

Ten Reasons To Attend The Traditional Latin Mass



Photo courtesy of Saint Ann's Church and Shrine in Buffalo, New York.

By Peter Kwasniewski & Michael Foley

Given that it can often be less convenient for a person or a family to attend the traditional Latin Mass (and I am thinking not only of obvious issues like the place and the time, but also of the lack of a parish infrastructure and the hostile reactions one can get from friends, family, and even clergy), it is definitely worthwhile to remind ourselves of *why we are doing this in the first place*. If something is worth doing, then it's worth persevering in—even at the cost of sacrifices.

This article will set forth a number of reasons why, in spite of all the inconveniences (and even minor persecutions) we have experienced over the years, we and our families *love* to attend the traditional Latin Mass. Sharing these reasons will, we hope, encourage readers everywhere either to begin attending the *usus antiquior* or to continue attending if they might be wavering. Indeed, it is our conviction that the sacred liturgy handed down to us by tradition has never been more important in the life of Catholics, as we behold the “pilgrim Church on earth” continue to forget her theology, dilute her message, lose her identity, and

bleed her members. By preserving, knowing, following, and loving her ancient liturgy, we do our part to bolster authentic doctrine, proclaim heavenly salvation, regain a full stature, and attract new believers who are searching for unadulterated truth and manifest beauty. By handing down this immense gift in turn, and by inviting to the Mass as many of our friends and our families as we can, we are fulfilling our vocation as followers of the Apostles.

Without further ado, ten reasons:

1. You will be formed in the same way that most of the Saints were formed. If we take a conservative estimate and consider the Roman Mass to have been codified by the reign of Pope St. Gregory the Great (ca. 600) and to have lasted intact until 1970, we are talking about close to 1,400 years of the life of the Church—and that's most of her history of saints. The prayers, readings, and chants that they heard and pondered will be the ones you hear and ponder.

For *this* is the Mass that St. Gregory the Great inherited, developed, and solidified. This is the Mass that St. Thomas Aquinas celebrated, lovingly wrote about, and contributed to (he composed the Mass Propers and Office for the Feast of Corpus Christi). This is the Mass that St. Louis IX, the crusader king of France, attended three times a day. This is the Mass that St. Philip Neri had to distract himself *from* before he celebrated it because it so easily sent him into ecstasies that lasted for hours. This is the Mass that was first celebrated on the shores of America by Spanish and French missionaries, such as the North American Martyrs. This is the Mass that priests said secretly in England and Ireland during the dark days of persecution, and this is the Mass that Blessed Miguel Pro risked his life to celebrate before being captured and martyred by the Mexican government. This is the Mass that Blessed John Henry Newman said he would celebrate every waking moment of his life if he could. This is the Mass that the Fr. Frederick Faber called “the most beautiful thing this side of heaven.” This is the Mass that Fr. Damien of Molokai celebrated with leprous hands in the church he had built and painted himself. This is the Mass during which St. Edith Stein, who was later to die in the gas chambers of Auschwitz, became completely enraptured. This is the Mass that great artists such as Evelyn Waugh, David Jones, and Graham Greene loved so much that they lamented its loss with sorrow and alarm. This is the Mass so widely respected that even non-Catholics such as Agatha Christie and Iris Murdoch came to its defense in the 1970s. This is the Mass that St. Padre Pio insisted on celebrating until his death in 1968, *after* the liturgical apparatchiks had begun to mess with the missal (and this was a man who knew a thing or two about the secrets of sanctity). This is the Mass that St. Josemaría Escrivá, the founder of Opus Dei, received permission to continue celebrating in private at the end of his life.

What a glorious cloud of witnesses surrounds the traditional Latin Mass! Their holiness was forged like gold and silver in the furnace of this Mass, and it is an undeserved blessing that we, too, can seek and obtain the same formation. Yes, I can go to the new Mass and know that I am in the presence of God and His saints (and for that I am profoundly grateful), but a

concrete historical link to these saints has been severed, as well as a historical link to my own heritage as a Catholic in the Roman rite.

2. What is true for me is even more true for my children . This way of celebrating most deeply forms the minds and hearts of our children in reverence for Almighty God, in the virtues of humility, obedience, and adoring silence. It fills their senses and imaginations with sacred signs and symbols, “mystic ceremonies” (as the Council of Trent puts it). Maria Montessori herself frequently pointed out that small children are very receptive to the language of symbols, often more than adults are, and that they will learn more easily from watching people *do* a solemn liturgy than from hearing a lot of words with little action. All of this is extremely impressive and gripping for children who are learning their faith, and especially boys who become altar servers.[1]

3. Its universality. The traditional Latin Mass not only provides a visible and unbroken link from the present day to the distant past, it also constitutes an inspiring bond of unity across the globe. Older Catholics often recall how moving it was for them to assist at Mass in a foreign country for the first time and to discover that “the Mass was the same” wherever they went. The experience was, for them, a confirmation of the catholicity of their Catholicism. By contrast, today one is sometimes hard pressed to find “the same Mass” at the *same* parish on the *same* weekend. The universality of the traditional Latin Mass, with its umbrella of Latin as a sacred language and its insistence that the priest put aside his own idiosyncratic and cultural preferences and put on the person of Christ, acts as a true Pentecost in which many tongues and tribes come together as one in the Spirit—rather than a new Babel that privileges unshareable identities such as ethnicity or age group and threatens to occlude the “neither Greek nor Jew” principle of the Gospel.

4. You always know what you are getting. The Mass will be focused on the Holy Sacrifice of Our Lord Jesus Christ on the Cross. There will be respectful and prayerful silence before, during, and after Mass. There will be only males serving in the sanctuary and only priests and deacons handling the Body of Christ, in accord with nearly 2,000 years of tradition. People will usually be dressed modestly. Music may not always be present (and when present, may not always be perfectly executed), but you will never hear pseudo-pop songs with narcissistic or heretical lyrics.

Put differently, **the traditional form of the Roman rite can never be completely co-opted.** Like almost every other good thing this side of the grave, the Latin Mass can be botched, but it can never be abused to the extent that it no longer points to the true God. Chesterton once said that “there is only one thing that can never go past a certain point in its alliance with oppression—and that is orthodoxy. I may, it is true, twist orthodoxy so as partly to justify a tyrant. But I can easily make up a German philosophy to justify him entirely.”[2] The same is true for the traditional Latin Mass. Father Jonathan Robinson, who at the time of writing his book was not a friend of the *usus antiquior*, nevertheless admitted

that “the perennial attraction of the Old Rite is that it provided a transcendental reference, and it did this even when it was misused in various ways.”[3] By contrast, Robinson observes, while the new Mass *can* be celebrated in a reverent way that directs us to the transcendent, “there is nothing in the rule governing the way the Novus Ordo is to be said that *ensures* the centrality of the celebration of the Paschal mystery.”[4] In other words, the new Mass can be celebrated validly but in a way that puts such an emphasis on community or sharing a meal that it can amount to “the virtual denial of a Catholic understanding of the Mass.”[5] On the other hand, the indestructibility of the traditional Mass’s inherent meaning is what inspired one commentator to compare it to the old line about the U.S. Navy: “It’s a machine built by geniuses so it can be operated safely by idiots.”[6]

5. It’s the real McCoy. The classical Roman rite has an obvious theocentric and Christocentric orientation, found both in the *ad orientem* stance of the priest and in the rich texts of the classical Roman Missal itself, which give far greater emphasis to the Mystery of the Most Holy Trinity, the divinity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and the sacrifice of Our Lord upon the Cross.[7] As Dr. Lauren Pristas has shown, the prayers of the new Missal are often watered-down in their expression of dogma and ascetical doctrine, whereas the prayers of the old Missal are unambiguously and uncompromisingly Catholic.[8] It is the real McCoy, the pure font, not something cobbled together by “experts” for “modern man” and adjusted to his preferences. More and more Catholic pastors and scholars are acknowledging how badly rushed and botched were the liturgical reforms of the 1960s. This has left us with a confusingly messy situation for which the reformed liturgy itself is totally ill-equipped to provide a solution, with its plethora of options, its minimalist rubrics, its vulnerability to manipulative “presiders,” and its manifest discontinuity with at least fourteen centuries of Roman Catholic worship—a discontinuity powerfully displayed in the matter of language, since the old Mass whispers and sings in the Western Church’s holy mother tongue, Latin, while the new Mass has awkwardly mingled itself with the ever-changing vernaculars of the world.

6. A superior calendar for the saints. In liturgical discussions, most ammunition is spent on defending or attacking changes to the Ordinary of the Mass—and understandably so. But one of the most significant differences between the 1962 and 1970 Missals is the calendar. Let’s start with the Sanctoral Cycle, the feast days of the saints. The 1962 calendar is an amazing primer in Church history, especially the history of the early Church, which often gets overlooked today. It is providentially arranged in such a way that certain saints form different “clusters” that accent a particular facet of holiness. The creators of the 1969/1970 general calendar, on the other hand, eliminated or demoted 200 saints, including St. Valentine from St. Valentine’s Day and St. Christopher, the patron saint of travelers, claiming that he never existed. They also eliminated St. Catherine of Alexandria for the same reason, even though she was one of the saints that St. Joan of Arc saw when God commissioned her to fight the English.[9] The architects of the new calendar often made their decisions on the basis of modern historical scholarship rather than the oral traditions

of the Church. Their scholarly criteria call to mind Chesterton's rejoinder that he would rather trust old wives' tales than old maids' facts. "It is quite easy to see why a legend is treated, and ought to be treated, more respectfully than a book of history," G. K. writes. "The legend is generally made by the majority of people in the village, who are sane. The book is generally written by the one man in the village who is mad."^[10]

7. A superior calendar for the seasons. Similarly, the "Temporal Cycle"—Christmastide, Epiphanytide, Septuagesimatide, Eastertide, Time after Pentecost, etc.—is far richer in the 1962 calendar. Thanks to its annual cycle of propers, each Sunday has a distinct flavor to it, and this annual recurrence creates a marker or yardstick that allows the faithful to measure their spiritual progress or decline over the course of their lives. The traditional calendar has ancient observances like Ember Days and Rogation Days that heighten not only our gratitude to God but our appreciation of the goodness of the natural seasons and of the agricultural cycles of the land. The traditional calendar has no such thing as "Ordinary Time" (a most unfortunate phrase, seeing that there cannot be such a thing as "ordinary time" after the Incarnation^[11]) but instead has a Time after Epiphany and a Time after Pentecost, thereby extending the meaning of these great feasts like a long afterglow or echo. In company with Christmas and Easter, Pentecost, a feast of no lesser status than they, is celebrated for a full eight days, so that the Church may bask in the warmth and light of the heavenly fire. And the traditional calendar has the pre-Lenten season of Septuagesima or "Carnevale," which begins three weeks before Ash Wednesday and deftly aids in the psychological transition from the joy of Christmastide to the sorrow of Lent. Like most other features of the *usus antiquior*, the aforementioned aspects of the calendar are extremely ancient and connect us vividly with the Church of the first millennium and even the earliest centuries.

8. A Better Way to the Bible. Many think that the Novus Ordo has a natural advantage over the old Mass because it has a three-year cycle of Sunday readings and a two-year cycle of weekday readings, and longer and more numerous readings at Mass, instead of the ancient one-year cycle, usually consisting of two readings per Mass (Epistle and Gospel). What they overlook is the fact that the architects of the Novus Ordo simultaneously took out most of the biblical allusions that formed the warp and woof of the Ordinary of the Mass, and then parachuted in a plethora of readings with little regard to their congruency with each other. When it comes to biblical readings, the old rite operates on two admirable principles: first, that passages are chosen not for their own sake (to "get through" as much of Scripture as possible) but to illuminate the meaning of the occasion of worship; second, that the emphasis is not on a mere increase of biblical literacy or didactic instruction but on "mystagogy." In other words, the readings at Mass are not meant to be a glorified Sunday school but an ongoing initiation into the mysteries of the Faith. Their more limited number, brevity, liturgical suitability, and repetition over the course of every year makes them a powerful agent of spiritual formation and preparation for the Eucharistic sacrifice.

9. Reverence for the Most Holy Eucharist. The Ordinary Form of the Mass can, of course, be celebrated with reverence and with only ordained ministers distributing Holy Communion. But let's be honest: the vast majority of Catholic parishes deploy "extraordinary" lay ministers of Holy Communion, and the vast majority of the faithful will receive Holy Communion in the hand. These two arrangements alone constitute a significant breach in reverence for the Blessed Sacrament. Unlike the priest, lay ministers do not purify their hands or fingers after handling God, thus accumulating and scattering particles of the Real Presence. The same is true of the faithful who receive Communion in the hand; even brief contact with the Host on the palm of one's hand can leave tiny particles of the consecrated Victim.^[12] Think about it: every day, thousands upon thousands of these unintentional acts of desecration of the Blessed Sacrament occur around the world. How patient is the Eucharistic Heart of our Lord! But do we really want to contribute to this desecration? And even if we ourselves receive communion on the tongue at a Novus Ordo Mass, chances are we will still be surrounded by these careless habits—an environment that will either fill us with outrage and sorrow or lead to a settled indifference. These reactions are not helpful in experiencing the peace of Christ's Real Presence, nor are they an optimal way to raise one's children in the Faith!

Similar points could be made about the distracting "Sign of Peace"^[13]; or female lectors and EMHCs, who, apart from constituting an utter break with tradition, can be clad in clothing of questionable modesty; or the almost universal custom of loud chitchat before *and* after Mass; or the ad-libbing and optionizing of the priest. These and so many other characteristics of the Novus Ordo *as it is all too often celebrated* are all, singly and collectively, signs of a lack of faith in the Real Presence, signs of an anthropocentric, horizontal self-celebration of the community.

This point should be emphasized: *it is especially harmful for children* to witness, again and again, the shocking lack of reverence with which Our Lord and God is treated in the awesome Sacrament of His Love, as pew after pew of Catholics automatically go up to receive a gift they generally treat with casual and even bored indifference. We believe the Eucharist is really *our Savior, our King, our Judge*—but then promptly act in a way that says we are handling regular (though symbolic) food and drink, which explains why so many Catholics seem to have a Protestant view of what is going on at Mass. This unfortunate situation will not end until the pre-Vatican II norms regarding the sacred Host are made *mandatory* for all liturgical ministers, which is not likely anytime soon. The safe haven of refuge is, once again, the traditional Latin Mass, where sanity and sanctity prevail.

10. When all is said and done, it's the Mystery of Faith. Many of the reasons for persevering in and supporting the traditional Latin Mass, in spite of all the trouble the devil manages to stir up for us, can be summarized in one word: MYSTERY. What St. Paul calls *mysterion* and what the Latin liturgical tradition designates by the names *mysterium* and *sacramentum* are far from being marginal concepts in Christianity. God's dramatic self-

disclosure to us, throughout history and most of all in the Person of Jesus Christ, is a mystery in the highest sense of the term: it is the revelation of a Reality that is utterly intelligible yet always ineluctable, ever luminous yet blinding in its luminosity. It is fitting that the liturgical celebrations that bring us into contact with our very God should bear the stamp of His eternal and infinite mysteriousness, His marvelous transcendence, His overwhelming holiness, His disarming intimacy, His gentle yet penetrating silence. The traditional form of the Roman rite surely bears this stamp. Its ceremonies, its language, its *ad orientem* posture, and its ethereal music are not obscurantist but perfectly intelligible while at the same time instilling a sense of the unknown, even the fearful and thrilling. By fostering a sense of the sacred, the old Mass preserves intact the mystery of Faith.[14]

In sum, the classical Roman Rite is an ambassador of tradition, a midwife for the interior man, a lifelong tutor in the faith, a school of adoration, contrition, thanksgiving, and supplication, an absolutely reliable rock of stability on which we can confidently build our spiritual lives.

As the movement for the restoration of the Church's sacred liturgy is growing and gaining momentum, now is not a time for discouragement or second thoughts; it is a time for a joyful and serene embrace of all the treasures our Church has in store for us, in spite of the shortsightedness of some of her current pastors and the ignorance (usually not their own fault) of many of the faithful. This is a renewal that *must* happen if the Church is to survive the coming perils. Would that the Lord could *count on us* to be ready to lead the way, to hold up the "catholic and orthodox faith"! Would that we might respond to His graces as He leads us back to the immense riches of the Tradition that He, in His loving-kindness, gave to the Church, His Bride!

It is no time to flag or grow weary, but to put our shoulders to the wheel, our hand to the plough. Why should we deprive ourselves of the light and peace and joy of what is more beautiful, more transcendent, more sacred, more sanctifying, and more obviously Catholic? Innumerable blessings await us when, in the midst of an unprecedented crisis of identity in the Church today, we live out our Catholic faith in total fidelity and with the ardent dedication of the Elizabethan martyrs who were willing to do and to suffer anything rather than be parted from the Mass they had grown to cherish more than life itself. Yes, we will be called upon to make sacrifices—accepting an inconvenient time or a less-than-satisfactory venue, humbly bearing with misunderstanding and even rejection from our loved ones—but we know that sacrifices for the sake of a greater good are the very pith and marrow of charity.

We have given ten reasons for attending the traditional Latin Mass. There are many more that could be given, and each person will have his or her own. What we know for sure is that the Church needs her Mass, *we* need this Mass, and, in a strange sort of way that bestows on us an unmerited privilege, the Mass needs *us*. Let us hold fast to it, that we may cleave all the more to Christ our King, our Savior, our All.

NOTES

[1] See “Helping Children Enter into the Traditional Latin Mass” ([Part 1](#), [Part 2](#)); “Ex ore infantium: Children and the Traditional Latin Mass” ([here](#)).

[2] Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 132.

[3] Jonathan Robinson, *The Mass and Modernity* (Ignatius Press, 2005), 307.

[4] *Ibid.*, 311, italics added.

[5] *Ibid.*, 311.

[6] The same author, John Zmirak (who is sound on this issue), continues: “The old liturgy was crafted by saints, and can be said by schlubs without risk of sacrilege. The new rite was patched together by bureaucrats, and should only be safely celebrated by the saintly.” John Zmirak, “All Your Church Are Belong to Us.”

[7] As documented in Peter Kwasniewski, *Resurgent in the Midst of Crisis* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2014), ch. 6, “Offspring of Arius in the Holy of Holies.”

[8] See, among Lauren Pristas’s many fine studies, her book *Collects of the Roman Missal: A Comparative Study of the Sundays in Proper Seasons Before and After the Second Vatican Council* (London: T&T Clark, 2013).

[9] Fortunately, acknowledging that this was a mistake, Pope John Paul II restored St. Catherine to the Novus Ordo calendar twenty years later, but what about all the other saints who got axed?

[10] Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 53.

[11] See, among the many who argue for this point, Fr. Richard Cipolla, “Epiphany and the Unordinariness of Liturgical Time.”

[12] See Father X, “Losing Fragments with Communion in the Hand,” *The Latin Mass Magazine* (Fall 2009), 27-29.

[13] The Novus Ordo “Sign of Peace” has almost nothing to do with the dignified manner in which the “Pax” is given at a Solemn High Mass, where it is abundantly clear that the peace in question is a spiritual endowment emanating from the Lamb of God slain upon the altar and gently spreading out through the sacred ministers until it rests on the lowliest ministers who represent the people

[14] For centuries, going all the way back to the early Church (and even, says St. Thomas Aquinas, to the Apostles), the priest has always said “Mysterium Fidei” in the midst of the consecration of the chalice. He was referring specifically to the irruption or inbreaking of God into our midst in this unfathomable Sacrament.