

Vatican says Latin Mass shouldn't divide Catholics

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) The Vatican on Friday (May 13) broadened access to the old Latin Mass with a new rule that gives the Vatican the power to overrule bishops who fail to make the rite available in their dioceses.

The Vatican also said that Catholics who request celebrations of the old Latin Mass must not support or belong to groups that challenge either the pope's authority or the "validity or legitimacy" of the newer Mass.

The announcement comes nearly four years after Pope Benedict XVI lifted most restrictions on the old Latin liturgy, also known as the Tridentine Mass, which had largely fallen out of use in favor of worship in local languages.

Celebrations of the older liturgy remain relatively rare. Few priests are qualified to celebrate its rites, and many bishops view the Latin Mass as a symbol of resistance to the church's liberalizing reforms of the 1960s.

The Vatican on Friday said bishops should permit use of the old Mass for even small groups that request it, and said pastors should receive such requests in a "spirit of generous welcome."

Bishops are also asked to offer instruction in the old liturgy to priests and seminarians, thus expanding the ranks of qualified celebrants.

"That really is basic to the pope's thinking," said the Rev. Joseph Kramer, a member of one such group, the Fraternal Society of Saint Peter, an order dedicated to celebrating the old Latin Mass. "He would

like the old rite to take its place alongside the new rite in the mainstream of the church."

Kramer called it an "important step," that Catholics may now contest bishops' decisions regarding the old rite before a Vatican commission, with the possibility of appealing to the Apostolic Signatura, the Vatican's supreme court.

Benedict presented his 2007 decision to lift restrictions on the old Latin Mass as a conciliatory gesture toward the Society of Saint Pius X (SSPX), a traditionalist group that rejected the new liturgy along with most reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

Benedict has said that acceptance of Vatican II and of his own authority are prerequisites for reconciliation with the SSPX.

Revival of the old Latin liturgy has also provoked inter-religious tensions. Jewish groups objected to a special Good Friday prayer from the old Mass that referred to Jews' "blindness" and asked God to "take the veil from their hearts." Benedict later modified that language, but not all critics have found the new version satisfactory.