Opinion
Guest Voices

A priest elevates the Eucharist after consecrating it during a Latin Mass. (RNS/Unsplash/Creative Commons/Shalone Cason)

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February 6, 2026
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"Paris is well worth a Mass" was reportedly the attitude of King Henry IV when he was trying to secure the French throne. As a result, he converted from Protestantism to Catholicism in 1593.

Today, the Eucharist, which is supposed to be the sacrament of unity, is too often a battlefield between Catholics who support the Traditional Latin Mass and those who want to see it disappear. Both sides need to ask themselves whether the fight is worth something more important than Paris: the unity of the church.

You must be my age to remember before the Second Vatican Council, when the liturgy was entirely in Latin in Catholic churches, except in those using Eastern Rite liturgies, where it was often in Greek. In Rome, it had been changed from Greek into Latin in the third and fourth centuries so the common people could understand it — a pragmatic decision, not a theological one.

When I was young, we took it for granted that the Mass was in Latin. It was something that made us different from Protestants. We could go to the same Mass anywhere in the world. The Scripture readings were in Latin, although on Sunday the priest would reread the Gospel in English before giving his sermon. Otherwise, unless you had a translation, you had no idea what the readings were.

The Eucharistic prayer was the priest' s prayer, which he said with his back to us. The altar boy would ring the bells to notify us when the priest raised the host and chalice for us to adore. The bell also rang to call us to Communion.

Other than that, the priest did his thing and the congregation passively watched or prayed in silence.

In high school from 1958 to 1962, I had a St. Joseph's Missal with Latin on one side of the page and English on the other so that I could follow what the priest was praying when I went to daily Mass, but that was not the norm. My parents had prayerbooks they read during Mass that had no connection to what the priest was

doing. Others in the church silently said their rosaries during Mass.

And prior to the 20th century, Communion was infrequent. My parents were among the first children allowed to go to Communion. Those who want to bring back the Tridentine liturgy, if they want to be truly traditional, should go to Communion less frequently and not allow their children to go to Communion. Otherwise they are accepting early 20th-century innovations.

Although I entered the Jesuits prior to the Second Vatican Council and went through a very traditional novitiate, I did not find the liturgical changes difficult to accept. Our conservative novice master taught us a course on the history of the Mass using Josef A. Jungmann's "Mass of the Roman Rite," which was published in English in 1951. It taught us that the Mass was always changing throughout history.

The transition was also made easier by our traditional novitiate's emphasis on obedience. If the church decided to change the liturgy, we were to accept it without question. To do otherwise would be disobedient.

The Jesuits in charge of formation were no help during the transition. They were clueless about what was happening. The classics professors argued about how we should pronounce "Amen" in English. The first time our superior said the Eucharistic prayer in English, he got as far as the institutional narrative and switched to "Hoc est enim corpus meum." The next day, he was able to do it all in English.

Some of my classmates had problems with the transition. Before ordination in 1973, one confessed that it just wasn't the same because in the old church, after ordination, he would be allowed to touch the consecrated bread for the first time. Now anyone could receive Communion in the hand. It was as if part of his priesthood had been taken away.

But for the most part, the liturgical changes were accepted and implemented with excitement and joy. They were the most visible reforms of Vatican II. And after a bit of confusion, they were accepted overwhelmingly by Catholics in the pews.

But there were two groups of holdouts.

First, there were those who found the change difficult because they were used to the old ways and the reforms were not well explained. Popes Paul VI and John Paul II wanted to deal with these people with pastoral sensitivity and patience, but the

popes made clear that eventually, the old Mass was to fade away.

The other group of holdouts was more problematic. They objected to the new liturgy in principle and felt it was blasphemous. In truth, these ideologues objected to all the reforms of the council, not just liturgy. They were divisive and contentious.

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Some of these dissenters were led into schism by French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, despite all the Vatican's efforts to appease him. To undermine Lefebvre and win back schismatics to the church, the Vatican permitted more frequent celebration of the Traditional Latin Mass. This strategy was partially successful, as exemplified by Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter, which celebrates the old Mass but is in unity with the pope.

But there was an unanticipated side effect: Some who grew up after Vatican II began to attend these Latin Masses. Most were not ideologues, but pious, theologically unsophisticated Catholics who were attracted by the ritual and mysterious ceremony that allowed them to focus on adoration and private prayer without the distraction of communal participation.

It is a mistake for liturgical reformers to lump this third group in with the ideologues who reject Vatican II. These are good, devout people who want to come closer to Jesus and find spiritual nourishment in the old liturgy. Their existence is a result of our failure to better explain the reforms and to make the new liturgy more appealing to them. We should have encouraged them to go to Benediction and explained how it is different from Mass.

Pope Benedict XVI erred in taking away the local bishop's control over the Latin Mass and allowing any priest to celebrate the Traditional Latin Mass anywhere, any time. Pope Francis erred in seeing only the ideologues and not the pious Catholics who liked the old Mass.

Now, poor Pope Leo XIV must figure out how to deal with this mess in a pastoral way that does not empower the ideologues and affirms that the Traditional Latin Mass must eventually fade away. This is why he gets the big bucks.

Leo should keep in place the Francis mandate that seminarians are to be trained and ordained for the reformed liturgy. If they prefer the old Mass, they should not be ordained.

On the other hand, Francis' ban on the Latin Mass in parishes could have more flexibility. It might make sense to return the authority over this to diocesan bishops, although some may prefer to blame the Vatican for not allowing it. And yet, this is exactly the kind of issue that should be handled in a synodal fashion at the local level. And diocesan bishops can more easily determine whether those asking for the Latin Mass are pious Catholics or ideologues, and respond accordingly.

In any case, I would keep some limits on the availability of the Latin Mass. It should be banned on major feasts like Christmas, Holy Week, Easter and holy days, so that the entire community can gather for and take part in these feasts. And, the Latin Mass should not be available every Sunday. Everyone should experience the new liturgy on a regular basis, at least once a month, especially families with children. If one totally rejects the reformed liturgy, then one is out of step with the church.

Meanwhile, Leo should relaunch liturgical reform. The 1998 English translation of the Roman missal by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy should be permitted. Individual prefaces should be written for each Sunday in the A, B and C cycles of Scripture readings. New Eucharistic prayers that are more scriptural should be written.

Henry IV compromised his faith to win Paris. Catholics of all stripes should be able to compromise on the liturgy to maintain the unity of the church. We must respect and love one another, despite our liturgical differences. And everyone should know that we are Christians by our love, not know that we are Catholics by our fights.