

# *Dominus Vobiscum*

## The Appeal of the Tridentine Rite in a Postconciliar Church

*Paula A. Buckner*

**The author reflects on the data she uncovered when researching why some Catholics strongly prefer the Tridentine Rite Mass and reject the vernacular liturgy according to the Rite of Paul VI.**

**I**t started with an on-the-way-out-the-door comment.

She was telling me at a church meeting how much she enjoyed the traditional Latin Mass, which had just received the bishop's approval for celebration, at the Poor Clares monastery in town. "Will you be going?" she eventually asked me. "No. No, I wouldn't," I replied, "just on principle." The pastor had been lingering nearby and now said he had to leave. As he walked past us, he placed his hand on her shoulder, leaned slightly in, looked her in the eye and said: "Come back to the real church."

Since that conversation in 1996, I have met more people who make the eucharistic celebration in the Tridentine Rite part of their faith life at least once a month. My question has remained constant: What does the Tridentine Rite offer them that the vernacular liturgy according to the Rite of Paul VI does not? Why is this meaningful for them?

Plenty of theologians posited theories, many relegating the resurgence to nostalgia for older Catholics who had grown up in it. But few seemed to heed the motto of the City News Bureau of Chicago: "If your mother says she loves you,

*Paula Buckner is a copy editor for the Rockford (IL) Register Star. A South Side Chicago native and a professed Secular Franciscan (1988), she received a master of arts in pastoral studies from Catholic Theological Union at Chicago (2005). Her e-mail: sfo88@aol.com.*

check it out.” So, as someone who works professionally in the news business, I would.

For my master’s thesis at Catholic Theological Union at Chicago, I focused my inquiry on St. Mary Oratory in Rockford, Illinois, where the Tridentine Rite is the only rite of the Eucharist celebrated. Initially, the focus was baby-boomer Catholics, and younger believers who seem to be flocking to these pews. Later on, however, useful information from people older than 45 was collected and introduced into the final paper.

### *Return of the Tridentine Rite*

The “Tridentine Rite,” Latin Rite Mass promulgated by Pope Pius V in 1570, while officially suppressed in 1969, never quite left the church.

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, no. 50, called for the reform of the Mass so as to foster the devout, active participation of the people of God. In accord with the work of various conciliar and post-conciliar committees (see Bugnini, 99–134, 337–392), the *Novus Ordo Missae*, commonly termed the “Mass of Paul VI,” was mandated for all Catholics on the First Sunday of Advent 1969. Permission was granted, however, for elderly or infirm priests to use the 1962 edition of the Roman Missal only when celebrating Mass without a congregation.

Two indults, issued in 1971 and 1984, allowed the Tridentine Mass under limited circumstances. Then in 1988, Pope John Paul II issued *Ecclesia Dei*, an apostolic letter encouraging bishops and pastors to permit the frequent celebration of the traditional Latin Mass for Catholics who desire it.

### *Rockford Meets Latin*

Following the prescripts of *Ecclesia Dei*, a small group of Catholics from the Rockford, Illinois, area petitioned then-Bishop Arthur J. O’Neill for a Tridentine Mass. He approved six in 1989–90, one Saturday a month, at the Poor Clares monastery. The first Masses drew about 200 people, in addition to the 22 nuns cloistered there; by the sixth, attendance was around 50, and the Masses discontinued.

A new Rockford bishop in 1994, Thomas G. Doran, brought new hope to the Latin Mass practitioners. Another petition, with at least 500 signatures, was sent to the bishop, who approved the Tridentine Rite in 1996.

Mass is celebrated at St. Mary Oratory twice weekdays, once on Saturdays and twice on Sundays: at 7 A.M. (Low Mass) and 9 A.M. (High Mass) for about 360 people. Also, St. Patrick in southwest Rockford and St. Mary in Aurora, offer the Tridentine Mass, bringing total attendance for this rite to about 500 a week.

## *Surveying the Community*

The oratory's worshipping community is widely diverse in age, marital status, and occupation. Many are from the Rockford area, but a substantial number live outside Rockford or the Rockford Diocese, driving 30 minutes to two hours one way to attend Mass here. Ninety-five percent of this assembly, the exception being youngsters who come with their parents, abandoned the Rite of Paul VI, whether two or nine or more years ago, for the Tridentine Rite.

It is to Fr. Brian A.T. Bovee, a priest of the Institute of Christ the King Sovereign Priest who has led the St. Mary community since 1996, that I first put my question: Why is the Tridentine Rite meaningful for you? In a conversation on 20 January 2005, this presbyter for almost 24 years replied: "The new is more touchy-feely, which for some is OK but doesn't satisfy. The attitude of . . . watering down, that some things are not important. Confession. Idea of sacrifice. Of prayer, of family. It's all there. Being an old conservative from way back, when I was in seminary, even before, I had this sense that "the lady doth protest too much," the line from Macbeth. . . . The more I found, the more I was disgusted with what I saw, the false presence, etc., etc. And so, with [my] language backgrounds, a sense of continuity applied for me, and so when the opportunity [to celebrate the Tridentine Rite] came, I took it."

Fr. Bovee gave permission to survey the community during coffee and doughnuts after the 9 A.M. Mass. Before conducting the survey on 23 January, 13 February and 27 February, I prayed with the assembly on these three Sundays in an effort to see, at least on the surface, what attracts members of this community to the Tridentine Rite. Each week saw mostly the same 125 adults, teenagers and children; 90 participated in the survey.

### *And These People of God Said . . .*

Tallying the surveys showed a particular definition of reverence as the No. 1 concern of these Roman Catholics who, young or old or in between, consciously decide to attend the Tridentine Rite. Of the 90 surveys returned, 62 people [= 70 percent] selected "reverence" as a reason they prefer the Tridentine Rite to the *Novus Ordo*, and 16 of those 62 [18 percent] selected "reverence" as their only reason.

Many respondents also completed an "other" category for attending. Among them: "I want to attend the Roman Catholic Mass of the ages and receive all the sacraments in the ancient rite, not something made up in the 1970s by Protestants," "History, dignity, music not banal but beautiful" and—from a preteen girl—"I believe it to be the closest to the intention Christ had for the Mass."

One respondent was more thorough in her explanation. She attends the Tridentine Rite as often as she can because she does not live near a church that offers it. She teaches the First Communion CCD class and is the organist at the church she attends regularly, and her eldest son is a seminarian. She wrote:

This is the Mass as it had been for centuries; turning our backs on the Tradition of the church impoverishes us all. I've read *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and don't see it in the *Novus Ordo*. S.C. stressed Gregorian chant, use of Latin by the people, and only making the most necessary of changes.

The Traditional Mass is Catholic (in the universal sense). No need for Masses in multiple languages. Wherever one travels the Mass is the same, highlighting the unity of the one, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic Church.

I appreciate the focus on God as opposed to how wonderful we, the “community,” are. I appreciate the priest facing the altar, with us, offering the Holy Sacrifice on our behalf.

The Traditional Mass is the same Mass attended and LOVED by centuries of saints. I love the continuity of it—praying the same Mass as St. Jean de Chantal, St. Terese and the multitudes of other saints. This is the Mass the English martyrs died for! They died to preserve what we have casually tossed aside.

“To preserve what we have casually tossed aside”—reverence, a focus on God and prayers that are particular to the Tridentine Rite are chief among these things, according to the survey group. Their concerns also were borne out in a roundtable discussion and in interviews in January and February with members of the oratory community.

### ***Reverence***

The Catholics who celebrate the Tridentine Rite see reverence for God reflected in appearance and actions during Mass. They spoke of their concern that the informality of American culture has overtaken the celebration of the Mass according to the Rite of Paul VI, from not dressing up for God as we would for other important events; to not genuflecting; to unnecessary conversations during the liturgy, which one respondent said shows also a lack of reverence of others.

### ***The Assembly***

Many of the oratory Catholics indicated that the focus on the assembly that Vatican II wrought is also to blame for this perceived casualness, for a pervading “social atmosphere” in the postconciliar church. “We can look at each other down here,” a 27-year-old woman remarked during coffee and doughnuts.

The *Novus Ordo* Mass is horizontal, they said, not vertical. They believe that it is not as God-directed as the Tridentine Rite, and perhaps too actively partici-

patory, which for many shows itself mostly in the sign of peace. As one survey respondent stated in an interview:

I was totally, I don't want to say appalled, but shocked that in the Latin Mass—I kept waiting for it because that was my time to say hi to everybody, and where is that? Well, it's not a congregation thing [in the Tridentine Rite]. In the new Mass when they do that “Peace be with you” thing, it becomes like a social hour and everyone pattin' on the back and everyone's shakin' hands and 'how ya doing?' It's not in every place. . . . I have been to [*Novus Ordo* Masses] where it lasts a good long time. I went to one where the priest came down from the altar and actually circulated around during the sign of peace. I'm ready for coffee and doughnuts, you know? Of virtually everything, it's the biggest overall [concern], coming back to the basic theme of God-focused instead of the congregation.

### ***The Prayers***

Before the Second Vatican Council, most Catholics assisted at Mass by praying silently in their pews, whether following along in their missals or praying the rosary. The movement to “make the liturgy of the Church the integrating force, the center, of the Catholic's whole life” (Swidler, 32) encouraged a more visible participation of the people, allowing the whole assembly to recite responses that had been given solely by the servers and certain marked passages of prayers intoned by the priest.

In the reformed rite, the assembly reclaimed its voice, from “Amen” when receiving Communion, to “And also with you” when the priest-president says “The Lord be with you,” to singing the “Holy, holy, holy.” The assembly also gets to proclaim the Creed, to sing or recite the *Gloria*, and to publicly proclaim its sinfulness and hope for pardon in the penitential rite.

### ***The Words of Consecration***

Several St. Mary's survey respondents mentioned this part of the Mass as the most bothersome of the 1969 reforms.

In the Tridentine Rite, when the wine is consecrated, the priest's Latin is translated: “For this is the chalice of my blood, of the new and eternal testament: the mystery of faith: which shall be shed for you and for many unto the remission of sins.” The reformed rite renders the text: “This is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven,” and the mystery of faith is proclaimed responsorially by the assembly when the words of consecration are concluded.

The objection primarily is the translation of the Latin *pro multis*, “for many,” as “for all.” Why is this a concern? For some, this sentence involves the validity

of the sacrament when it is taken as a theological statement of salvation of all people, including those who do not believe.

Because of this concern, some of the traditional Catholics said they never attend a *Novus Ordo* Mass. Many of them said they often make vacation plans around where a Tridentine Mass is offered. Some make a spiritual communion, reading the liturgy from their missals in their hotel room, rather than endanger their souls and salvation by attending a non-Tridentine Rite.

Other participants said they attend a non-Tridentine Mass if they must, but they will either “offer it up” or give thanks to God afterward, on the drive home, for the gift of the Mass according to the Tridentine Rite. “We don’t go ‘ewww’ after leaving a *Novus Ordo* Mass,” one respondent said, mentioning that a recent non-Tridentine funeral “was very respectful, but you do appreciate what you have more [when you cannot attend].”

### *Where Do We Go from Here?*

Agreeing to disagree is often the best that people of differing beliefs and opinions can do. This is where we seem to find ourselves, postconciliar Catholics and those who adhere to the Tridentine Rite, for we have encountered a clash of theologies, particularly when speaking of the Mass as sacrifice and as Paschal Banquet.

One survey respondent was blunt in her assessment of the reformed rite and why she no longer cared for it: “It’s no longer a sacrifice.” She and others equate the action of the Canon with ancient Jewish temple practice in which the priest offered grain, wine, and animals on the altar of God on behalf of a sinful people gathered in prayer outside the Court of Priests. The Tridentine Catholics of St. Mary Oratory draw primarily on the twenty-third session of the Council of Trent that affirmed the Mass as “a divine sacrifice in which the same Christ who offered himself once in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross is contained and is offered in an unbloody manner” (see *CCC*, no. 1367) and the propitiary nature of the Mass.

The two rites do not have the same appearance in this regard—bread and wine are offered on the high altar in the Tridentine, while bread is broken and wine shared at the table of the Lord—but the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist nonetheless remains in the reformed rite. This is borne out in the language of seven of the eucharistic prayers approved for use in the United States, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Article 3, nos. 1322–1419, specifically 1323 quoting the CSL [no. 47], 1330, 1350, 1356 and 1365–67), and the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (nos. 2, 11, 27).

However, the reformed rite of 1969 envisions the Eucharist also as thanksgiving and praise (*CCC*, nos. 1358–61), a sacred meal that recalls “Jesus’ own historical

ministry of table-fellowship” and is at the same time eschatological and reconciles us to God (Mitchell, 19–22, 55).

The Second Vatican Council was just as blunt in its assessment of the Mass as the survey respondent was, writing in the “Instruction on the Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery”:

Hence the Mass, the Lord’s Supper, is at the same time and inseparably: a sacrifice in which the sacrifice of the cross is perpetuated; a memorial of the death and resurrection of the Lord, who said ‘do this in memory of me’ (Lk 22.19); a sacred banquet in which, through the communion of the body and blood of the Lord, the People of God share the benefits of the Paschal Sacrifice, renew the New Covenant which God has made with man once for all through the Blood of Christ, and in faith and hope foreshadow the eschatological banquet in the kingdom of the Father, proclaiming the Lord’s death ‘till his coming.’ (Flannery, 102–3)

Furthermore, a number of the Tridentine-Rite adherents said the priest, by virtue of holy orders, is the only person who ought to touch the Body of Christ and the vessels that hold the consecrated bread and the wine. Because of this, these Catholics will receive the Host only on the tongue, never in the hand. Should they attend a non-Tridentine Mass, they said, they receive only from the priest—even if this means walking the circumference of the church to get into his Communion line.

However, liturgy is the work of the people, and members of the assembly put their baptismal call into practice as extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist; as lectors and servers and choir members; as a priestly people of God who intercede for the world and the church, who receive the Body and Blood of Christ in Communion, then go forth to “continue Christ’s mission in the world. The words ‘Go in peace to love and serve the Lord’ are a call to evangelization, a call to share the good news, a call to mission, a call to give witness” (Trautman, 22; see also Huck, 307–8).

Despite wishful thinking or prayers for reunification, despite the potential for understanding that could be fostered by dialogue along the lines of the Catholic Common Ground Initiative, Tridentine Catholics and Vatican II Catholics are unlikely to come together because the chasm between their theologies and perceptions is too wide. For example, the Tridentine Catholics in the roundtable discussion and in the interviews were asked: “If you could change one thing about the *Novus Ordo* Mass, what would it be?” Several people responded: “Everything,” which was met by a chorus of affirmation. When Vatican II Catholics who grew up in the pre-Vatican II church were informally asked whether they would go back to the Latin Mass, they responded with a hearty “no.” Many said they prefer the

visible participation they are afforded in the reformed rite; others cited the ability to pray in a language they understand, that if they are reading the English translation of the Mass out of a missal, why not just pray in English in the first place?

The root of this separation goes beyond finger-pointing and saying “we’re right, you’re wrong,” although people on both sides of the fence certainly do just that. It is precisely the opposite: The Tridentine Mass and the *Novus Ordo* Mass have the blessing of the pope as approved rites for the eucharistic liturgy. The dilemma, says Fr. Brian Geary, pastor at St. Pat’s in Rockford, is that “when you start to say that one of them is invalid, now we got problems because the pope has declared them both valid. But it looks like one is an American penny and one is a Canadian. They don’t really mix very well. So you must say, however, that both are a representation of Calvary, that both are valid sacrifices offered to God, and that both distribute the true Body and Blood of Christ. If my people are attached to one or the other, then I’m happy to provide both.”

Is it so horrible to admit the slim likelihood that the pre- and post-Vatican II Catholics will come together? Not necessarily a bad thing, “I think it’s more of a sad thing,” one oratory Catholic from Stoughton, Wisconsin said. “God has plans and he knows what he’s doing, I guess. I really don’t, I try not to focus on that too much, so I stumble a little in having an opinion on it because I really don’t know if it’s a bad thing or not. I was talking to Sister today, we were talking about some of the articles we were reading, and I said I think we run a risk though of immersing ourselves in the this-is-right-that’s-wrong type of articles. I think in the traditional Mass, we know what is right and let’s just stick with that and pray for the other folks. I think it’s good to learn and to read writings and articles. I know for me, though, I run the risk of just gobbling all that up. I don’t want to get too focused in just my own faith life on just reading articles and books all the time of “nyah-nyah, we’ve got it right, they’ve got it wrong,” you know? I think, we stick to our tradition, we pray like crazy and hope for the best.”

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