

Mass appeal? Attending a Latin liturgy: Attending a Latin liturgy

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [August 21, 2007](#) issue

The Sunday after Pope Benedict XVI authorized the wider use of Latin in the Catholic mass, I went to St. John Cantius Church in Chicago, which has been celebrating mass in Latin for years. In fact, Catholic priests could always use the Latin version of the 1970 Vatican II-inspired liturgy (which at St. John Cantius is called the *missa normativa*). What the pope did was authorize use of the pre-Vatican II Tridentine Mass—named for the 16th-century Council of Trent—by any priest in any parish without the special permission of the local bishop. The Tridentine Mass, or the “extraordinary form of the Roman Rite,” as Pope Benedict called it, has also long been celebrated at St. John’s, which has had special permission from the archbishop to worship as the church did for half a millennium before Vatican II.

I expected to find gray-haired ladies. But the enormous Baroque-style church was filled mostly with families and young professionals who seemed to follow the Latin easily enough, even joining in the Gregorian chant with the men’s choir that sang from an unseen loft. There was one family of six, the father sweating profusely in a three-piece suit, the mother in a black dress. The parents genuflected each of the several times they exited the pew with a screaming child.

The Tridentine Mass was as crowded as the *missa normativa*, even though the priest faced away from the congregation and said many of the prayers inaudibly. Perhaps that aura of priestly distance is part of the appeal. At both masses the scripture lessons and homily were delivered in English, and at both Gregorian chant was part of the liturgy, as befits a church well known in Chicago as a guardian of ancient sacred music.

Benedict’s pronouncement will likely mean little for traditionalists in the U.S., who have had little trouble gaining permission to use the Tridentine Mass. Nor will it affect the vast majority of U.S. parishes, which are quite happy to worship in the post-Vatican II style: in English, with the priest facing the congregation. It will likely

have more of an impact in Europe, where anti-Vatican II reactionaries in France may be drawn back into the church, since pro-Vatican II bishops can no longer outlaw Tridentine worship. According to Father Tom Reese, former editor of the Jesuit magazine *America*, writing on *Newsweek's* blog, with this pronouncement the pope is saying that "he does not trust the pastoral judgment of the bishops."

What draws worshipers to St. John's? William See, an undergraduate at Northwestern, told me that young people like worship in which something is demanded of them. "To worship here you either have to show up a lot to learn the Latin or follow along in the missal. Either way you have to pay attention." (The church also offers classes in Latin and Greek.) See said many Catholics of his age feel like they were "robbed" of something by the liturgical changes of the 1960s and 1970s. They find it at St. John's.

The sermon at the *missa normativa* was on Jesus' sending of the 72 and his lament that "the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few." Father Scott Haynes, a converted Southern Baptist, identified the laborers with priests and vowed religious. "Have you ever considered being a priest or a nun?" he asked. "A priest holds in his hand the living Christ just as Mary of Bethlehem did." Not a word about the ministry of the laity. The preacher quoted an authority on the glories of the priesthood: "If a priest knew the importance of what he did, he would die. Not from fear, but love."

The queue for those seeking to say confession before communing snaked around the apse, moving quite slowly, right up to the moment of consecration. A Polish (or Italian, Irish or Mexican) immigrant could have arrived directly from the old country in 1893 and felt right at home at this service. Clearly, that's part of its attraction. St. John's literature boasts that though the neighborhood around the church has gentrified and trendy lofts have replaced immigrant tenements, the church's worship is "virtually untouched by the changes of recent times."

Pope Benedict has often lamented the near-complete extinction of the rich form of the mass that first drew him to the priesthood in his native Bavaria. For those who follow the Tridentine Mass in the Latin-English missal, there are treasures to be found, like the note explaining that water is mixed with the communion wine as a sign of the blood and water that flowed from Jesus' side and also as a sign of Christ's two natures. That's rich theological teaching, or mystagogy, in the language of the ancient church. A prayer after communion asks that the Lord's body *adhaereat visceribus meis*—will "cleave to my inmost parts," or more literally, "will stick to my

guts.” Where else does one hear prayers like that?

Even so, the effort at “restoration of the sacred” with a form of worship frozen in time seems a bit quixotic. As Reese said to the *Chicago Tribune*, the mass is mysterious because of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, not because the language is foreign. At St. John’s, the priest presiding over the Tridentine Mass seemed positively proud that he was inaudible, actually turning off his lapel microphone. In the Middle Ages, worshipers wished for quiet so they could say their prayers by themselves, usually with rosary in hand, praying mostly for the souls of their departed loved ones. I heard no prayer beads clicking during the interminable quiet at St. John’s, and only the briefest of (nonaudible) prayers in the missal mentioned the departed. In short, even with enormous effort, the Middle Ages can’t be imitated exactly.

But so what? Whereas the post-Vatican II church has suffered from a shortage of priests, the order that runs St. John’s has grown to 27 brothers in less than a decade. Perhaps the renewal of Catholic priestly vocations depends on a two-tier form of Christianity, in which the religious life is clearly marked off as superior to lay Christianity. Commenting on Jesus’ promise that those who give up possessions will gain back a hundredfold, Haynes pointed to his own experience: “I grew up with one sister, but here at St. John’s, I have 26 brothers. What the Lord says is true.” His enthusiasm for vowed religious life was palpable.

A Protestant visitor to the Tridentine Mass, even one who appreciates the history of the liturgy, will still wonder: Does it even matter that I’m sitting here?

The answer is clearly no. The priest would be doing the same thing if presiding alone, or in front of monks or nuns. The missal explains many of the gestures but not all.

Each time the priest kneeled, which was often, two fellow priests, one on each side, raised his chasuble in the back to keep it from brushing the ground. The effect to me was comical: two men keeping another man’s skirt from being defiled. How is this edifying for worshipers?

Father Dennis Kolinski of St. John’s told me that the church sees “more young people coming of their own accord—singles, families, couples.” Something at St. John Cantius is attracting them, he observes. He says the church has been “flooded” with calls from priests and dioceses around the country seeking to imitate their liturgy.

Reese, however, doubts that interest in the Tridentine Mass is very widespread. “We Jesuits have some 30 colleges and universities around this country, and we don’t see any great hunger among students for this.”

Jews have expressed concern that the revival of the Latin mass will revive an ancient prayer calling for the conversion of the Jews. But John Paul II had already changed the prayer so that it expresses the hope that Jews will “continue to grow in love of [God’s] name and in faithfulness to his covenant.”

Haynes did not allay all of my concerns. In speaking of the power of cloistered nuns to effect miraculous change, he referred to how a single prayer of St. Teresa of Ávila had “converted 10,000 heretics.” For a 16th-century Spanish nun like Teresa, I realized, the heretics in question were Protestants.