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AGATHA CHRISTIE AND THE LATIN MASS

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If you are not a Catholic, you may be puzzled about the family feud that has recently erupted in the Church over, of all things, the old Latin Mass or how we worship God.

In 1969, interpreting proposals of the Second Vatican Council, Pope St Paul VI authorised a “new order” of the Mass, usually celebrated in the local language with the priest facing the people. He swept aside the traditional Latin Mass, standardised since 1570, but with roots going back to the early Christian era.

Most Catholics, including myself, welcomed the new rite but some resisted, persistently maintaining and defending the old forms. These traditionalists found powerful friends in the English-speaking world who spoke up for them.

In 1971, Pope Paul received a letter signed by literati, artists, musicians and scholars including Joan Sutherland, Yehudi Menuhin, Graham Greene and Kenneth Clark. They argued that the traditional Mass should still be available, citing its cultural patrimony evident in art, architecture, poetry and music. The magnificent and beautiful music composed for the old Latin rite does not easily work with the simpler new form.

Suddenly, among the signatories, the Pope recognised a name, Agatha Christie! This devout Anglican was one of his favourite authors, so he readily granted permission to England to retain the old Latin rite, under specific conditions. This concession is known as the “Agatha Christie indult”.

In 1988, after Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre led a traditionalist break with Rome, Pope St John Paul II extended the concession to the whole Church. In 2007, an even more generous policy was firmly set in place by his successor Benedict XVI. He defined two forms of the Mass, as *ordinary*, the modern rite, and *extraordinary*, the old Latin rite. He made them virtually equal. Any priest who knew Latin could choose to celebrate the old rite, if people asked for it. Significantly, priests no longer needed the permission of a bishop. But that would turn out to be the weak point.

On July 16th, Pope Francis abruptly reversed the generous policy of his predecessor, living in retirement in his back garden. In a personal decree, he severely restricted the “old rite”. He has even tried to ensure that it should die out. Priests must have a bishop’s permission to celebrate the traditional Latin Mass. Young priests ordained henceforth need a second OK from Rome. His letter accompanying the short decree

cites a secret survey made among bishops to justify his claim that the old rite is divisive. Francis' idea of "unity" is uniformity.

It might be argued that key points in his decree are plainly untrue and that the document is so incompetently drafted as to be moot anyway. I worked for ten years in the Vatican. I know the checks and balances that moderate even papal statements before they are published. Whatever process was observed, the bishops suddenly received the July 16th decree.

The Pope has handballed the implementation of his decree to the bishops. They are now caught, between the rock of St Peter and the hard place of caring for the flock, between loyalty to the Pope's restrictive decree and the spiritual needs of some of their most committed people.

The pastoral effects of his *dictat* are: confusion, anger and hurt, together with puzzlement: "But was this really necessary?" and "Wasn't that settled peacefully by Pope Benedict?"

Having received copies of a flood of anguished letters, protesting about the severe papal ruling, I hear not only their pain but moving arguments explaining their love for the stately old rite, its attractive silence and engaging spirituality.

Among the letters. I noted the names of at least eleven Melbourne people I know well. These women and men include leading Catholics in such fields as education and youth ministry. They are certainly not divisive extremists, aggressive cranks or nostalgic old folk. Young people and young families wrote many of these sad letters.

What has surprised my Vatican II generation is how young people are gravitating to the old rite. In 2008, I glimpsed that at World Youth Day in Sydney when I celebrated a solemn Latin Mass for an international youth movement known as "Juventutem". This Latin word means "youth", and is used in the beautiful psalm recited at the beginning of the traditional Mass.

I have never opposed the "new" order of Mass. I celebrate it every day. Indeed I have published three widely used manuals and two other books (in the US and Spain) on how to celebrate this post-Vatican II liturgy *properly*, just as the Pope wishes. At the same time, I appreciate and value the rich variety in the forms of worship in the one great Church, her inclusive "unity in diversity". That includes glorious non-Latin liturgies of the "Eastern" Catholic Churches: Byzantine Ukrainians, Lebanese Maronites and Melchites, Chaldeans from Iraq, Syro-Malabar Indians, some Egyptian Copts and Russian Catholics, all found in Australia.

Catholics do not argue so much about *what* we believe, which is clearly defined. We argue about *how* we do things. But not only Catholics. My father, a high church Anglican vicar, knew this only too well. He used to joke about sects in the Deep South of the US who fought over how much water was needed for a valid baptism. He

claimed that “ten gallon Baptists” opposed “twenty gallon Baptists” who opposed “thirty gallon Baptists” and so on.

How the merciful Lord must smile at some of us Christians as we make our pilgrim way forward on planet earth. But, let us avoid diversions, rise above distractions and set our hearts on serving God and people as best we can.

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