

How to deal with the Traditional Latin Mass Movement?

Thoughts on William H. Johnston's Reply

from Dennis M. Doyle

Dennis Doyle antwortet auf die Kritik an seinem im Dezember 2021 publizierten MThZ-Beitrag. Im Horizont des Zugeständnisses sich im Streben nach rhetorischer Exuberanz ergeben habender Fehler wird die Notwendigkeit anerkannt, sich verständnisvoll bezüglich der legitimen Anliegen loyaler konservativer Katholiken zu verhalten. Demnach ist es rechters, die praktische Entscheidung von Papst Franziskus in dieser komplexen Frage nach der Liturgie einer kritischen Anfrage zu unterstellen. Gleichwohl wird die zuvor artikulierte Unterstützung der päpstlichen Restriktion mit dem Argument verteidigt, dass die schädlichen Begleiterscheinungen der Bewegung um die vorkonziliare Liturgie diese selbst in Misskredit gebracht haben. In einer polarisierten kirchenpolitischen Situation müssen alle Diskursteilnehmer sich demütig der Begrenztheit ihrer Positionierungen bewusst sein und sich um einen Austausch im Geist christlicher Nächstenliebe bemühen.

I thank my colleague, William Johnston, for his response to my article. His tone sounds to me as if he is striking up a conversation between friends about a serious matter. I believe such conversation is much needed not only between the two of us but far beyond. He expressed appreciation for several things that I said but then added some challenges. He disagrees with specific points I made and to some degree with the position I took concerning Pope Francis' recent restrictions on the celebration of the TLM. He concludes with a reference to the Synod on Synodality. Will the concerns of those who accept Vatican II and who support church leadership but who continue to strongly desire the opportunity to celebrate the TLM be heard?

1. In need of clarity and differentiation

My main area of theological concentration is ecclesiology. Johnston's expertise in sacramental and liturgical theology surpasses mine. He has written an entire book on *Summorum Pontificum*, the 2007 document of Pope Benedict XVI that expanded the use of the TLM.¹ In my article I explained that I was writing personally and with a passion. I must admit, though, that at times I put forth loose rhetoric more than careful analysis, such as when I

¹ Cf. *William H. Johnston*, *Care for the Church and Its Liturgy. A Study of Summorum Pontificum and the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite*, Collegeville 2013.

wrote “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.” I must also admit Johnston’s point that many TLMers may have a high sense of participating in the liturgy as well as that many RM-goers might not. Moreover, it is not entirely without merit to worship in ways that acknowledge the holy transcendence of God. I also erred in the absolutist way I took exception to the claim of TLMers that “the RM is oriented toward celebrating ourselves.” Johnson insightfully points out that several figures whom I admire have warned about exactly that danger in specific cases. In places, I wish I had expressed myself less generally and more respectfully. As Johnston acknowledges, though, at other times I made efforts to appreciate the concerns of TLM-attenders and to acknowledge problems in the implementation of the RM.

Neither Johnston nor I know actual numbers or percentages of who might be classified as a radical traditionalist or a conservative traditionalist as distinct from conservative Catholics who simply are attracted to and experience their spiritual needs being fulfilled by the TLM. In my article, I tried to stress that such categories, while useful, have their limitations. Pope Francis surveyed bishops worldwide about the TLM and expressed serious concern over the results, but the data from that survey was not released. *Summorum Pontificum* had itself called for some kind of follow-up. As Johnston pointed out, it was Archbishop Augustine Di Noia of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith who identified a divisive “TLM Movement” that is hostile to Vatican II and church leadership.

Johnston disputes neither the existence nor the problematic nature of such a movement. He emphasizes, however, the importance of distinguishing among the different types of TLM-goers: the radical traditionalists, the conservative traditionalists, and the conservatives. He expresses special concern about this third group of conservatives, implying that Pope Francis’ decision in reaction to what he takes to be a present crisis could have been more differentiated and more sensitive to loyal Catholics attached to the TLM.² Johnston sees a potential for problems that could have been avoided if the pastoral needs of these loyal Catholics would have been honored.

2. Inherent Limits of the current situation and its challenges

Although I agree that the people who might fit roughly into these categories need to be distinguished conceptually from each both individually and sociologically, I do not believe that in the real-life everyday world, an innocent group can be treated in a practical way that isolates them from the other groups. In my judgment, it is more the case that the bad apples have spoiled the whole barrel. In the present, polarized situation, which I have argued is very different from the time of Benedict’s 2007 *Summorum Pontificum*, I do not see how

² Cf. id., Traditionis Custodes: How Did We Get Here?, in: Church Life Journal (01.10.2021), in: <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/traditionis-custodes-how-did-we-get-here/> [accessed on 10.05.2022]; also id., Traditiones Custodes Challenges Everyone, in: Church Life Journal (05.11.2021), in: <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/traditionis-custodes-challenges-everyone/> [accessed on 10.05.2022].

a special effort can be made to meet the so-called needs or desires of loyal conservatives while at the same time interrupting the expansion of the TLM movement.

The question at hand is whether the TLM movement should be allowed to expand aggressively or whether it needs to be significantly curtailed. Pope Francis has made the judgment that Pope Benedict's experiment of mutually enhancing dialectical development has been tried and found wanting. Francis has allowed for the continued celebration of the TLM to address the desires of those who are affectionately attached to it. He wants to stop its expansion in parishes insofar as it stands in direct competition with the RM. He wants to stop newly ordained priests from founding personal parishes based on the TLM. At this moment in history, attachment to the TLM cannot be entirely separated as a social and cultural phenomenon from the rejection of Vatican II and of the RM even if there are individuals and even groups who personally manage a more loyal balance. It is not feasible to celebrate a TLM with a sign outside reading "no rad trads allowed."

Johnston admits that historically the most legitimate desires for the TLM are rooted in dissatisfaction with the deficiencies of the RM, especially with its not-always-legitimate variations. In that regard, it is almost impossible to avoid all competitiveness. And then there are the young people who are supposedly simply attracted to this form of mass. In my article, I suggested that the taste for the TLM in young people is something that must be learned and cultivated, if not indoctrinated through recruitment.

Perhaps a big sticking point here is Francis' expressed desire to eventually phase out the TLM. This goal implies a distinction between those currently attached by affection to the TLM and those of future generations. Francis accommodates current but not perpetual needs. He does not want young people to be socialized into the TLM style.

In the limited space offered to him, Johnston did not address this issue. I do not want to put any words into his mouth. Yet I cannot help but think that his concern for the loyal conservatives necessarily carries with it serious implications beyond addressing current pastoral needs. There remains an implied critique of the contemporary offerings of the RM. There arises the implication that even if the dialectic as put forth by Benedict has not worked, there remains the need for some kind of dialectic between the conservatives and the not-so-conservatives. There is also Johnston's expressed concern that restrictions on the celebration of the TLM might be accompanied by restrictions on the status of conservatives in general such that their voices might not sufficiently be heard, even during the present synodal listening processes. There is, moreover, the danger that the restrictions on the TLM will not lead to greater unity but rather move in the opposite direction.

I must acknowledge that Francis made a practical judgment call, and, even though I still strongly support it, as is the case with any practical judgment, it might have been the wrong one. I believe that a large part of the present-day polarization is caused by too many people being certain about matters that can only be judged with degrees of probability. I initially went into my study of *Traditiones Custodes* not knowing what conclusions I would draw. I was very struck, even alarmed, by my exposure to the TLM movement through various forms of social media. Many of the voices struck me as being motivated less by a true love of a faith tradition and more by the individualistic culture as expressed in extremist political

positions. It was as much with my heart as with my brain that I thought, “Thank God someone in a position of power is trying to put the brakes on this madness.” I wrote strongly in support of Pope Francis’ decision.

3. Outlook – a task to work on

I am thankful that my friend and colleague, William Johnston, defended a loyal conservative view out of a love for a faith tradition in an open-minded conversational tone. I am also grateful that he corrected some points that I had expressed in one-sided rhetoric. I strongly agree that loyal conservatives need to be cared for and listen to, and even that some kind of respectful dialectic needs to unfold in our increasingly divided church.

Can such goals be met as the TLM is very gradually phased out? Legitimately celebrated TLMs will not suddenly disappear from the face of the earth. In February 2022, Pope Francis explained that priests of the Fraternity of St. Peter, as well as similar institutes, would not be bound to the restrictions expressed in *Traditiones Custodes* since the use of the 1962 missal was at the origins of their existence and supported by their founding constitution. Over forty years ago, when I was in graduate school, a professor of mine offered caution about directives from Rome. His example reflects in more than one way an older cultural period. He said that if you are in Rome, and you see a sign on a bus that says “No Smoking,” it means that no more than two or three people should light up at one time. Confusion can occur when such directives are interpreted by either German or American minds.

Of course, the TLM movement, the restrictions placed upon the celebration of the TLM, and the current polarized situation are important matters that cannot simply be taken lightly. Amid our differences, we all need to work on humility in regarding the practical challenges we face as well as on developing Christian friendships that can help us to transcend polarization.

The author responds to criticisms of his December 2021 MThZ article by his University of Dayton colleague first by admitting to errors due to rhetorical overexuberance. He acknowledges further the need to be sensitive to the legitimate concerns of loyal conservative Catholics and allows that one can legitimately question the practical judgment of Pope Francis regarding the exceedingly complex matter of the TLM. However, he still defends his stance of strong support for Francis’ position, claiming that the bad apples of the TLM movement have spoiled the whole barrel of TLM celebrations. In the present polarized situation, we all need to acknowledge humbly the limitations of our particular positions as we conduct our conversations in Christian friendship.