



# TRADITIONIS CUSTODES: MISTEP INTO INCOMPREHENSION

*Posted on August 1, 2021 by Christophe Geffroy*



Incomprehension is what predominates when reading the *motu proprio*, *Traditionis Custodes* and the accompanying letter to the bishops. One does not understand the justification or the necessity of such a document, and all the more so because the Pope has legislated on the basis of an incomplete argument and false information.

## The Incomplete Argument

To say that John Paul II's *motu proprio* *Ecclesia Dei* was motivated only by "an ecclesial reason to recompose the unity of the Church" is not accurate. Certainly, that was a major reason, but there was another reason omitted by Francis: "All the Pastors and the other faithful have a new awareness, not only of the lawfulness but also of the richness for the Church of a diversity of charisms, traditions of spirituality and apostolate, which also constitutes the beauty of unity in variety: of that blended 'harmony' which the earthly Church raises up to Heaven under the impulse of the Holy Spirit" (*Ecclesia Dei* n. 5-a).

## False Information

Pope Francis affirms that the generosity of John Paul II and Benedict XVI was used by the traditionalists to oppose the Mass of Paul VI and the Second Vatican Council, by putting in danger the unity of the Church. He has thus said: *"The opportunity offered by St. John Paul II, and with even greater magnanimity by Benedict XVI, to restore the unity of the ecclesial body, while respecting the various liturgical sensibilities, has been used to increase distances, to harden differences and to build oppositions that wound the Church and hinder her progress, exposing her to the risk of division.... But I am also saddened by the instrumental use of the 1962 Missale Romanum, which is increasingly characterized by a growing rejection, not only of the liturgical reform, but of the Second Vatican Council, with the unfounded and untenable claim that it has betrayed Tradition and the 'true Church'.... It is increasingly evident in the words and attitudes of many that there is a close relationship between the choice of celebrations according to the pre-Vatican II liturgical books and the rejection of the Church and its institutions in the name of what they consider to be the 'true Church.' This is behavior that contradicts communion, feeding this impulse to divide."*

The very vocabulary used by Francis is that of the Society of St. Pius X. The "true Church!" No traditionalist, faithful to Rome, uses it! So, his statement is true if we limit ourselves to the Society of St. Pius X. But it is false if we apply it to the vast majority of the "Ecclesia Dei" movement; that there are

cases that correspond to what the Pope says is true, but they are very much in the minority: why apply a collective punishment for the fault of a few? Would it not have been enough to crack down on those? Obviously, we do not live in the same world as the Pope or his advisors, because their world simply does not correspond to reality; they see it as a homogeneous world that is in fact that of the Society of Saint Pius X alone! Who is advising and enlightening the Pope on these matters?

Based on biased information about the real situation, it is made to appear that the Pope is responding to a demand that is only that of a small minority who have always been fiercely hostile to the Extraordinary Form.

### **The Pope's Objective...**

...and its predictable dramatic consequences: *"It is to defend the unity of the Body of Christ that I am obliged to revoke the faculty granted by my predecessors. The distorted use that has been made of it is contrary to the reasons that led them to grant the freedom to celebrate Mass with the 1962 Missale Romanum."*

In wanting to defend unity, this motu proprio will bring misunderstanding, confusion, drama and finally stir up divisions instead of reducing them. It will achieve the opposite of its objective! In one stroke of the pen, it sweeps away 35 years of efforts by John Paul II and Benedict XVI to calm the situation and bring about a peace that is imperfect but real. Even the synthesis of the CEF, though not very benevolent towards the traditionalist world, recognized that Summorum Pontificum had led globally to a "calmed situation," which our investigation has largely confirmed.

It will reawaken the liturgical war, exacerbate the resistance of the traditionalists, and, above all, lead to a number of departures towards the Society of Saint Pius X (which must be delighted with this motu proprio which will feed their troops and confirm what they have been repeating since 1988, namely that Rome cannot be trusted; thus confirming their refusal of any reconciliation) – all precisely what John Paul II and Benedict XVI had been able to avoid by their attention to this traditionalist world. This risks becoming an immense mess.

Let us add an important remark from a historical and psychological point of view. Paul VI was ready to make concessions on the Mass, if Archbishop Lefebvre had not rejected Vatican II (it was the famous

declaration of November 21, 1974 against the "modernist Rome" of the Council that caused the problem). But John Paul II and Benedict XVI understood that liturgical appeasement was the necessary condition for the most reserved traditionalists to open up to the Council and assimilate it. By tightening the grip on the Mass, Francis will achieve the opposite result to the one legitimately sought.

### **Double Standards?**

The tone of the motu proprio and of the letter is so harsh and severe against the Traditionalists that one cannot help but think that there is a double standard. While Francis insists so often on mercy, leniency, forgiveness – while he is so patient with the Church of Germany which is on the verge of schism – he, the common Father, does not show even a hint of love or understanding for those who are nevertheless a small part of his flock! In these documents, the traditionalists appear as harmful, who are just being tolerated in "Indian reservations," until they fall into line; the stated objective being to make them disappear (without ever questioning whether they could bring something to the Church, in terms of youth, dynamism, vocations). Are there so many convinced practicing Catholics in the West that it is necessary to drastically limit a part of them?

Recent history has shown that despising and persecuting the Traditionalists in this way does not help them to evolve. On the contrary, it stirs up the resistance of the most hardened. They become more rigid; and this goes against the desired goal of promoting unity.

Let us pay tribute here to the French Bishops' Conference for their communiqué of July 17, which shows esteem for the "traditionalists:" *"They [the bishops] wish to express to the faithful, who usually celebrate according to the missal of Saint John XXIII and to their pastors, their vigilance, the esteem they have for the spiritual zeal of these faithful, and their determination to pursue the mission together, in the communion of the Church and according to the norms in force."*

### **Contempt For The Great Work Of Benedict XVI**

These two documents of the pope turn, without any nuance for the work of reconciliation of John Paul II, and especially of Benedict XVI, starting from an analysis of the facts which is false, and proceed right up to cancelling the essential contribution of the pope emeritus who had distinguished the two ordinary and extraordinary forms of the same Roman rite. In so doing, the Pope also eliminates the legal

existence of the former Extraordinary Form (as if it no longer existed), thus plunging the Church back into an endless liturgical dispute over the legal status of the Mass of St. Pius V. We return to the regime of tolerance according to more severe modalities than those of 1988, that of the "merciful parenthesis..." which is hardly merciful anymore! That is to say, a setback of more than thirty years by a single act of government.

### **What Strategy Of Rome Can We See In The Background?**

The two documents of Francis show very clearly that the Pope wants to eradicate the Traditionalist world in the Church, to make sure that the Mass of St. Pius V disappears – everything is done to prevent this movement from growing (prohibition of any new group and an obstacle course for the diocesan priest who would like to celebrate with the old Ordo). Everything is being done so that in the long run the traditional Mass will be celebrated only in the Society of Saint Pius X and its satellites.

It seems, therefore, that the Pope's strategy is to push the recalcitrant towards the Society of St. Pius X, so that the whole of the Traditionalist world will find itself there – they will thus be perfectly controlled and isolated in an "Indian reservation," cut off from Rome and the dioceses, but with which a minimum link can be maintained in order to avoid a formal schism. This explains why the Pope no longer seeks reconciliation with the Society of St. Pius X, but shows great generosity towards them by recognizing the full validity of marriages and confessions, by encouraging them to be received in churches during pilgrimages, etc. All this is consistent – and the exact opposite of all the past efforts of John Paul II and Benedict XVI – for the unity of the Church.

### **Liturgical Exclusivism?**

Is this *motu proprio* not an opportunity for those institutes that refuse to celebrate the ordinary form (which, let us specify, are in the minority within the "Ecclesia Dei" galaxy) to question themselves very seriously about the liturgical, theological and ecclesial validity of this refusal?

Since 1988, the popes have invited us not to refuse the very principle of the celebration of the new Ordo (it is true that the positions of the Ecclesia Dei Commission have fluctuated on the subject, and not helping to clarify it), which in no way takes away from the charism proper to these institutes for the old Mass. Benedict XVI was very explicit in his 2007 letter to the bishops and, in this regard, it must be

noted that the lines have hardly moved since then. By obeying the Pope on this crucial point, would not these institutes demonstrate, by their very example, that Francis is wrong in his analysis?

## Conclusion

All this is sad because it is unjust; and it is therefore legitimate to complain about it, to argue, to ask tirelessly for a reform of this *motu proprio*, or for the most flexible application of this text possible, while respecting the authority and the function of the Pope. The bishops will have an essential role to play. Everything will depend on the way they apply this *motu proprio* - the first reactions observed are encouraging, and I thank those bishops who are concerned for their entire flock.

It is also up to them to bring back to Rome more accurate information about who the traditionalists really are. Recent history has shown that they are not used to letting themselves be done for without reacting. Let's hope that most of them do not fall back into a "resistance" that turns into revolt and open disobedience. The example not to be followed is that of Archbishop Lefebvre and the Society of St. Pius X; and we can see where that leads. It is hard to suffer for the Church, but it cannot fail to bear fruit.

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*The [featured image](#) shows the Madonna of Misericordia, by Piero della Francesca, ca. 1460.*

