

THIS IS A HARD SAYING; WHO CAN ACCEPT IT

Some of you may be aware that there is a kind of controversy brewing in certain corners of our Catholic Church. It has to do with what is called the Traditional Latin Mass. TLM, for short. Some brief historical context. For hundreds of years the Mass was celebrated in the Latin language although the actual New Testament was not written in Latin but rather in Greek. In the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus educated Romans and other people spoke Greek. The common folk spoke Latin. In the Holy Land they spoke Aramaic or Hebrew too. Eventually all throughout the Empire, Latin became the language of choice, even for liturgy. That continued even after the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 AD.

Fast forward to the early part of the 16th century, the 1500's, a thousand years later. There were revolts going on against the Catholic Church from within the Church because of certain abuses especially financial abuses and life-style of the clergy abuses. Luther in Germany. Calvin in Switzerland. Zwingli in Germany. Initially there were attempts to root out corruption among the clergy but the critical spirit soon spread into other areas of Church life, including the celebration of the Eucharist.

From within the Catholic Church, the response was varied over decades but eventually there was the Council of Trent which had three sessions spread over twenty years beginning in 1545. This Council revised the sacraments; restated church teaching, launched a genuine reform of the clergy and liturgy, and condemned those who rejected the centuries long tradition of the Church. The Council of Trent revised and standardized the celebration of Mass—in the Latin language. That revision of the Eucharist liturgy became known as the Tridentine Mass, the Traditional Latin Mass (TLM). From the middle 1500's until the end of the Second Vatican Council in the mid 1960's, over 400 years, that was the form for the celebration of Mass—everywhere in the world, no matter the country.

Vatican II sought to achieve its own revision and simplification of the Mass. More importantly, for the first time in a very long time, the Mass was allowed to be celebrated not just in Latin but in the language of the particular country in which the Mass was being celebrated. So in the late 1960's this revision began to filter into parish life. First Mass was part in English (the readings) and part in Latin still (the prayers and Eucharistic Prayer). Then the entire Mass was celebrated in the vernacular language. In addition, for many centuries the priest stood at the head of his people at Mass, facing the same direction as the congregation, with his back to them but leading them as they all prayed to God. But the Second Vatican Council decreed that the altar should be situated in such a way that the priest would face the people as he led them in prayer. This was a significant change and it coincided with the altar being seen as the table of the Lord as it was at the Last Supper.

Not every Catholic agreed with this change. Some believed that the Mass had always been in Latin and should not be changed. Except that the Mass had not always been in Latin. Others felt that the altar should never have been turned around. However, in order to establish these revisions, the Pope and the Bishops decreed that the former Traditional Latin Mass was not to be used any longer. In its place there was to be used the New Form of the Mass This is called

the Novus Ordo. That lasted for about thirty years and the New Form was thoroughly established in Eucharistic celebrations all around the world. Then Pope Saint John Pail II gave permission for limited use of the TLM under certain circumstances. There was still interest and various bishops, priests and laity used the Old Form. Then Pope Benedict XVI loosened the restrictions even more and now even some younger Catholics started to attend the TLM in various churches.

But over the past dozen years or so, coinciding with the politicization of almost everything in our lives today, the TLM began to be politicized too. Some who favored this celebration of the Mass began to state that the Mass should never have been changed at all. Others claimed that the Novus Ordo was not an authentic reform in the church even though thousands of bishops voted for it at an Ecumenical Council as they had at Trent. Some began to claim that Vatican II was not an authentic Council and its teachings should be abandoned and there should be a return to the status quo before Vatican II.

Pope Francis thought that this was going too far so he said that there were going to be some new restrictions placed on the celebration of the TLM. The local bishop would have to give permission. Local priests would have to be given permission to celebrate. Where and when were to be limited. So there is presently upsetment in the ranks of those who favor the TLM although it is by no means all who participate in and favor this form who want to overthrow a Council of the Church.

But here is the thing. We are losing sight of the forest for the trees. The Eucharist is about Jesus being sacramentally present in our midst as the living bread that sustains and nourishes us. The language used in celebrating is secondary in importance to what is happening. In both forms the Lord Jesus comes and is Really Present. What the Pope has decreed seems harsh to some. You can hear people say: This is a hard saying; who can accept it? The danger is that this is precisely what some of Jesus' own disciples said about his teaching on the Eucharist. It is precisely what some of the Protestant Reformers claimed about the teaching on the sacramental real Presence of Jesus in the Mass back in the sixteenth century.

Joshua, over three thousand years ago makes a declaration: "As for me and my household we will follow the Lord." Yes. That is precisely the right approach. None of us should walk away sad from our Eucharistic Lord because we don't like what we hear even if it is from the Pope. Jesus asked the twelve if they wanted to go away too because of the hard saying. Peter speaks for them: "Lord to whom would we go? You have the words of everlasting life." Yes. He does. Yes. He is. Let us not forget. Let us stay—and be fed.

May the Lord bless us today and give us his peace.