

Worshiping with Agatha Christie: The traditional Latin mass

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [August 21, 2007](#) issue

What would Agatha Christie Do? In 1971 she put her name on a petition urging the conservation of an endangered species: the traditional Latin mass, threatened with extinction in the aftermath of Vatican II. The petition noted that the preconciliar mass, a thing of beauty in its own right, was the inspiration for countless works of poetry, philosophy, music and other arts throughout the centuries. Intervening, as UNESCO might, to safeguard an intangible cultural treasure, the petition asked the Holy See to consider “the appalling responsibility it would incur in the history of the human spirit were it to refuse to allow the Traditional Mass to survive, even though this survival took place side by side with other liturgical forms.”

There were 56 other signatories, among them Nevill Coghill and Colin Hardie of C. S. Lewis’s Inklings circle; Maurice Bowra, the Oxford don whose humorous assaults on priggishness are the stuff of legend; Kenneth Clark, the television face of *Civilisation*; “Liberal Lion” Jo Grimond; abstract sculptor Barbara Hepworth; Welsh modernist poet David Jones; literary critic F. R. Leavis; *Whiskey Galore* novelist Compton Mackenzie; the 17th Duke of Norfolk; Ralph Richardson; Yehudi Menuhin; Nancy Mitford; Robert Graves; Kathleen Raine; Graham Greene; Iris Murdoch. The list includes cradle Catholics, Catholic converts, Protestants, Anglicans, Jews and nonreligious humanists.

The petition made it to the desk of Pope Paul VI. There is a story, probably apocryphal, that he said, “Ah, Agatha Christie!” and promptly agreed that the 1962 form of the Roman Rite could be used in England and Wales on special occasions. This concession is known informally as the “Agatha Christie Indult.” John Paul II extended the privilege, and now Pope Benedict, in his *motu proprio* of July 7, has seen to it that Agatha Christie’s wish can be granted wherever her mysteries are read. The 1962 revision of the Tridentine Mass, published by John XXIII, is to be the “extraordinary form” of the Roman Rite, while the postconciliar mass, usually celebrated in local languages, remains the “ordinary form” of the Roman Rite. On

the face of it this would seem to be a liberalization of current practices rather than, as some critics call it, a retraction of Vatican II.

Despite confusion about this in the media, it's not a question of bringing back Latin. The official version of the postconciliar mass is in Latin. When students ask me where they can go to experience a Latin mass, I point them to the thoroughly modern Benedictine monastery down the road, where the postconciliar mass is sung beautifully in Latin Gregorian chant, with the priest facing the people, scriptural readings in English and no ladies looking prim in lace mantillas.

Why, then, all the fuss? It goes back to the contested legacy of the Liturgical Movement, a renewal effort which spread beyond its 19th-century roots in the Benedictine monasteries of Europe and drew Christians of all communions into a search for ways to deepen participation in the sacramental mysteries of Christ. The hallmark of the Liturgical Movement was the recovery of patristic sources. As this movement took on ecumenical proportions, the effect was to raise awareness throughout the Christian world of the beauty and dignity of ordered celebration of the Eucharist, liturgical seasons and canonical hours of common prayer. The pioneers of the Liturgical Movement sought a balance between word and sacrament, immanence and transcendence, private devotion and communal fellowship. They favored organic development, not rupture with the past. The same principles animated the renewal proposed by Vatican II. Unity-in-diversity—not uniformity—was the watchword.

For some who find fault with the recent *motu proprio*, however, it seems that nothing short of uniformity will satisfy. Those who regard the mass of Paul VI as invalid and those who thoroughly reject the Tridentine Mass are likely to suffer in equal measure the disappointment of realizing that their vision of liturgical correctness will not prevail.

For my part, when I've been to a Tridentine Mass, I've been sensible of a certain awkwardness, as if I might use the wrong spoon, so to speak, or drink out of the finger bowl. But I remember seeing a photograph of the old mass being celebrated on a World War II battlefield. The soldiers kneel behind a priest who himself kneels before a rock-hewn altar covered by a simple cloth. It's not that the priest has turned his back to the people; one sees immediately he is praying in unison with the soldiers, facing east, as his fellow servants serving the crucified Lord on the plain of their peril. There is no privatistic mysticism in wishing to see such usages restored.

Best of all will be the opportunity for growth in both forms of the Roman Rite, by means of their mutual influence. The aspic will be melted off the Tridentine Mass, the fussiness will pass away, as it is celebrated in light of the communion ecclesiology and pastoral warmth of Vatican II. By the same token, the postconciliar mass will gain in solemnity and fidelity to its Latin original, provoking, it may be hoped, a renewed sense of the mystery at the heart of Christian worship. Such developments should be reason enough for all Christians—indeed, for all who care for the poetry, music and drama of the Western religious imagination—to rejoice in diverse tongues. It's a door thrown open, not a clock turned back.