischen Elementen des TLM gibt es Katholiken, die eine liturgische Verehrung in Übereinstimmung mit der konziliaren Lehre wünschen, aber diese nur selten im Pfarrleben finden. (2) Es ist darauf zu achten, nicht jene Weise der Anbetung misszuverstehen, die Priester und Gemeinde im Darbringen „des Heiligen Messopfers“ und in dank sagender Verehrung der göttlichen Heiligkeit, Herrlichkeit und Majestät vereint. (3) Nicht allein extreme Vertreter des TLM, sondern auch Befürworter der erneuerten Liturgie erkennen an, dass deren Praxis mitunter in einen exzessiven Horizontalismus abrutscht. Abschließend wird die Frage gestellt, welche Antwort gemäßigte Anhänger des TLM geben würden, wenn man sie in dieser Ära der Synodalität um ihre Meinung fragen würde.

I am grateful for the invitation to reply to Dennis M. Doyle’s article “The Traditional Latin Mass Movement and the Unity of the Church.”¹ Let me first say that I very much respect the work of my colleague, and it seems to me we are fundamentally ecclesial kindred spirits, in this sense: we both seek to dwell within the range of the Catholic ecclesial center, loyal to Vatican II – to honor the principle, *in necessariis unitas*. Our intent is also to understand and be respectful of diverse perspectives and insights, even those with which we disagree, held by those more widely ranging on either side of that center, to the left or right – to honor the principle, *in dubiis libertas*. Yet we avoid and lament the divisive and polarizing extremes on both sides – as violating the principle, *in omnibus caritas*. There is also much I agree with in the article, such as his analysis of the liturgical actions of the postconciliar popes (362–366), and certainly, his general intent to give a fair hearing to TLM adherents while supporting Pope Francis. That said, in the interest of fostering wider dialogue and deeper understanding, let me offer three points of critique and commentary.²

¹ Cf. Dennis M. Doyle, The Traditional Latin Mass Movement and the Unity of the Church, in: MThZ 72 (2021) 350–366. In-line parenthetical page references are to this article.

² I will use Doyle’s abbreviations: “TLM” for the Traditional Latin Mass (1962 Missal), and “RM” for the Mass as revised after Vatican II.

1. The “Traditional Latin Mass” Movement: Who Are They?

Whom you have in view when writing about “the TLM movement” greatly determines what you will say. For example, Doyle refers briefly to an interview in which Archbishop Augustine Di Noia speaks of “a ‘TLM movement’” (352). Di Noia gave the interview to vigorously defend Pope Francis’s *Traditionis Custodes* which limits the celebration of the TLM for now and promises its eventual elimination. Why such vigorous defense? Because he had in view specifically those who have “hijacked” the traditional Latin Mass for their own illegitimate purposes. While Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI intended their permissions for use of the prior Missal to avoid schism, end liturgical abuses, and strengthen church unity, Di Noia charged the TLM movement with misusing that permission to foment division, disparage the council’s liturgical reforms, and promote their movement as the “true” Catholic Church.³

Doyle’s essay has a different tone, purpose, and method. He intentionally presents both critiques of the “TLM movement” along with a more positive assessment of some of its leaders and aims. Key to this effort is the recognition of a “spectrum of positions” within the movement, identifying three: radical traditionalists, conservative traditionalists, and conservatives (351). Yet, after a positive section, “The Vision of the TLM Movement: A Critic’s Attempt to Be Fair” (353–355), while there are sentences that bring this vision forward, the main thrust of the essay turns to a critique of “the movement” for its ecclesiology, its polarizing effects in the church (mirroring political polarization in the USA), and the liturgical form and spirituality of its Missal – in effect, implicating everyone drawn to the TLM with the faults of the polarizing activists whom he critiques.

I have no dispute with Di Noia’s and Doyle’s criticisms of the movement’s divisive, polarizing elements. And I very much approve of recognizing differences among those attracted for various reasons and to varying degrees of intensity to the traditional Latin Mass – in fact, the more distinctions the better, so as more accurately to see and respectfully honor the interior motives uniquely drawing everyone to that form of Mass.

My eye, in surveying the TLM landscape, is drawn to some who are often overlooked in critiques of “the movement.” They are those whom Pope Benedict identified in his letter accompanying *Summorum Pontificum* – the “many people who clearly accepted the binding character of the Second Vatican Council, and were faithful to the Pope and the Bishops,” but who “nonetheless also desired to recover the form of the sacred liturgy that was dear to them.” One chief reason they were drawn to that liturgy was not opposition to the council or resistance to its liturgy constitution but, interestingly (and sadly), the search for an alternative to postconciliar liturgical celebrations that “in many places [...] were not faithful to the prescriptions of the new Missal” – something every postconciliar pope without exception has lamented, including Pope Francis in *Traditionis Custodes*.⁴ A further

³ See Cindy Wooden, Traditional Latin Mass ‘movement’ sows division, archbishop says, in: Catholic News Service (20.07.2021), in: <https://www.ncronline.org/news/parish/traditional-latin-mass-movement-sows-division-archbishop-says> [accessed on 19.02.2022].

⁴ See my essay, Traditionis Custodes Challenges Everyone, in: Church Life Journal (05.11.2021), in: <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/traditionis-custodes-challenges-everyone/> [accessed on 02.19.2022].

subgroup of this demographic is those “young persons,” individuals and families, who “have discovered this liturgical form, felt its attraction and found in it a form of encounter with the Mystery of the Most Holy Eucharist, particularly suited to them.”⁵

How many TLM Catholics fit this description? I know of no statistical studies on that question. What will those Catholics find when the TLM is eliminated and they join their territorial parishes, seeking a form of Mass consonant with their liturgical spirituality informed by such conciliar teachings as *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 8, and *Lumen Gentium* 50? That, too, is an open question and a pastoral challenge for the church. The point here is that they – with their devotion to a form of Eucharist they have celebrated since 1984 with papal sanction, and with a liturgical spirituality in sync with conciliar teaching – should not be identified or lumped in with the TLM trouble-makers, but recognized and respected for who they are and what they seek.

2. What Happens at the Traditional Latin Mass?

In his liturgical critique of the TLM Doyle writes, almost as a synopsis: “The TLM worship service is performed by the clergy for the benefit of a barely participating laity who are worshipping the God who is far off” (358). This three-part sentence may be an instance of describing the other in terms the other would not recognize, risking misunderstanding and misrepresentation. Let me propose an alternative to each part.

First, those drawn to the TLM would likely say the priest is offering the sacrifice of the Mass, not performing a worship service for them. They would prefer this theological to a functional description, and one that highlights the Mass as a sacrifice (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1362–1372).

Nor would they think of themselves as “barely participating” – not, at least, if Mass with the 1962 Roman Missal is celebrated as it should be, conscientiously implementing the 1958 Vatican Instruction, *De musica sacra et sacra liturgia*.⁶ That Instruction strongly promoted active participation both external (described in progressive degrees of participation) and chiefly internal – categories also used in Pius XII’s *Mediator Dei* and the council’s *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.⁷ Internal participation, as understood in the Instruction, means the faithful offer the sacrifice of the Mass “with” and “through” Christ the High Priest, doing so with “devout attention of the mind and the affections of the heart” (*De musica sacra*, 22. a).⁸ Liturgical movement pioneers, for whom the TLM was all there was, called it “active and intelligent participation.” Of course, anyone can go to any Mass, TLM or

⁵ Benedict XVI, Letter of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Bishops on the Occasion of the Publication of the Apostolic Letter “*Motu Proprio Data*” *Summorum Pontificum* from 07.07.2007, in: https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20070707_lettera-vescovi.html [accessed on 02.19.2022].

⁶ Sacred Congregation of Rites, *De musica sacra et sacra liturgia*, in: AAS 50 (1958) 630–663. English translation available at: <https://adoremus.org/1958/09/instruction-on-sacred-music/> [accessed on 02.19.2022]. I make no claim or assumption that TLM communities seek to implement the provisions of this Instruction. I recall no reference to it in the TLM literature I have reviewed, though I would be happy to stand corrected on that point.

⁷ Cf. Pius XII, *Mediator Dei*, in AAS 39 (1947) 521–595, nn. 23–26; Congregation of Rites, *De musica sacra et sacra liturgia* (see fn. 6), nn. 22–34; Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 19.

⁸ Translation by Mary Perkins Ryan, *What Is This ‘Active Participation’*, Collegeville 1959, 9.

RM, mindlessly, and the RM certainly prioritizes and enhances the potential for active participation more than the TLM. But faith-filled active internal participation in the TLM is certainly possible, and the ideal is to be upheld in that movement.

As for worshipping “the God who is far off” – this is like saying (Doyle does not, but the example helps make my point) that when celebrating Mass *ad orientem* the priest turns his back on the people. To put it that way infuses a seemingly neutral and objective description of direction with all the negative connotations of rudeness carried in the English phrase, “to turn your back on someone” – as though priest and people were in some way at odds or divided during Mass. But for those drawn to the TLM the intentionality of *ad orientem* celebration is quite different: it is a configuration that unites the whole congregation as one, priest and people together turned toward the Lord, a communal posturing both liturgical and eschatological. For them, their shared physical orientation is an effective symbol of their shared spiritual worship.

Similarly, here the point of the liturgical spirituality of the TLM is not that God is “far off” (with the implication: distant and aloof?), but that God is holy. “The holiness of God is the inaccessible center of his eternal mystery. What is revealed of it in creation and history, Scripture calls ‘glory,’ the radiance of his majesty” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2809). The spirituality of the TLM, at its best, draws its adherents to conscious, whole-hearted liturgical prayer in thanksgiving for Christ’s sacrifice and in praise and adoration of the mystery of God’s holiness, glory, and majesty. The fourth and fifth chapters of the book of Revelation offer, with their rich symbolism, a biblical image, analog, and perhaps warrant for this form and spirituality of worship.

3. Do Communities ‘Celebrate Themselves’ in RM Versus Populum Liturgies?

Doyle resents the claim of TLM supporters “that the older way is oriented toward the worship of God and the RM is oriented toward celebrating ourselves. This argument strikes me as manipulative and insulting” (359). It is certainly an oversimplification, if “celebrating ourselves” is meant by TLM proponents to apply to RM liturgies in general. I hear in the phrase echoes of Joseph Ratzinger’s analysis of the *versus populum* liturgical orientation – that while “this does express *one* aspect of the Eucharist [...] the danger is that it can make the congregation into a closed circle,” which can lead to misunderstanding this point: “The community does not carry on a dialogue with itself; it is engaged on a common journey toward the returning Lord.”⁹ Ciraulo’s analysis of this is helpful – that “Benedict is constantly fighting against whatever may limit the horizon of one’s experience of God: in the liturgy against a ‘closed circle,’ in eschatology against excessive immanentism or political

⁹ *Joseph Ratzinger*, *The Feast of Faith. Approaches to a Theology of the Liturgy*, trans. Graham Harrison, San Francisco 1986, 142–143; id., *Theology of the Liturgy. The Sacramental Foundation of Christian Existence*, Collected Works, Vol. 11, ed. Michael J. Miller, San Francisco 2014, 390 – respectively id., *Theologie der Liturgie. Die sakramentale Begründung christlicher Existenz*, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 11, ed. Gerhard Ludwig Müller, Freiburg 2008, 466.

utopianism, and in ecclesiology against a reductive sociological approach.” To counter these limits in the realm of worship, Benedict emphasizes “the characteristic of ‘pointing beyond’ that typifies Christian liturgy.”¹⁰

Benedict is not alone in these concerns. Even Archbishop Rembert Weakland, writing as a member of the Catholic Common Ground Initiative, thirty-five years after the liturgical reforms began, raised similar questions regarding the implementation of the conciliar reforms.¹¹ The shift to *versus populum* put new demands on priests, and as Weakland observed, “Many adopted a kind of colloquial style that was and is unbecoming the liturgical moment.” This led him to ask, “Has the personality of the priest-presider now become too prominent in the liturgy,” a dimension (even if unintended) of a worshipping community’s self-focus, “to the detriment of the more objective nature of the liturgy itself?” He mentioned other liturgical practices “of dubious origin” (his example: “holding hands”) introduced out of a new “desire to emphasize the nature of the community.” He also wondered whether certain steps to avoid a “magical” understanding of sacraments inadvertently “forged a Pelagian mentality that forgets God is the primary actor?” Again: “Has the community or parish at times distorted the rite by seeking to do its ‘own thing’ – as creative as it may have seemed to the assembled group or the specialists who guided it?” This last dynamic may underlie Chauvet’s concern about what he concisely termed “smug self-celebration.”¹² In sum, though they may overemphasize it, the TLM-ers are not alone in their concerns about an overemphasis on the community dimension of postconciliar liturgical celebration when the council itself taught that “the sacred liturgy is principally the worship of the divine majesty” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 33).

4. Conclusion

The TLM “movement” is complex and diverse. Those who, from within it, reject the council and (with selectivity) this or that pope and stir up others to do the same damage to the church. *Traditionis Custodes* is Pope Francis’s strategy to limit the damage. But also within the TLM orbit are persons trying to find the way, in confusing times and as their conscience shows them how to live devout and holy Catholic lives. Few though they may be (?), let us not forget about them – and even be willing to learn what they may have to offer the church by their witness. If they try to speak in this time of preparation for the Synod in 2023, will they be heard, and what would they say?

The author was invited to offer counter-points to Doyle’s essay, “The Traditional Latin Mass Movement and the Unity of the Church.” After opening remarks of appreciation for Doyle’s ecclesial spirit and for elements of his essay, the author makes three points.

¹⁰ Jonathon Martin Ciraulo, Sacramentally Regulated Eschatology in Hans Urs von Balthasar and Pope Benedict XVI, in: *ProEc* 24/2 (2015) 216–234, at 229.

¹¹ Rembert G. Weakland, Liturgy and Common Ground, in: *America* 180/5 (1999) 7–11. The quotations that follow are from page 10 of this article.

¹² Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament. A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan and Madeleine Beaumont, Collegeville 1995, 338.

(1) Within the TLM, besides a divisive element deserving critique, others only seek to worship in a way consistent with conciliar teaching but often difficult to find in parish life. (2) Take care not to misunderstand that way of worship, which unites priests and people in offering “the holy sacrifice of the Mass” in thankful adoration of God’s holiness, glory, and majesty. (3) It is not only TLM extremists but also advocates of the reformed liturgy who recognize that celebrations of that liturgy can slip into, perhaps in some places be characterized by, an excessive horizontalism (e.g., Chauvet’s reference to “smug self-celebration”). Finally, what would happen if we listened to the faithful (non-divisive) Catholics drawn to a TLM-style of worship? In this era of synodality, would they be heard, and what would they say?